

Changes at Carrifran

Formal demonstration of ecological changes resulting from the restoration effort at Carrifran will be more feasible after a decade or more, when comparison can be made with baseline surveys of vegetation, birds, beetles and spiders. Additional systematic recording has been done on butterflies, moths and other flying insects. A photographic record of starting conditions was also established.

Withdrawal of grazing, phased over the years 2000-2004, led to immediate suckering from the bases of some surviving trees and rapid growth of suppressed tree seedlings (mainly rowan) in several parts of the site. A thicker mat of vegetation developed all over the valley. Field voles thrive in this habitat and many predators are seen. Foxes are now common and badgers, otters and stoats are also present. Kestrels and buzzards, peregrines and ravens are regularly seen (as previously) and there are records of long-eared and barn owls; short-eared owls are frequent in some years.

Annual breeding bird surveys suggest declines in skylark, meadow pipit, wheatear and ring ouzel. There are apparent increases in whinchat, stonechat and carrion crow, and black grouse also seem more numerous, with 12 males at a lek in autumn 2006. A territorial robin has been noted in winter and there have been summer records of grasshopper warbler, redpoll, siskin and reed bunting associated with developing scrub and woodland.

Restoring a natural treeline on the hills

There is now little trace at Carrifran of the natural treeline zone where the high forest on the slopes below gave way to contorted dwarf trees and shrubs and eventually to montane heath. This special woodland has been destroyed all over Britain by millennia of browsing, burning and cutting, so that no-one really knows what it was like.

Carrifran extends to the summit of White Coomb, which at 821 m (2700 ft) is the fourth highest point in the Southern Uplands, so we have a unique opportunity to try to re-create an authentic treeline zone. There is no idea of establishing a continuous blanket of trees over the summits of the Moffat Hills. Areas with special montane plants must be avoided, and anyhow the aim is to create a natural-looking mosaic of open ground, patches of bent and wind-clipped dwarf trees, ribbons of woodland along watercourses and clumps of bushes hugging the ground in damp hollows. This will enhance the interest of the landscape and increase biodiversity, the woody species providing cover for several kinds of birds and resources for a whole array of insects and other animals.

Until the end of 2006 the main planting at Carrifran was below the heather line, but now we have started planting in the hanging valley of Firth Hope, between 600 and 750 m (~2000-2500 ft). This is pushing the limits of broadleaf woodland establishment to heights where it has hardly been attempted in Britain. However, records of fossil pollen and analysis of climatic conditions suggested that scrubby woodland might once have grown there, and experience in a trial plot established at 690 m in 2002 shows that a variety of trees and shrubs can survive and grow slowly at these high altitudes.

We need help in this challenging work, and are looking for additional volunteers to make the strenuous but rewarding trip up to the planting area in Firth Hope, either with Tuesday volunteers (who go up there when the weather is favourable) or on one of the special weekend events.

**IMAGES Firth Hope and Carrifran Gangs
Constructing the high enclosure**