



Partner Newsletter

Issue 11
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LOCH LOMOND
& THE TROSSACHS
COUNTRYSIDE
TRUST





Image: Wild Strathfillan © Ellie@Trustinthepark

Welcome

Welcome to 2026 and to our 11th newsletter edition, featuring updates from our team and partners.

In this issue, we say a farewell to two valued team members – **Sue** and **Gareth** as they move on to new adventures. At the same time, we're thrilled to welcome our new Chief Executive **Alistair Whyte** to the Wild Strathfillan journey (page 5 and 6).

We join our team who last November joined NatureScot on **Ben Lui** to **install protective cactus-guards** – an essential step in restoring the rare montane willow scrub that supports some of Scotland's most fragile alpine species – find out more on pages 7 and 8.

Discover our **wellbeing activities** which are back underway supporting people to stay active, social and connected with nature across Strathfillan (page 9).

Herbivore Impact Assessment is the topic for our authors Chris York (Walking-the-Talk), Stuart Smith and Robin Pakeman (James Hutton Institute) who share more about the next stage of a **field-testing phase** you can participate in this coming spring (page 10 and 11). **Wild Strathfillan** is also stepping up its effort to understand and manage herbivore impacts across the landscape with recent **survey insights**, **growing training opportunities**, and new tools like our **thermal imaging drone support for land managers** (page 11).

Thanks for reading, and don't forget you can also submit your own updates for our next issue – we'd love to hear from you (page 12).

With best wishes,
The Wild Strathfillan team

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Wild Strathfillan

Restoring nature in the National Park



Wild Strathfillan is a nature restoration initiative working across the north of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park to deliver **a resilient, dynamic and connected landscape where people and nature thrive together.**

The initiative is led by Loch Lomond and The Trossachs Countryside Trust with the support of the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority and is underpinned by a diverse and committed partnership, bringing together land managers, communities, statutory bodies, educational institutions and businesses who share an interest in restoring nature across the landscape and supporting rural communities.

The initiative is currently delivering a series of ambitious activity programmes, grounded in the landscape's rich natural and cultural heritage. These are focused around three main themes:

- **Nature recovery**
- **Nature connectedness**
- **Sustainable livelihoods**

Our active projects are:

- **'The People and Nature of Wild Strathfillan'**, funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund and runs until December 2026
- **'From Lochside to Mountain-top'**, funded by NatureScot through their Nature Restoration Fund and runs until March 2026.

To find out more about the initiative and the work we are collectively delivering, visit the [Wild Strathfillan webpage here](#).

#WildStrathfillan

This project is supported by the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund, managed by [NatureScot](#) and, with thanks to National Lottery players, by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.





Image: Examples of Alder, Birch and Scots Pine.

Notice Board

- **Local Provenance Trees Available (Subject to Availability)**

Native trees sourced locally (Birch, Alder and Scots Pine) are available from the Glenfalloch Tree Nursery. These locally sourced trees are ideal for supporting biodiversity and restoring natural habitats. For more information, and to check availability before placing an order, **please contact Julian at** info@glenfalloch.org

- **Team farewells!**

We're saying a fond farewell this month to both **Sue Morris** our Trust Director and our Partnership Support Officer, **Gareth Kett**.



Although Sue is going to be taking a break for now and moving onto the next chapter of her adventures, we're sure our paths will continue to cross out on the hills, trails, and woodlands she knows so well. While we're sad to see Gareth leave the Trust, we're delighted to share that he won't be going far - Gareth is continuing in his existing role as a Senior Ranger with Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority. We hope you enjoy one last treat from him in this issue with his final article.

Please join us in wishing Sue and Gareth all the very best in this next chapter!



From Uplands to Leadership

Meet Alistair Whyte Our New CEO

We're delighted to introduce Alistair Whyte as the new Chief Executive of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs Countryside Trust. Alistair brings a wealth of experience from leading roles and with his energy and vision we delved a little deeper to learn more about how he will help guide the Trust as we continue connecting communities with nature and protecting the landscapes we all cherish.

Q: "Can you tell us a little about yourself and your background?"

Alistair: *I'm a nature conservationist with a long-standing passion for the natural world and landscape-scale restoration. Growing up in rural Angus sparked my interest in wildlife and the outdoors and led me to a career working in nature conservation. My career so far has focused on land management, ecological restoration and delivering conservation that benefits both wildlife and communities. Before taking up my current role in January, I was Head of Plantlife Scotland, where I worked on plant conservation, species recovery, and habitat management across Scotland. I've also worked for and collaborated with organisations including Forestry & Land Scotland, the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts. I always try to focus on practical, partnership-based action to protect and restore nature.*

Q: "What first attracted you to Loch Lomond and The Trossachs Countryside Trust?"

Alistair: *The Trust is an organisation that doesn't just talk about conservation but works within landscapes and communities to deliver it! I've always believed that the most lasting impact comes from partnerships that bring together people from all walks of life, and the Trust embodies that collaborative spirit. The opportunity to lead and support initiatives that restore habitats while also strengthening community connections was something I couldn't pass up!*

Q: “What are you most looking forward to about being involved with the Wild Strathfillan initiative?”

Alistair: *Wild Strathfillan is a hugely ambitious nature restoration initiative. It's exciting because it brings together so many partners and local voices to build a collaborative vision for nature recovery that works with traditional rural industries, not in opposition to them. Whether that's expanding native woodlands, bringing back rare species, or enhancing habitat connectivity, the potential to see real change on the ground is something I'm genuinely excited about.*

Q: “What impact do you hope Wild Strathfillan will have?”

Alistair: *I hope Wild Strathfillan becomes a model for large-scale nature restoration that supports both biodiversity and rural communities. The initiative aims to revive key habitats - from temperate rainforest and montane scrub to Caledonian pinewoods - in ways that enhance ecological resilience and climate adaptation. Beyond the nature benefits, I'd love this project to help strengthen local economies, create opportunities for skills development and foster deeper connections between people and the landscapes they care for.*

Q: “What's your favourite spot within the project area?”

Alistair: *The view from the summit of Ben Lui is awesome! It's such an iconic mountain, with amazing plants and other wildlife. I always find something new and interesting whenever I go there.*

We're really excited to welcome Alistair to the team as he steps into his new role, bringing his energy, experience and enthusiasm. You can reach him at Alistair@trustinthepark.org and he's very much looking forward to meeting everyone involved over the coming months.



Images top: (Left to right) The team prepare to set off on the hike, Peter Kelly (NatureScot) briefs the team at the helicopter-drop point, and Peter (NatureScot) and his Jack-Russell terrier push through the snow.

Mission Cactus-Guard

Protecting Ben Lui's Rare Montane Willows by Gareth Kett

It was just gone 7.30am and barely light on a crisp November morning last year, as I began the hour-long drive to meet the four-strong NatureScot team of Natalie, Peter (accompanied by his Jack-Russell terrier), Tim and project leader Peter Kelly, just outside Dalmally at the foot of the long climb into Ben Lui Special Area of Conservation. Our task was to install protective cactus-guards on the nature reserve as part of a montane willow scrub restoration project.

Montane willow scrub is a very rare and important high-altitude, shrubby habitat, now confined to a few rocky slopes that supports rare alpine species. Unfortunately, the willows are particularly tasty to herbivores and are especially sensitive to higher levels of grazing. In the UK, montane willow has been almost totally wiped-out although healthy populations can still be found in the mountains of Scandinavia. Loch Lomond and The Trossachs Countryside Trust is working with NatureScot to help restore this invaluable habitat at Ben Lui.

"That's where the cactus guards are going"

Twenty minutes later, after a drive through the forest that took us above the snowline, we left the vehicles to embark on a 45-minute climb through a beautiful but bitter landscape, towards a distant snow-covered cliff. A few red deer crossed our path ahead of us. A pair of golden eagles skirted the skyline and disappeared. At the base of the steep, sharp ascent to the cliff, blanketed in snow, lay a pile of cactus-guards and re-bars in hippo-bags that had been helicopter-dropped a couple of weeks earlier. Peter Kelly pointed 100 metres higher to where the hill met the cliff - *"That's where the cactus guards are going!"*.



Image: Tough-going carrying cactus-guards through snow.

Laden with equipment, we trudged our way up the frozen slope to the cliff, trying to avoid the ever-present spikes of the coiled cactus guards – not so called for nothing – that accumulated snow and weight each time they touched the ground.

Mallets were used to bank the re-bars into the ground and, so far as frozen fingers would allow, re-usable cable-ties were used to connect cactus-guard sheets to re-bars, creating a series of roughly circular enclosures across the slope and a single linear enclosure along a smooth section of cliff face, ready to protect willow shrubs from herbivores. Planting begins in spring. How different the landscape will look then!



Image: Peter, Tim and Peter building the first of the enclosures.

Further coverage

We're thrilled that *Mission Cactus Guard* has caught wider attention as featured in **The Herald** – read more [here](#).

You can also catch some snowy snaps of NatureScot's work in their **Facebook** post [here](#).

This work is funded by the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund managed [NatureScot](#), and will build on other local work which is helping to bring back Scotland's lost montane scrub habitat.



Image: Peter and Natalie cable-tying cactus guards to re-bars.

Photo credits: Gareth@Trustinthepark



Images: First walk of 2026, Killin, Acharn railway credit @Trustinthepark

Movement together in Strathfillan

Our activities supporting people to stay active, social, and connected with nature are back underway across Strathfillan. These well-established, volunteer-led programmes are coordinated by Loch Lomond and the Trossachs Countryside Trust, in 8 communities across the National Park. In Killin and Crianlarich, funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund through Wild Strathfillan has been supporting their continued delivery and growth.

Walk in the Park

After an icy start to the year, **Walk in the Park** started its 2026 programme in Killin with a walk along the old Acharn railway track, part of the historic Callander to Oban line. The group meet every Wednesday at 10:20am. Through Wild Strathfillan, we've been trialling more nature and local heritage experiences into the walk schedule in the north of the National Park. A highlight from 2025 was a brilliant hands-on bird identification walk with Kinross Ecology, where participants spotted 24 bird species by sight and sound!

Across the year, **Killin Walk in the Park** engaged 39 local people, including 7 new participants, with 15 joining our additional summer evening walks.

Strength and Balance

Alongside the weekly walks, the Countryside Trust coordinates weekly Strength & Balance classes to support improved confidence and mobility. Last year, Strength and Balance engaged 35 participants across Killin and Crianlarich. The Crianlarich class also celebrated their first anniversary a couple of months ago!



Images: Crianlarich S&B first anniversary November @Trustinthepark

Both classes have also been enjoying intergenerational movement-based sessions with the local primary schools, following introductions made by Wild Strathfillan's Education & Engagement Officer. Just this week, pupils from Killin Primary School joined Killin Strength & Balance for some fun in celebration of Burn's Night including interactive Scottish songs that incorporated lots of movement to accompany the lyrics.

"The sessions are a great way of meeting local friends but particularly useful to address muscular weakness issues. May the sessions long continue!" - John, Crianlarich participant.

If you'd like to find out more about **Walk in the Park** or **Strength & Balance**, contact Fiona@trustinthepark.org.



Image: HIA field testing at Glen Lochay
(Credit: Stuart Smith)

Herbivore Impact Assessment

Revising the open hill range by *Stuart Smith (James Hutton Institute), Chris York (Walking-the-Talk) and Robin Pakeman (James Hutton Institute)*

Herbivore Impact Assessments (HIAs) are ground surveys to assess the impact of herbivores on vegetation. HIAs are used to assess deer, hare, sheep and cattle and other mammalian herbivore impacts and they are key to informing herbivore management, such as agricultural management and conditions suitable for habitat restoration.

HIAs are based primarily on identifying current vegetation and soil features that have changed because of herbivore presence. Features are known as indicators, and include evidence of grazing or browsing of vegetation, changes in plant growth-form and species composition, evidence of disturbance and trampling, and dung deposition. Based on these indicators a surveyed area is assigned an impact class.

As part of two rounds of NatureScot funded projects, the James Hutton Institute and Walking-the-Talk consultancy have been evaluating existing HIA methods through stakeholder consultation. The lack of consistency between existing open hill range HIA methods has influenced development of a revised HIA method, which draws on indicators from existing methods. The revised method also integrates new components from stakeholder feedback. Some notable amendments have been to increase the overlap of indicators between habitat types, include a negligible impact class, and indicators that align with the woodland HIA method.

They are now in a field-testing phase. For the first round of field testing, they have been comparing different HIA methods at the same site, at the same time and by the same group of surveyors. This is being done by JHI staff at three sites over the autumn and winter of 2025.

The second round of field testing will take place in spring 2026. For this, the intention is to invite a range of professional ecologists, estate managers and deer stalkers to test the revised method. Participants will be compensated for their time as being part of the testing. **To find out more or express interest in being involved in field testing please contact:** stuart.smith@hutton.ac.uk

Enhancing herbivore monitoring in Wild Strathfillan

The work described above sits alongside wider efforts in Wild Strathfillan to understand and monitor herbivore impacts on the ground. Indeed, land managers and landowners within the project area were invited to complete a short questionnaire which aimed to gain a better understanding of the methods currently being used for herbivore monitoring across the landscape, including population survey techniques, impact assessments, and training needs.

A big thank you to everyone who took the time to complete our questionnaire: your insights are invaluable in shaping effective monitoring and land management practices!

Responses highlighted a range of approaches, from foot counts and helicopter surveys to habitat impact assessments, with record-keeping methods varying from paper notes to digital spreadsheets. While some respondents have received formal training, many identified a need for additional support, particularly in species and habitat identification, HIA methodology, and the use of technology such as drones and GIS.

Training Opportunities

Keep an eye on this space for upcoming training opportunities. If you have ideas for training or specific needs, contact Sharon at sharon@trustinthepark.org.

Take Your Herbivore Monitoring to New Heights

Also, a reminder that we have a thermal imaging drone and certified pilots ready to support partners, and our pilots are keen to further develop their herbivore survey skills. If you'd like to use this service (for herbivore surveys or anything else), please contact Ophelie at ophelie@trustinthepark.org. We're eager to practice and build our expertise wherever possible!

Get in touch!

If you'd like to get involved, volunteer with us or find out more about Wild Strathfillan, please contact us below:

Contributions to our next bimonthly Partner Newsletter

If you've got a local wildlife sighting, news story or opportunity you'd like to share with Wild Strathfillan partners, get in touch – the next issue is due on 31 March 2026.

Email: info@trustinthepark.org

To find out more about volunteering please email Sharon Cawston, Education and Engagement Officer:

Email: Sharon@trustinthepark.org



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