

Name: Reviving the Wild Heart of Southern Scotland

Place: 3100 hectares of uplands in Dumfriesshire and the Scottish Borders – comprising three estates, two bordering each other, the third a few hillsides away.

Headline: Volunteer vision and action leading to landscape scale ecological restoration centred around the recreation of upland woodland habitats.

Keywords: landscape scale ecological restoration, partnership working, wild land, communities, volunteers

What is the context?

BFT now owns three remarkable sites in the Southern Uplands. Together we think of them as the Wild Heart of Southern Scotland.

Reviving the Wild Heart of Southern Scotland describes the programme of work taking place across these sites. Each of these properties has unique qualities and there are specific visions and histories associated with each. However, they share many characteristics of uplands where the natural ecology has been degraded by centuries of grazing on fragile hill land. Approaching them in a unified manner enables BFT to take a landscape view of ecological restoration, resulting in a more impactful programme.

Our vision for the Wild Heart is to return the lost heritage of ‘the wild’ to one area of Southern Scotland. As well as striving for excellence in ecological restoration, BFT believes that engaging volunteers, communities, and particularly young people, in the restoration of these spaces will benefit individuals, communities and the heritage we seek to restore. Only through personally experiencing the vibrancy of such sites, and contributing to their welfare, will more people come to understand the importance of these habitats as vital components that should be returned to our countryside.

What was the initial aim?

The first site, and the inspiration and foundation for acquiring the others, was Carrifran Wildwood. A group of passionate and dedicated volunteers came together to look for a valley where they could re-create, in the Southern Uplands of Scotland, an extensive tract of mainly forested wilderness with most of the rich diversity of native species present in the area before human activities became dominant.

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

The three sites (Carrifran Wildwood, Corehead Farm and Talla & Gameshope) were purchased by BFT over a period of 15 years. The successes of the Carrifran project, both in the ambitious initial acquisition of the site and the subsequent transformations of the landscape, led directly to the opportunities for BFT to purchase the other sites.

Carrifran was purchased through volunteer fundraising and public subscription on Millennium Day. Since that day Wildwood supporters have worked to recreate an extensive tract of wild and largely wooded land, evoking the pristine countryside of six thousand years ago. The level of human intervention will be gradually reduced as the Wildwood gains its own momentum and becomes a functioning natural ecosystem. With the passage of the decades and centuries, Carrifran will increasingly provide a haven for a rich array of native Scottish plants and animals, long excluded from these denuded hills.

In 2007, thanks to the example and inspiration of Carrifran Wildwood, BFT was given the opportunity to purchase Corehead Farm. The iconic Devil's Beef Tub, Hart Fell Shoulder and the source of the River Annan sit within its boundaries. In 2009, with generous donations from individual, charities and trusts, Borders Forest Trust acquired Corehead. The goal here is to combine habitat restoration on part of the site, with sympathetic farming on other areas. The vision for Corehead Farm is a community-engaged, sustainable project integrating the restoration of native woodlands, wetlands and heathlands with a farm operating on organic principles. It will become an important educational resource in the South of Scotland demonstrating how biodiversity, ecosystem services and farming can thrive together

In 2013, again due to the examples of successes at Carrifran and Corehead, BFT had the opportunity to acquire the Talla & Gameshope estate. At 1,830 ha it is larger than the other sites together and transformed our ability to think on a landscape scale. Again through trusts and private donations BFT was able to purchase this site and begin working across the Wild Heart of Southern Scotland.

Finally, it is crucial to highlight that the above achievements of land purchases and habitat restoration were entirely dependent upon the volunteers and community of interest that grew from the Carrifran Wildwood vision. A small organisation such as BFT is enabled and energised by the passion of its members and the volunteer time devoted to achieving its goals. The most visible volunteers are often the ones who work out on site: planting trees, maintaining fences and paths and leading groups and activities. However, we are equally dependent upon the planning and visioning skills of volunteers from Trustees to Steering Groups to the wider membership in ensuring that the visions are well-articulated and forward progress continues.

Evidence of outcomes

Land purchases: Through the constant efforts of volunteers and staff, donations were gathered to enable the purchase of these three sites. Carrifran (660 ha), Corehead (640 ha) and Talla & Gameshope (1,800 ha).

Ecological results: Woodland creation

At Carrifran over 600,000 trees and shrubs have now been planted and the valley is visually very different from the day of purchase.

At Corehead over 250,000 trees have been planted, mainly in the upper three valleys of the site, creating 195 ha of new woodland. There has also been some work on riparian planting and wood pasture in the lower ground.

At Talla & Gameshope we have developed woodland plans and are preparing a first area of 40 ha for planting.

Emerging ecological commentary:

Although it is not long, in ecological terms, since work began on these sites, there are already some interesting results looking at the impact of the work at Carrifran. Here we quote from two scientific papers published this year.

Adair 2016: "In only 13 years, the planted native woodland of Carrifran is maturing and returning a long-lost important habitat to the area. Although obviously planted, the trees do not look out of place and the worst aspects of many plantation forest schemes have been avoided. The experience has demonstrated a number of new insights into ecological restoration in Scottish uplands, including the potential for forest establishment under dense continuous bracken, given careful planting, correct species choice and good aftercare; and the and the readiness of more scarce native plants to re-establish in the absence of grazing stock."

Savory 2016: “a comparison between Carrifran and a neighbouring valley which has not been replanted, demonstrates the effect on bird species. Until 2008, tree growth on planted areas at Carrifran was limited, some areas were still unplanted, and only two woodland bird species, Willow Warbler and Chaffinch, were recorded in very low numbers (<5) in systematic annual May and June surveys there. From 2008 to 2015, after the most intensive planting was completed and tree and shrub cover became progressively denser, a further 12 woodland species were recorded. ... The total number of all woodland birds recorded increased consistently from four individuals in 2007 to 262 in 2015. ... No such changes were observed in surveys at Black Hope, where Meadow Pipit and Wheatear remained the most abundant species.”

Enhanced profile: The purchase of Carrifran and its continuing impact on the landscape lead directly to BFT’s ability to purchase the other sites. Additionally, BFT’s reputation for high quality results has led to work with other landowners in the area, increasing the impact we have on woodland creation. The sites are also increasingly visited by professional bodies and universities as learning opportunities.

Social outcomes: Volunteers have been, and remain, essential in the success of this work. Not only do they carry out vital work on sites, they sit on advisory and steering committees, contributing to the projects immeasurably. We also have education/volunteer projects aimed at local families and school children, particularly at Corehead. The popularity of this work over the past two years, including the enthusiasm of parents and school staff, is inspiring in itself. We believe this to be fundamental to spreading the word about the importance of woodland restoration and ensuring these sites will be cared for into the future.

Economic outcomes: To date the main economic impact of this work has been in the employment of contractors on the sites, particularly fencers and tree planters. However, we expect that in years to come, as the sites mature, local communities and businesses will benefit through the nature based economy. Several B&Bs in Moffat already share our site information with guests and we have been speaking with the Tweedsmuir community about ways in which they might integrate our sites with their economic regeneration work. At Corehead Farm we continue to explore diversification opportunities which in the future might exemplify economic benefits of combining farming with ecological restoration. The impact of both the nature based economy and farm diversification are expected to increase as the years go by.

What factors contributed to those outcomes?

- Vibrant community of interest with the passion, skills and stamina to turn a vision of ecological restoration into reality.
- Presence of an overall organisation (Borders Forest Trust) with staff and expertise that are able to see the strengths of volunteer leadership in projects and enable and support that approach.
- Private donors who are inspired by the vision of this work and are willing to give generously, particularly toward the initial land purchase.
- A long-term view of this work and an inclusive approach to working with individuals, communities and partner organisations such as FCS and SNH.

What might we do differently with the benefit of hindsight?

Learning points in terms of this style of woodland planting:

- We are now moving toward planting more trees per hectare. This has the twin benefits of helping to keep down competing grasses and also cutting the amount of effort that needs to go into beating up. Beating up is particularly time consuming on these steep and challenging sites and planting somewhat more densely has resulted in a real lessening of this side of the work and

we believe the trees will 'sort themselves out' over time in terms of the correct density for the conditions.

- We are less likely to use tree tubes now, as they can result in less natural growth and still do not protect well from browsing (tall tubes cannot take the conditions on site), though we still depend upon vole guards.
- Focused deer stalking from the start is recommended. Even where deer fencing is in place, stalking is needed as fencing on these challenging sites is not 100% deer proof.
- In terms of our planning for works on site we have learned that we need to take a long view in achieving our goals as grant funding for work on site is unpredictable and other factors such as weather can slow things down. Be realistic about deadlines and communicate that clearly in planning information and setting expectations.

How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?

The 'work on the ground' side of this story is absolutely replicable. This experience has demonstrated that trees and shrubs can grow, albeit slowly, at higher altitudes and in more severe conditions than is traditionally supported. The sites and the work achieved show that a more ambitious and hopeful approach to ecological restoration is possible and that, given a strong and thorough start, there is every reason to believe that the ecology of our degraded uplands can recover with time. If more private landowners decide to restore parts of the marginal uplands on their sites, the impacts will be vastly expanded.

Another aspect of this experience which is replicable is the breadth of partnership working which we aim to maintain. While there have been examples where relationships faltered, overall we try to maintain open communication and joint working with a variety of organisations, communities, landowners and other individuals. Of course it is difficult to achieve change without unsettling some interests. However, when the work is taken forward in a spirit of openness, with a clear and consistent vision, over time that earns respectful acceptance in most instances. By trying to move forward in this open manner we have usually been able to work inclusively with varied partners and communities of interest, resulting in a much more impactful programme of work than would be expected from a small organisation.

A key limit to this work is financial. The cost of land is extremely high and only with generous private donations were these purchases accomplished. Acquiring the sites individually over a long time scale enabled us to demonstrate successes along the way which then enabled purchase of further sites.

For a detailed explanation of the development of the Wildwood, please look at The Carrifran Wildwood Story by Myrtle and Philip Ashmole, available from <http://www.bordersforesttrust.org/places/wild-heart/carrifran-wildwood/>

Key messages

- Working openly toward a clear and ambitious vision, and achieving tangible results, can snowball so that the scale and impact of the work is hugely increased. The key is to get started.
- Replicability and impact of this work will be further increased as more landowners are inspired to restore the less productive parts of their land, rather than conservation organisations being the only ones to take these decisions.
- The commitment of communities, both local and communities of interest, increases popular knowledge of the project and leads to further opportunities locally. This also enables a relatively small organisation to have a much greater impact than would be the case if we depended mainly on staff input.