

# THE CAIRNGORMS CAMPAIGNER

Spring 2009

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## ARE WE TAKING BIOINVASION IN THE CAIRNGORMS SERIOUSLY ENOUGH?

### BIOINVASION TAKES MANY FORMS AND ITS IMPACTS ARE HUGE

Bioinvasion, the arrival of new species or “strains” of species in ecosystems that have evolved without their presence, is not

introduced. The troublesome weed, bishopweed, for example arrived with the Romans as a salad. Rabbits, when first introduced, had to be safeguarded by a “warrender”, hence the surname.



*Giant Hogweed colonising the banks of the Don*

We are surrounded with the results of these invasions, often extremely destructive. It is thought that some 80% of the natives who opposed Cortez and his “conquistadors” in South America died of diseases like smallpox transmitted by the invaders to a native population with no evolved resistance to them. In

necessarily an “unnatural” process. Over the aeons of evolution, it has gone on as species crossed seas, perhaps by plant seeds floating as investigated by Darwin, or carried by migrating animals. Historically, the landbridge between Siberia and Alaska permitted migration of species, including man, into North America. Ecosystems change in response, often dramatically. Man is a major agent



*Ranunculus growing densely in the River Spey Photo Spey Fishery Board*

in bioinvasion, carrying species around the globe. Nearly all agricultural weeds came with his crops or were deliberately

nineteenth century Ireland, exploitation reduced the large human population to degrading poverty and almost entire

## ARE WE TAKING BIOINVASION IN THE CAIRNGORMS SERIOUSLY ENOUGH? contd.

dependence on potatoes for survival. The accidental introduction of the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, the causal organism of the disease late blight of potatoes, removed that food source in drastic epidemics in 1847-49. Over a million people starved and another million emigrated! The large scale damage can be less spectacular, but no less real. The accidental 19<sup>th</sup> century import of *Serpula lacrymans* to the UK from the Himalayas (where it was a fungus parasitising woody plants, causing a rot of some tree species) produced the problem of dry rot of timber in buildings. It is since reckoned to have thereby destroyed more buildings than the blitz.

### BIOINVASION CONTINUES

In recent years, the huge international trade in horticultural plants into the UK has brought us, among other things, the lily beetle, the lupin aphid, the New Zealand flatworm that predates earthworms, and three species of vine weevil. Vine weevil grubs feed on the roots of many plants. Nobody knows how widespread they now are in the wild or how much damage they do there. The wombat, the coypu, the muskrat and the mink all have two things in common. They were brought into ecosystems where they were not native for fur farming. Escapees multiplied and caused major ecological and economic damage through bioinvasion.

### CLIMATE CHANGE IS INDUCING A NEW WAVE OF BIOINVASION.

The Blue Tongue Virus (BTV) that causes Blue Tongue disease in sheep and cattle has been spreading north in Europe since October 1998 and continues its advance. Originally spread by a midge *Culicoides imicola*, it can now spread through at least two other midge species *C. obsoletus* and *C. pulicaris*, both of which occur in Scotland and indeed in the Cairngorms. Since the virus also infects deer, being a pathogen of ruminants in general, the potential implications for ecosystems in Scotland are obvious.

### BIOINVASION IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

Looking more closely at the Scottish Highlands, bioinvasion historically has had significant impacts. Probably for centuries, the domestic cat has interbred with the wild cat, a different species, and there is dispute as to whether there are any pure wildcats left in the Highlands. The fashion for "improving" red deer stocks led to the introduction of red deer from various areas to Highland deer forests. The fallow deer found around Blair Atholl, soon to be within the Cairngorms National Park, were another introduction from North Africa, possibly in Roman times, but so far relatively localised in their impacts. *Rhododendron ponticum* is an example of a plant introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that has since become a major problem in the western Highlands. When forestry was revived under the newly established

Forestry Commission, much pine seed was imported from Germany, rather than gathered from locally adapted Scottish stocks, leading to genetic pollution as another form of bioinvasion. It took the Commission a very long time to learn this was bad practice. Hence much of the Scots Pine planted in Glen Affric is of German origin and, in more recent years, when schemes for planting broadleaves like birch and wild cherry (gean in Scotland) were introduced, again foreign seed sources were permitted. Much of the wild cherry, from seed from Eastern Europe, simply died after planting, but in other cases, as with birch, inferior plants survived, genetically polluting the native, well adapted stocks. Only in recent years has this avoidable error been corrected.

### WHAT ABOUT BIOINVASION IN THE CAIRNGORMS?

There are several concerns. Giant Hogweed has started to invade river banks of the upper Don and immediate action is required. Another potential problem is what appears to be a species of Cotoneaster, a garden escape, that is colonising some scree slopes in mid Glen Avon. The Spey Fisheries Board is trying to prevent the spread of an invasive alien waterweed species of *Ranunculus* (same group as the buttercups) that invaded the Spey from Grantown on Spey downwards some years ago.

There are some major worries on the near horizon for the Cairngorms and indeed the Highlands in general. To the mania of Victorian landowners for importing exotic species, we owe the Sika deer. This is a different kind of bioinvasion as it interbreeds with red deer. It has been advancing north. Controlling this problem will be very difficult. A parasite of the Baltic Salmon, *Gyrodactylus salaris*, has reached the Atlantic and invaded many rivers on the continent. The Atlantic salmon has little resistance to it and, in rivers invaded, 98% of the salmon have been lost in five years. If it reaches Scottish rivers, the salmon stocks of the Spey and Dee and others will be threatened. Enter also *Phytophthora ramorum*, a fungus that causes Sudden Oak Wilt among trees in North America, or at least it did until it got to the UK. It is a threat to beech, sessile oak, *Calluna* species (the heathers), and *Vaccinium* species like blaeberry. Hence it is a serious threat to our native flora. It is an indication of the impact of horticultural trade that the disease is now reported as present in all the West coast gardens of the National Trust for Scotland bar one. It has been declared a Notifiable Disease. Desperate measures are being taken to eliminate the pathogen and prevent its spread outwith the gardens, but the chances of success are limited.

Meanwhile, to fend off another invader, "Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels" has been launched (See In Brief") Said the then minister for environment, Mr Russell, "This project, like the Red Squirrels in South Scotland (RSSS), which I launched in Dumfries and Galloway earlier this year aims to stop the march of the grey squirrel into the north." Well, let's wish it luck.

## ARE WE TAKING BIOINVASION IN THE CAIRNGORMS SERIOUSLY ENOUGH? contd.

### ARE WE TAKING BIOINVASION SERIOUSLY ENOUGH?

Bioinvasion has long been underestimated in its importance. It is estimated to cost the British economy £2 billion/year. A recent study counted 2,721 non-native species in England alone, 2/3 of them plants. But there are at last signs of an awakening to its potential damage to biodiversity as second only to habitat loss. A secret of successful control of bioinvasion is to detect it early and act immediately and drastically if necessary before it spreads. In May 2008, the UK launched "The Invasive Non-native Species Framework Strategy for Great Britain" (See [www.nonnativespecies.org](http://www.nonnativespecies.org)) covering England, Scotland and Wales. The strategy includes education, early spotting of bioinvasion, and means for rapid response. However, the key to successful control of bioinvasion is **prevention** and to do this within as wide a national and international boundary as possible. The Framework does not tackle this. Neither at present would EU initiatives under its Sixth Environmental Action

Programme, which is trying to head "Towards an EU Strategy on Invasive Species." This is a key weakness. The Scottish Government is considering a new legislation on the Natural Heritage. It remains to be seen if it will cover bioinvasion.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, what can the Cairngorms Campaign do? Some current problems can be tackled. The Campaign is taking steps to push agencies like Aberdeenshire Council, the CNPA and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency to act now on the Giant Hogweed invasion on the upper Don. The Cotoneaster issue in mid Glen Avon, and some small invasions of Japanese knotweed should also be tackled now, and the Campaign will contact authorities to urge this is done.

The Cairngorms Campaign co-operates with other voluntary organisations interested in the Cairngorms. This issue, we focused on some issues of strong interest to Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group who supplied important information and splendid photos.

### Increasing the Membership of the Campaign

The recession will undoubtedly make life harder for all voluntary organisations as fewer people will be able to afford subscriptions, and funding charities and government have less money to distribute. The Campaign depends on income from its members to finance its work and doubtless there will be a tendency to lose some members as the recession bites.

The Campaign's committee decided to act to anticipate this. and is taking various measures In this issue of the newsletter, for example, you will find a membership form. Is there someone you know who would like to support the protection of the Cairngorms? Then PLEASE give them the membership form, show them a copy of this newsletter and ask them to join.

## ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN

Below we describe some but not all of the Campaign's recent activities in caring for the Cairngorms.

### National Park Core Paths Plan

The core paths network is an official network of paths for general access each district of Scotland is required to create and maintain under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. The National Park Authority (CNPA) is preparing such a plan for the Park and hence for much of the Cairngorms. It was clear from the draft plan, that a lot of good work had been done on the plan, which broadly had our support. However, the Campaign raised a number of objections. It is the Campaign's policy to support good access for a variety of users to ensure a wide range of people enjoy the qualities of the Park. However, within that, it is important that such principles as the balance of access that have been explained in previous newsletters, and that protect the basic resource from damage are observed. The Campaign's objections therefore mainly sought clarification on a number of issues that touched on this kind of consideration. Thus, when the plan used terms like "reasonable access" or "high quality access" the Campaign held this was too vague. Did "high quality" mean highly engineered laid out paths or did it refer to the quality of the experience offered? Another example was where there was reference to paths being upgraded, with apparently no recognition of the need arising sometimes for paths to be downgraded – perhaps to protect a vulnerable habitat. There was also a lack of integration between Core Paths policies on where core paths could be built, and CNPA policies on the protection of wild areas. We have since held productive meetings with CNPA Staff to resolve these issues through clearer wording of the plan and revised wordings have been offered to the Campaign which is now examining these.

### Consultation on National Parks

The Scottish Government is conducting its first five year review of the functioning of national parks in Scotland and we gave this considerable attention.

### The Cairngorms Campaign and Scottish Environment Link

The Campaign encouraged Scottish Environment Link to hold a workshop of concerned NGOs to share knowledge and views and discuss what their responses should be. The Campaign submitted one of two papers on the topic for the meeting. It proved a thoughtful and useful meeting giving the benefit of shared experience and knowledge to all participating organisations. On the basis of this, the Campaign submitted a lengthy response.

### The Narrow Focus of the Review and the Need for Indicators

The Campaign pointed out that the review had simply focused on the structural aspects of the parks' governing bodies and consequently had not addressed the real issues with focus on planning and an undue emphasis on the importance of local communities in decision-making. There should have been a proper quinquennial review of Parks' progress. There was a lack of indicators and of any strategic system of monitoring, meaning it will be hard to assess the performance of national parks when one is done. Already, in general, for example in the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), there is a lack of strategic thinking, of connectivity of policy and rationale from first principles and to the huge body of knowledge, research and praxis on key subjects such as mountain management, tourism development in mountain areas and recreational management. There is a need to establish systems for collecting appropriate data on which to base performance reviews of the Parks in future and a mechanism for appraising Parks' roles as planning authorities, tracking decisions, whether made by staff or Board, etc. Indicators should be developed including for quality of decisions.

### The Relevance of the Aims of the National Parks

Serious questions arise about the present functioning of the national parks. The starting point for review of our arrangements for National Parks should be their aims, as set out in s.1 of the National Parks (Scotland Act) 2000. Their four-strand remit contains nothing that is specifically relevant to national parks. They are simply the four guidelines of sustainable development that are equally applicable to the centre of cities or housing schemes. Guidelines by IUCN, the official international body with a remit to take an international overview of protected area systems clearly lay down that national parks are places that should have conservation of their special qualities as the foremost purpose of their governing bodies stating that they should be "*managed mainly for ecosystem protection...or landscape/seascape conservation...and recreation*". By these international standards, Scottish National Parks do not qualify for the title of National Parks and there is a danger they will become simply another kind of rural development tool.

### Are the Current Governing Arrangements of the Parks the Right Ones?

Responding to specific questions posed by the consultation, the Campaign regarded the present National Park bodies as the only practical model for a governing body of a park board and each Park required its own body due to the local distinctiveness of the issues they addressed. It felt that there was limited scope for a ministerially chaired National Strategy Group simply to oversee the Parks though it might exercise some functions such as commissioning research.

In response to suggestions to reduce the size of the boards, while the current boards were large, governance of national parks is, to a considerable extent, about



## ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN

natural resource negotiations. Such processes are seldom easy. They almost inevitably involve clashes and struggles between conflicting interests, between alternative worldviews, between those comfortable with the status quo and those trying to change it, and between diverse actors with differential power and access to resources. It is necessary to have this diversity of interests represented on the board and this may lead to a fairly large membership.

### ***There is a Fundamental Error in the Management of National Parks***

Regarding the makeup of the directly elected local people: collectively, the local interests dominate the boards. We stated, "This leads to problems. It is internationally recognised that a strong local engagement is vital to the successful management of protected areas. But a national engagement is also important. Unfortunately, from the start, there has been a heavy, imbalanced, focus, from ministerial level downwards, on the involvement and importance of local (geographic) communities." Para 2.2.3 of the consultative document states that, "As *small distinctive organisations, the challenge for National Park Authorities is to sustain their local roots at the same time as enhancing their national profile.*" This statement is based on a fallacy and is at the core of the problem. The Campaign pointed out It stated :-

***"that the aim of park authorities should be not so much to enhance the parks' national profile, as their national ROOTS! "***

***We cannot overemphasize the importance of this point.*** Success in the management of national parks, and indeed of stakeholder groups approaching natural resource management issues in general, as demonstrated all over the world, depends on the involvement of both **local geographic communities** and of **communities of interest**. These last exist at the local and national level and indeed were collectively influential in bringing about the creation of National Parks in Scotland. Successful National Parks can no more be solely locally rooted than nationally" The Campaign sensed that national parks, as presently operated, are steadily losing support among communities of interest and, given their wide membership, this will sooner or later be reflected in the publics' views at national level unless the situation is remedied.

The Campaign felt that there is a need for ministerial appointees to bring a greater knowledge of relevant subject areas and a stronger national and international perspective and for a deliberate policy of engagement with the communities of interest to be pursued by park boards and staff and for them to be adequately represented on the boards. The response rejected the proposal that ministers appoint conveners and deputy conveners from among board members for several reasons.

### **Cairngorms National Park Local Plan – The Campaign's Objections**

This Plan sets policies for development in the Park over the coming years and has now reached the stage where the Park Authority has published its proposed final form. Since there are outstanding objections to policies in the Plan it is now going to a Public Inquiry. Throughout the stages of the Plan's development the Campaign made detailed comment, supporting many policies in the Plan, and pointing out deficiencies it perceived in policies etc. It pressed for example for clearer recognition of the SSSI system and of the importance of wild land within the Park. Similarly it emphasized the need for clearer definition of aquatic features of outstanding value including the neglected catchment of the river Don. The Campaign is concerned with the entire environment of the Cairngorms, including their social and historical aspects. It thus pressed for clearer recognition of the social and historical importance of features like the planned villages within the Park like Grantown-on-Spey, a specifically Scottish genre of settlements, and of the military roads. Despite subsequent improvements to the draft Plan, the Campaign has maintained formal objection on two things in particular. One is the lack of any policy of the control of bulldozed tracks into roadless areas, despite the growing national recognition of the importance of wild land in the Cairngorms. The other is the large scale of holiday home construction envisaged within the Park which the Campaign sees as unsustainable development in terms of balanced development of communities, protection of the natural resources of the Cairngorms, and globally in terms of reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> omissions and their impact on climate change. The Campaign will be submitting detailed written evidence to the inquiry in cooperation with other voluntary organisations but cannot afford legal representation at the full public hearing.

### **Comments on a Planning Application for Housing in Kingussie**

The Campaign recently received an urgent request for support from Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group in its objection to a planning application to build almost 20 new homes in woodland on the outskirts of Kingussie. Since Campaign committee members had no opportunity to visit the site, it was not possible to enter a formal objection but this housing proposal raised some important general concerns that informed the Campaign's letter of comment. The application raised important issues that are discussed in the article in this newsletter on "Valuing the Straths" but in this specific instance it became clear that the richness of the area proposed for housing had not been properly assessed and the local population of red squirrels for example not noted in the application. The Campaign therefore urged the Park Board to exercise the greatest caution in assessing this application. The application was refused. An interesting aside arose when it turned out that, for elderly residents of sheltered housing near the site, watching the antics of the red squirrels provided a daily pleasure and stimulus: an example of the experiential value of wildlife.

## Talking Point

## VALUING THE

Ask people to think of the Cairngorms and most picture the high mountains but around these mountain masses lie the Straths! (In Here the human settlements lie, strung out along the rivers. Here also lie the great majority of the broadleaved woodland of the Cairngorms. Both the entire Spey and the Dee are designated Special Areas of Conservation under the European Union's Habitats Directive. Here internationally designated a Ramsar Site under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands protecting key wetland sites. The Campaign's vision of the Cairngorms environment embraces the entire ecological catena including lowland features such as these forests and the wetlands and rivers, the flanking glens, and the natural environment and the diverse and environmentally rich settings of settlements.

Many areas around settlements are now coming under pressure from housing development for housing. Splendid work in these areas by the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group aided by Buglife, is discovering an unsuspected diversity of plants, animals and insects. An example is the open grassland area called the Mossie at Grantown-on-Spey threatened with development for 193 houses by Muir. Here have been discovered the small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly (*Boloria selene*) and another UK priority species of butterfly the northern argus (*Arixia artaxerxes*). The Mossie is now known to support rockrose, the typical foodplant of this butterfly. Four other insect species have been previously recorded in Scotland plus other endangered insects, including the blaeberry bumblebee and five species of butterfly have been recorded at the Mossie, along with more than 30 species of hoverfly. This flower-rich grazed grassland area supports a rich array of colourful waxcap fungi and two UK red listed species the field gentian (*Gentianella campestris*) and heath dog violet (*Viola canina*). This exemplifies other concerns that arise with such proposals. Red squirrels use woodland in the area and the open ground supports waders including lapwing, snipe, oystercatcher curlew and redshank. If the housing is allowed, the setting of the nearby caravan site on the edge of Grantown would become urbanised, a recreational area for local people and visitors would be lost and strains the infra structure of Grantown-on-Spey. Locally it is starting to be seen as a test case for the Park Authority in its willingness to stand by its commitment to environmental protection.



**Bumble Bee on vetch**



**Northern Brown Argus Butterfly**

Villages are experiencing a series of large scale and smaller housing development proposals that in Badenoch and Strathspey, in-to having a major impact on this varied and highly valued environment. Most of this housing development is not related to the social needs of the communities concerned but aims to build large numbers of holiday homes. Collectively, it creates a creeping urbanisation of an environment that makes its living out of visitors' experience of a rural environment. For example, Aviemore developer, Davall Developments, has an application to build 79 houses, plus land for a primary school, in Boat of Garten. Environmental surveys for some sites at least submitted in planning applications appear to have been inadequate, underestimating populations of protected species like red squirrels and capercaillies.

The built environment of the Straths includes classical examples of planned villages like Grantown-on-Spey and Ballater, a distinctly Scottish cultural feature where the design of settlements encompassed a sense of architectural and social cohesion, a sense of place, often with communal features like central public squares and parks. Aviemore, in contrast, entirely lacks these features and gives the impression of someone simply backed up a "megatruck" and tipped it there.

The landscape of the Straths not only has a high biodiversity but, despite the emphasis in much tourism marketing literature for example on the high mountain areas, it is the environment of the Straths which the visiting tourist chiefly experiences. It is also the environment that surrounds local residents and provides them with a diversity of open accessible green spaces, various forest and woodland areas, w



# Talking Point

## THE STRATHS

(in Scots, is a narrow valley) of Strathspey, Strathdee and Strathdon. Cairngorms, the bulk of its ancient pinewoods, and open grasslands. There are also important water features like the Insh Marshes

concern and woodlands, elements.

areas by the insects. A good Homes. Here northern brown species not have also now assemblage of a). The site breeding and camping placed on the by its



**Wax cap fungi**



**Common Blue Butterfly**

lochans and other natural and seminatural features. Such an environment has an enormous experiential value for people as well as for biodiversity and science. Increasingly, studies are showing the close relationship between human wellbeing, as opposed to just health, and peoples' exposure to a diverse green environment. In particular, children growing up locally have access to a rich range of recreational opportunities and direct experiences of the natural world that enhances their development and lives enormously. It is instructive to contrast the opportunities for such experiences facing small children growing up in sprawling, expanding Aviemore, with that of children growing up in Kingussie as it stands! It should therefore be carefully protected for sound social and economic reasons. In considering the planning applications for large scale and often unnecessary housing coming before it, the Park Authority should have this foremost in their minds.



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**Field Gentians**

**Flowers, fungi and insect photos by The Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group**



**Shaft of sun strikes roadside larch near Braemar.**

**The straths give magic moments.**

## IN BRIEF

### OTTERS IN DECLINE?

Regular assessments are made of otter populations in rivers and lochs in Scotland and, until recently at least, the otter populations have been reviving. There were always otter populations on the river systems of the Cairngorms like the Spey, Dee and Don. Counts in recent years however indicate a significant decline in otter populations. The reason is unclear. One possible reason advanced is the steep decline in populations of the Atlantic eel, and again for reasons that nobody really knows. Eels are a significant food species for otters and otters require frequent top-ups of food, as their energy losses to their environment are considerable. A similar decline is also being indicated by assessment of the same species in marine areas, even in places where they have formerly been common, such as the Shetland Isles. Here, the possible cause is thought to be overfishing by man leading to a decline in otters' food supply.

### RABBIT? RABBIT? RABBIT?

Where have all the rabbits gone? There is no rabbit census revealing startling results, no "Friends of Rabbits" group watching their welfare, but still people are commenting. On the east of the Cairngorms, even last summer, hillsides that would be expected to be "hopping with rabbits" were strangely deserted or held thin populations. Road kills of rabbits are normally plentiful, especially of young ones, but have noticeably decreased over a wide area. From the northern side of the Cairngorms comes a complaint that buzzards are becoming chicken thieves after being forced to switch prey due to the shortage of the usual ready supply of rabbits. It can't have been the hard winters – we haven't had one for a long time. Nor are people seeing many myxomatosis infected rabbits around, so it doesn't seem to be an epidemic of that disease. How widespread is this phenomenon? What is causing the decline of such a determined little breeder? It is a mystery! If you have noticed such a decline in your area – especially around the Cairngorms, let us know.

### WILL WILD LAND BE BETTER PROTECTED?

A survey of public attitudes to wild land in Scotland by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Cairngorms National Park Authority has produced the following results: The vast majority of residents (91%) think it important for Scotland to have wild places, and that they contribute to Scottish identity.

Woodlands, forests, mountains, hills, lochs and moorlands were all rated highly as wild areas. Scotland was seen as having a lot of wild areas, especially in the north, west and east Highlands, the Western Isles and the Northern Isles. Wild places are most commonly valued because they are seen as part of Scotland's culture, heritage and tourist industry. They are also seen as important for wildlife and nature, the environment, and the local economy.

Half the people interviewed believe that wild places in Scotland are under threat and around three in five residents

thought that action is required to preserve wild areas in Scotland. Overall, the key perceived threats to wild areas were development, urbanisation and humans.

Over 1,000 people were interviewed, including 300 in the Cairngorms. This is interesting stuff but hardly surprising given studies dating back to Dr Robert Aitken's 1977 Thesis on attitudes to wild land in Scotland and work by others. Wild land it seems from the report is embedded in the Scottish sense of identity. Not unexpectedly, maps in the report show the high Cairngorms as a significant area but, as the work of Dr Adam Watson has shown, this has been much shrunken by the construction of bulldozed roads into roadless areas. In 1999, Scottish National Policy Planning Guidelines no 14 identified wild land as an important landscape resource that should be protected, in spite of which the CNPA had to be almost dragged into evolving a wild land policy as part of the Park Plan. SNH has now adopted a policy on wild land stating the policy aim to be: - "SNH identifies as its policy aim that: there are parts of Scotland where the wild character of the landscape, its related recreational value and *potential for nature are such that these areas should be safeguarded against inappropriate development or land-use change*. The only uses of these areas should be of a low key and sensitive nature, which do not detract from their wild qualities. Within the main areas of wild land, a restrictive approach to development should be taken, as these will be landscapes where development is inimical to their character. "

This is interesting stuff, but it highlights why the Cairngorms Campaign has formally objected to the lack of any policy on the creation of bulldozed tracks in roadless areas in the Local Plan for the National Park despite itself being intent on developing a policy on wild areas!

### ALL CHANGE ON THE FUNICULAR

Since our last newsletter, Highlands and Islands Enterprise has finally given up the battle to have an independent operator running the funicular railway after only six years of operation and taken over Cairngorm Mountain Ltd to prevent it becoming bankrupt. It has "squared" its debts, a curious term that can only mean it has paid off its overdraft which, at last balance sheet, stood at £3.6 million. That means we, the taxpayers paid it. This was after a loan of £1m from Highland Council had been "converted" to a grant. The operation has become a bottomless pit for taxpayers' money. The manager Bob Kinnaird has left and is the new principal of Glenmore Lodge, the national outdoor education centre in Glenmore where he will at least have a more achievable task. Meanwhile, Audit Scotland has decided to initiate a "Review of the Cairngorm Funicular Railway". The overall aim of the work would be to "describe the lifecycle of the funicular (including funding arrangements) and, in particular, to review the key decision stages; and to examine how the use of public funds has been monitored, including the actions taken by public bodies, in particular HIE, to address financial difficulties. " Its key objectives are to: -



## IN BRIEF

- 1) Review whether HIE used a rigorous approach to decisions about funding and support for the funicular
- 2) Assess whether HIE put in place effective monitoring and evaluation arrangements
- 3) Assess whether HIE has used a rigorous approach to developing a new business model"

The report is due out in September.

### BOUNDARY EXTENSION OF THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

After consultations on the first five years of the Scottish national parks, the government has decided to extend the boundaries of the Cairngorms National Park to include the Atholl area in the southwest. There is logic to this. The area certainly is part of the Cairngorms massif, and meets the standards of landscape and wildlife value required to be included. It was missed out while political lobbying ensured areas like Laggan, which do not meet these standards, were included. SNH, which originally recommended that it should be included, is now reviewing the area to recommend where the boundary should lie. The move is a victory for the Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms (PARC) that campaigned for this.

### RAPTOR PERSECUTION CONTINUES

The RSPB's 2007 report on raptor persecution, now issued, concludes that, while there has generally been a long-term decline of illegal persecution of raptors in the lowlands and the North and West Highlands, this trend is slowing or indeed may now have ceased. In fact for some species and in some areas, despite the efforts of the law, there is no evidence of a decline in the crime rate and illegal killing remains a threat to some species. Raptors tend to be long-lived birds rearing small numbers of young and this makes populations of them vulnerable to even relatively low levels of persecution. The birds found are of course only a fraction of those killed as most of the carcasses lie in remote hill areas. A study of the maps and lists of cases in the report of birds found killed by poisoning, trapping etc, shows the Cairngorms, with seven cases, is still a trouble spot.

### AVIEMORE HIGHLAND RESORT DEVELOPMENT FINALLY GIVEN PLANNING PERMISSION

The planning committee of CNPA has given planning permission for the £80m second phase of development of Aviemore Highland Resort. It has been a contentious development with the resort management complaining of planning delays jeopardizing the project, the CNPA demanding the resort management show some respect for the Park Authority, and disputes over access with the local community. Architecture+Design Scotland, a government advisory group on design, acknowledged improvements had been made to the plan but heavily criticized it concluding, *"This is a major investment, and a unique opportunity to deliver a vision that is special for the resort, for Aviemore, for the National Park and for Scotland; as such we believe it requires well-advised, competent and skilful masterplan. We remain unable to support the project in its present form. We*

*would emphasise that the designs are not of a sufficient quality for one of Scotland's National Parks and a major visitor destination, and the project is not yet meeting its potential to create a positive development, that capitalises on the assets of the site, and maximises its appeal as a place to attract visitors. We continue to believe that greater investment in design could result in economic benefits for the Resort, and the wider community."* At the planning committee meeting, the chairman of the Aviemore Community Council wished the decision deferred on the grounds that the design was still not of adequate quality, lacked detail necessary for proper consideration, and the issue of community provision had not been resolved. In their report, Architecture+Design Scotland also emphasized the importance of integrating the whole development into the wider Aviemore area. Certainly the wider area needs attention. It is instructive to compare the old "planned villages" around the Cairngorms like Grantown on Spey, designed by "improving landowners" and which still give a sense of community, and of architectural and social cohesion. Aviemore, in contrast, gives the impression somebody backed up a "megatruck" and tipped it there. It is increasingly reminiscent of a badly planned housing scheme of the kind holidaymakers come to the Highlands to avoid. Experience in the Alps shows such resorts, in the long term, are doomed. Meanwhile the developers complain that the delays have cost them millions of pounds and assert that the future of the whole now lies with their bankers, themselves caught in the credit crisis.

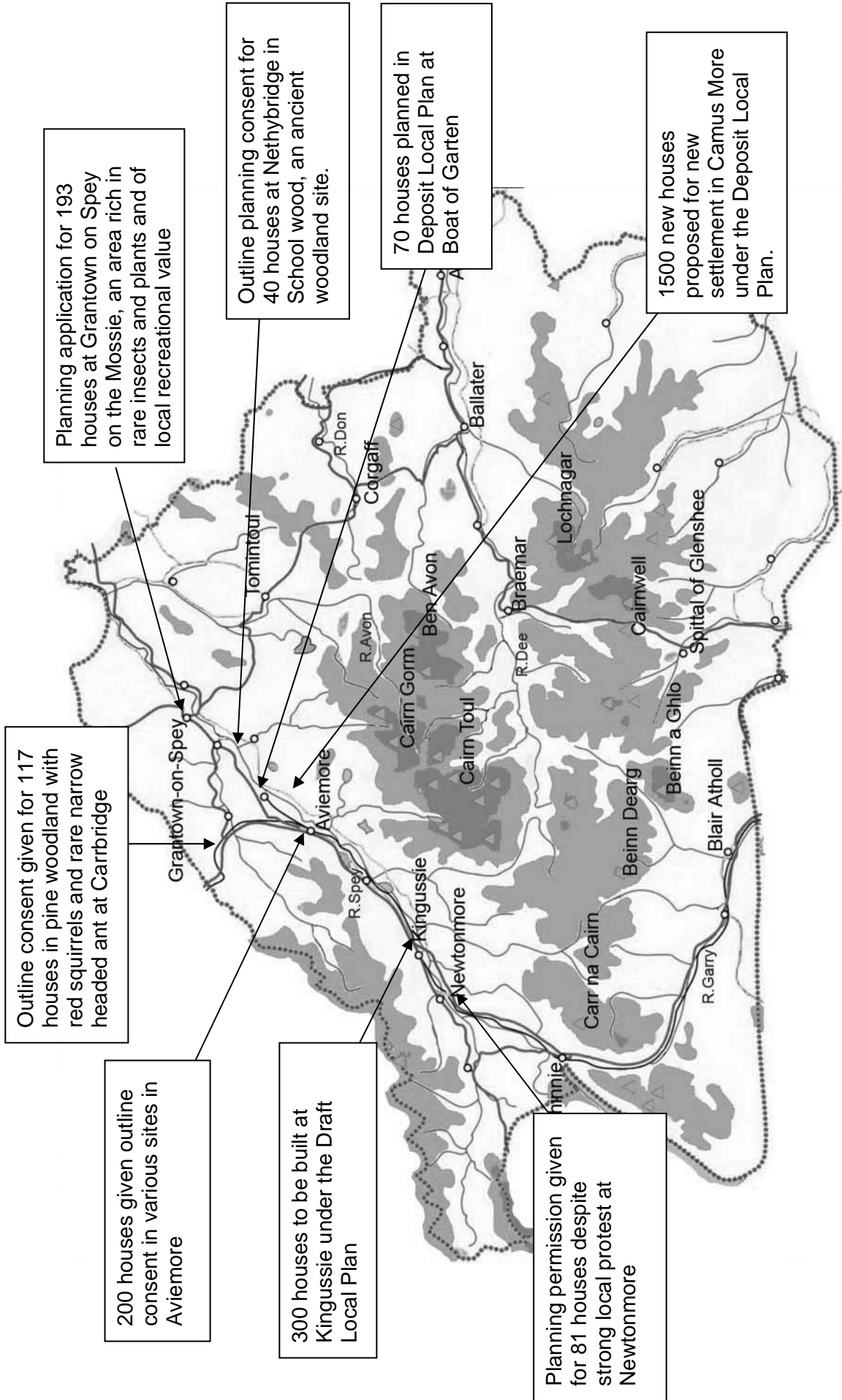
### SAVING THE RED SQUIRREL IN SCOTLAND

A working group of Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland and The Scottish Executive has worked out a plan to conserve the shrinking populations of red squirrels. The Plan identifies the impact of the gray squirrel and the disease it carries, squirrelpox, that kills red squirrels, as the primary threat to the species but acknowledges that total eradication of gray squirrels from Scotland is unlikely to be achieved. The plan therefore focuses, "on action which is sustainable and effective for long-term conservation management of the red squirrel." The plan includes an increased budget for the work from £542,250 to £3,719,000 to cover a targeted survey of squirrel control and habitat management. This includes a survey of 150 woods including red/gray interface areas, a larger area of red squirrel strongholds. Red squirrel-friendly management is a priority, and stronghold buffer areas to be defined where restriction of large-seeded broadleaves would be planned to deter gray squirrels. Gray squirrel control aimed at stopping regional spread in Grampian, Argyll and Perthshire, as well as squirrelpox virus in the south is included. There would also be research into vaccine development for squirrelpox virus. More information at [www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk) - enter "The Scottish Red Squirrel Action Plan 2006-2011."



# AROUND THE CAIRNGORMS

WHICH THIS ISSUE, UNFORTUNATELY, IS ABOUT HOUSING DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS IN BADENOCH AND STRATHSPEY



## Cairngorm Stories

***“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; Consider her ways, and be wise”***

**King James Version of the Bible Proverbs 6.**

*“If you go down in the woods today, you’d better go in disguise”* goes the old song. In the song, it promises an encounter with a “Teddy Bears’ Picnic” :unlikely in the Cairngorms, but you will almost certainly encounter something more interesting if less bizarre – wood ants! Wood ants are among our largest ants, measuring anything from 5–11 mm long. They are thought to be the largest ants in Europe. As is common with ants, it starts when all the females and males from colonies in the one area mate on the same day. A fertile female, now a queen, either rejoins her home colony and shares it with sister queens, or starts a new one. She looks for an open woodland clearing or woodland edge where the sun can reach the nest, favouring south facing sites, although the Scottish wood ant is tolerant of denser, shadier woodland. If she is of the species the narrow headed woodant, she may seek and enter the nest of a smaller species of the same group, incapacitate or kill the queen, and exploit her “enslaved” workers to help care for her own brood! She starts to lay eggs that hatch into infertile “worker” ants and later males and females. Queens of the red robber ant (*Formica sanguinea*), gets up to the same game with nests of Large Black Ant. The things that go on in the woods of the Cairngorms!

As the queen’s growing brood of workers gathers pine needles, small twigs and other plant material and creates the domed structure you see in the pine forests of the Cairngorms, and elsewhere where wood ants occur: a conical pile of pine needles and twigs with an internal labyrinth of tunnels and chambers. The needles are often laid pointing down the slope of the pile, acting like a thatch that efficiently sheds rain. This is really a solarium in which the eggs and the pupae that hatch from them are kept, warmed by the sun and moved round daily as it warms different sides of the pile. Ventilation is closely controlled by daily opening and closing ventilation shafts in tune with the changing weather. Simultaneously, the workers are busy creating the real nest; a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers often deep below ground. On sunny days, the ants will mass in the sun and then reenter the nest using the heat of their bodies to warm the nest. Debris of various kinds is removed and dumped at a distance. Nests two feet high are common and can be 3-4 feet high. In one instance in Sweden, a brown bear hollowed one out and hibernated in it, dry and well insulated.

Inevitably, such a comfortable dwelling, though well defended by the ants, attracts lodgers. Some are harmless to the ants. One group of beetles, known as Myrmecophilous beetles, have their larvae living within the nest as lodgers. If ants attack the beetles, they are equipped with glands that emit chemicals that repel or even kill the ants. Some are just scavengers, but others are parasites. The beetle *Lomechusa strumosa* lives in the nest of the red robber ant and is even fed and

protected by its hosts.

Some animals such as the capercaillie may damage nests just using them for dust. They may also feed on ants, as black grouse will also do, but pine martens, badgers and deer can inflict worse damage. Please, if you are examining a nest, don’t poke it with sticks or kick it. I mean, how would you like someone to kick a hole in your roof?

As the queen or queens continue to lay eggs, the numbers of workers, males and females produced in a nest are prodigious! It is thought a single nest may contain 100,00 ants. What does such a population feed on? As the colony grows, a system of trails is gradually extended sometimes for 100m in each direction for foraging ants. Trails may connect separate nests from a mother colony to make super colonies. But foraging for what? Wood ants are carnivores! With aphids (greenfly), workers may devour them or gently stroke with their antennae to induce them to exude sweet plant juice from special glands in their rear. Ants will even protect them. There are even thought to be species of aphids dependent on ants for their survival.. But that apart, almost any insect, spider, mite etc is food – up to 100,000 insects a day by some estimates. The bodyweight of that number of tiny insects soon adds up to what a wolf might eat hunting deer. They are as much major carnivores of the forest as wolves!

As you walk through the woods, much of the foraging is going on, up there, over your head in the forest canopy and therein lies much of the ecological significance of wood ants. Wood ants thereby play a major role in the ecosystem of the Caledonian Forest. They are credited with helping disperse seeds, aiding nutrient cycles and being a food source for species like capercaillie, but it is their impact on insect populations that is most obvious. In the absence of wood ants, insects living on leaves etc such as caterpillars or species such as the sawfly (*Neodiprion sertifer*) and [pine looper moth](#) (*Bupalus piniaria*) that eat Scots pine needles can proliferate and become damaging to the forest. The Forestry Commission recognises them as a “keystone” species in the forest ecosystem and encourages woodland owners to treat them sympathetically. Several species are on the Scottish Biodiversity List bringing them under the biodiversity duty of the Nature Conservation Scotland Act 2004. Wood ants are “indicator species” whose presence indicates healthy woodland. Their value for biological control of insect pests has been recognised widely with, historically, attempts being made to spread them in countries like the Netherlands. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussia, for example, they were systematically introduced into orchards for pest control and protected there in law, one of the earliest examples of an insect protection of this kind in Europe.



## CAIRNGORM STORIES *continued.*

There are several species of wood ants in the UK. In Scotland we have the northern wood ant (*Formica lugubris*) and the Scottish wood ant (*Formica aquilonia*) found in the fragments of the pinewoods and some birchwoods of the Caledonian Forest of the Highlands along with blood red slave-maker ant. Rarest of all is the once common narrow-headed ant (*Formica exsecta*), found, at least within the UK, in Scotland largely only from the pinewoods of the Caledonian Forest around Loch Morlich and Abernethy in the Cairngorm area. A recent survey of their colonies in the forest of Glenmore identified over 430 colonies. A small population near Carrbridge is the most northern known surviving population and is under threat from housing development. The only other British population occurs in Devon but it used to be common in places like Bournemouth and the New Forest. As with many species, fragmentation and loss of its habitat and unsympathetic forestry practices have reduced its populations.

Against many natural enemies, they have a formidable protection. They don't sting or bite. Instead they eject an accurate and deadly stream of formic acid which has been measured at 50 to 75% concentrated and is present as up to 20% of the ant's bodyweight, a remarkable amount of a



**Wood ants nest on a site threatened with development at Carrbridge**

*Photo The Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group*



**Woodants foraging in the pines**

*Photo The Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group*



**Cetonia cuprea - a beetle that lodges, largely unattacked, among wood ants.**

*Photo The Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group*

toxin for any animal to carry. The ants use it also to subdue their prey. Place your face close to a wood ant nest and alarm the occupants and you may feel it sting your face. It is thought the acid can help control bird parasites like feather lice and birds like jays have been seen on nests deliberately getting ants to spray it onto their feathers.

Ogden Nash, the doggerelist, had a rather more irreverent view of such ants than the bible:-

**“The ant has made himself illustrious  
Through constant industry industrious.  
So what?  
Would you be calm and placid  
If you were full of formic acid?”**