

Scottish Wildlife Trust North of Scotland Members' visit Evanton Community Woodland

Sunday 11th of August (2012) was a significant day for North Members. It was the first summer outing of the recently constituted North Members' Centre and we enjoyed a beautiful afternoon exploring Evanton woodland, Easter Ross. The local Novar Estate sold 65 hectares to the Community for £300,000 on the 1st of August and the newly established Evanton Wood Community Company has prepared plans for its future management and public involvement. This mixed forest was originally established over 100 years ago by Sir William Schlich, an important figure in European forestry and Oxford University's first Professor of Forestry. It is largely a commercial planting, but it does exhibit a wide range of habitats and has small remnants of native wood, for example alder on wet ground, and hazel fringing its northern edge.

The woodland boasts some large "cathedral trees", which are rare in the Highlands. We saw impressive Douglas Firs, oak and beech. These together with some fine Scots Pine and silver birch made an interesting mix. Dappled shade provided an ideal place for speckled wood butterflies to cavort around the glades; this species is a relative newcomer having arrived in the early 1990s.

Peering upwards we were treated to calls and movement from a bunch of long tailed tits, cryptic coal tits and industrious blue tits feeding along the birch branches.

A commercial woodland can be rather devoid of ground flora. However at Evanton it was pleasing to find sunlit glades full of colour with purple heather species and yellow hawkweeds. In contrast, in a more shaded area beside Scots Pine, was one of our highlights - the diminutive creeping Lady's Tresses, the orchid *Goodyera reptans var repens*, its creamy flowers just beginning to fade. This species was first recorded near the river Nairn in 1767.

We saw no mammals. Tracks on wet ground revealed roe deer were about. Pine Marten have been recorded and we may have seen their scats. Red squirrels are present but they too remained elusive.

A narrow winding track led us downhill to the Allt Grad (ugly burn), or more attractively known as the Black Rock Gorge. A vertiginous, dark, sombre chasm - 120 feet at its deepest and a mere 16 feet wide at its narrowest - has been cut by the burn in spectacular fashion through the relatively soft conglomerate and old red sandstone. We wanted to reach the other side but were not tempted to jump! Unlike an alleged whisky smuggler some 200 years ago who, fired up by a combination of adrenalin and his "spirit", leapt across and escaped the clutches of the excise man. More recently the gorge was a setting for a scene from the film "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire". The army however have provided two fine bridges, which were great vantage points. Without our climbing gear we were unable to get close up to the 68 species of moss and the 32 species of Liverwort which have been found, clinging precariously and festooning the dripping slopes. We didn't see any signs of the otter. Nor did we have our wet suits to look for lamprey species and salmonids in the rushing, well oxygenated, waters below! Such inaccessible places are so invaluable to wildlife.

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