

# **1 MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND PROPOSALS**

## **1.1 Knowledge of biodiversity**

It would be useful to involve the community in gathering more information about Gearrchoille's wildlife. Activities such as moth-trapping, bat, lichen and squirrel surveys could all be undertaken by experts as training exercises, with participants being invited from the community and beyond. The cost of training and equipment may be funded by the LBAP.

- Investigate further surveying and biological recording.

## **1.2 Woodland regeneration**

The ideal solution to excessive browsing is to increase deer control. If this is not within the control of the community, the alternative is to individually protect selected trees. This has already been started by volunteers, but guards need to be tall enough to prevent browsing. The selection of seedlings is also critical, as light-demanding species such as oak require high light levels.

Acorn mesh guards are recommended, as they allow ventilation and are not too visually obtrusive. Larger diameter guards are available for shrubs such as hazel.

Chosen locations should allow protected trees to eventually fill canopy gaps, replace pioneer trees such as birch or grow successfully in the understorey.

Seedlings within areas of bracken need to be identified early in the summer before the bracken has grown up, or once the stems are tall enough to search under the fronds, but before the bracken collapses. Subsequent weeding around tree guards will be necessary to ensure seedlings get sufficient light and are not choked by bracken.

- Using 1.2m tree guards, shelter 20 oak, aspen or hazel saplings or seedlings each year for the next 5 years. Remove when established (after 4-5 years), and shelter another 20 trees. This will ensure that there are no more than 100 tree guards at any one time that need checking by volunteers.

## **1.3 Thinning**

Some areas of birch thicket would benefit from thinning. This will improve their appearance and generate a useful product (firewood or logs for shiitake cultivation). While trees are small, this is a good hands-on group activity to involve volunteers from the community. Cut

logs should be extracted by hand to the carpark or to the gravel pit area adjacent to the A836. Alternatively, cut material can be stacked as habitat piles.

Areas recommended for thinning might include the South side of the pond and areas close to paths.

- Thin a total area of 0.4ha of birch thicket over a 3 year period.

## **1.4 Juniper**

Birch trees are over-shading juniper in many areas.

- Remove birch trees to release shaded juniper.

## **1.5 Botanical diversity**

Where a vigorous species-poor sward has developed as a result of past grazing, recovery of the woodland flora is likely to be a slow process. An alternative is to manage these areas for other benefits.

In Compartment 2, cattle could be used to break up dense sward and create sites for seedlings to establish. This would be best arranged with neighbouring grazing tenants. Fences and gates would need to be maintained, and stock introduced on a seasonal basis. A suitable regime would be a maximum of 15 cattle from August to October, without supplementary feeding. Grazing and access do not mix well. Cattle, in particular, damage footpaths and cause anxiety for dog-walkers.

- Consider grazing versus crafting options for Compartment 2.

## **1.6 Non-native species**

Whilst non-native species do not currently pose a threat, they can spread quickly once established. Vigilance and prompt action are recommended. Attention should be especially focussed near the road, car-park and neighbouring gardens.

## **1.7 Wetland habitat**

It is recommended that the curling pond is excavated to create a small area of open water of varying depths and associated wet margins. Given the extensive growth of willow in the old pond, excavation would most efficiently be done by bringing in a small, tracked excavator from the car park and accepting some minor and recoverable damage to branches overhanging the path and to trees where the machine needs to avoid the footbridge. With operator care there should be minimal damage to the path surface.

This excavation will remove the clay liner of the pond, but given the high water table and the constant flow of water from the burn, this is unlikely to affect the pond's ability to hold water year-round.

Willow brash that has been left on the old curling pond site should be removed to make habitat piles in the adjacent woodland.

Care should be taken not to disturb the northern margin of the old curling pond, as this area contains some interesting botanical specimens.

The curling pond is of historical interest. The archaeology unit at Highland Council has requested that a photographic record is made of the curling pond before work is undertaken.

- Record the curling pond
- With a suitably experienced contractor, plan, peg out and implement pond excavation

## **1.8 Paths**

The surface of the way-marked woodland trails that loop through the wood and link to Oakwood Place should be improved.

There are various ways to achieve this. Board walks reduce ground damage and interfere least with ground vegetation, but they are costly to install and maintain and consideration needs to be given to non-slip surfaces.

A more lasting alternative is to use a geotextile base and gravel for those sections that need it most. If this can be done with minimal machine use and a lot of volunteer labour, then the ground damage will be reduced.

The problem of dog-fouling might be addressed by providing a dispenser for bio-degradable bags on entry to the wood, and a compost bin on leaving the wood.

- Plan and implement path improvements

## **1.9 Social and educational activity areas**

Three sites are recommended for activities in the wood.

The area close to the old gravel pit has good drainage and ground conditions are robust. Repeated cutting of bracken will create an area suitable for educational activities.

A small meeting/picnic area could be opened up on the South or East side of the pond.

For the production of fruit, the woodland pasture area (Cmpt 2) is best suited to this activity. Soil samples should be taken to determine the most suitable crops, or the need for applications of fertiliser or lime. Fruit bushes will need moderate to high light levels, as well as protection from browsing animals. Apple and plum trees will require protection for the first 5 years of their life, but the bark will remain vulnerable to grazing animals, especially during the winter. Low growing fruit bushes will require a fenced enclosure if reliable quantities of fruit are expected.

If a herb or plant nursery is to be established, in addition to a fenced enclosure a water supply will also be required and a site close to the old shooting hut may be appropriate.

### **1.10 Archaeology**

A field survey of Gearrchoille's archaeology would yield invaluable information that could be used to guide operations in the woodland, and perhaps provide a basis for interpretation. This survey should include an assessment of past woodland management, and should also seek recommendations for the future management of veteran trees such as old pollards. This may have to be balanced with a consideration of their epiphyte interest.

Several surveyors with complementary skills may be required to input before agreeing a management plan for veteran trees.

- Commission field surveys of archaeology and woodland management heritage
- Seek advice on management of pollards.

### **1.11 Bird boxes**

An assessment of the bird box scheme should include number and design of boxes, and monitoring occupancy. The installation of further bird and bat boxes may be of benefit, especially for species such as redstarts and flycatchers.

- Assess current provision of nest-boxes, and consider erecting further boxes.