

Estate of nature



STEFAN SCHURR/GETTY IMAGES

Returning thousands of misused hectares in the Highlands to glorious woodland and pasture is a fascinating process. By *Lisbet Rausing*

Our family are newcomers to the Highlands. We bought Corrou, a 57,000-acre estate on the edge of Rannoch Moor, in 1995 from Donald Maxwell Macdonald, grandson of Sir John Stirling Maxwell, who acquired it in 1891, at the age of 25. Sir John, the 10th baronet, was a philanthropist and benefactor, as well as a pioneering botanist and forester. He ringed Loch Ossian with an arboretum, and planted a 60-acre rhododendron garden with specimens his plant-hunters collected in the Himalayas.

Sir John was a caring employer: Corrou's staff houses were beautifully built, with indoor bathrooms, unknown elsewhere in the 1890s. The lodge built in 1896 (and lost in a fire in 1942) was pleasantly plain, eschewing Scottish baronial fancies.

Our family were enchanted by the Scottish mountain landscape, as Nordics are (we grow up reading Gavin Maxwell). One magical summer in the early 1980s, we had ridden across the Highlands. It was a journey we never forgot.

West Coast place names reminded us that these were lands that our ancestors had settled. Torlundy outside Fort William echoes Sweden's many Torlunda — sacrificial groves where Tor, the Norse god of war and thunder, was worshipped.

Somerled (?-1164), king of the Kingdom of the Isles, descended from Norsemen, and is the ancestor of the five chiefs of Clan Donald. Genetic studies show he has some 500,000 patrilineal descendants. If you are a MacAlister, a MacDonald, or a MacDougall, the chances are that you have Norwegian ancestry.

Incidentally, Somerled means 'summer traveller' in Norse. It seems the Vikings so enjoyed their summer raids they named their sons in celebration of them.

Our family felt at home in Lochaber from the start. Over time, we came to understand that Corrou was an ancient common: high-altitude, cattle-grazing land for summertime. We began to piece together the landscape's history. From ancient times it was a vast wood pasture, with diverse plantlife. Yet when we came in 1995, just 39 of its 23,000 hectares were natural woods. The altitudinal tree line had vanished. Even undergrowth like heather, bilberries and cowberries was largely gone. Those spongy and mossy hummocks and knolls had given way to hard-trampled ground, often covered with deer grass.

Between 1966 and 1984, the Forestry Commission had erased 3,500 hectares of Corrou's ancient woods. It took 18 years to destroy a millennia-old land. Once it was a mosaic landscape, with sessile oak, downy birch, rowan, alder, aspen, wild cherry, willows, ash, holly, hazel, and juniper — all with associated flora, fungi, insects, mammals and birds. Now all this was replaced by a conifer plantation.

These giant fields of exotic conifers, mostly lodge pole pine and sitka spruce, were abandoned soon after they were planted. Many of the trees are now diseased or dead. Across lower Corrou, stunted, yellowed conifers show the folly of planting on deep peat bogs. We found a few remaining ancient oaks in these croplands, their spreading branches confined by gloomy pines.

Across the Highlands, you can see ruined shielings. These huts were where, in the summers, clan women milked cows and made cheese, while in the glens below the men harvested hay to feed the stock over long winters. This traditional way of life, where livestock seasonally migrate up and down mountains, was once common all over Europe. It is still practised in the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Carpathians, the Caucasus and the Norwegian-Swedish *fjäll* mountains. In continental Europe, the move to higher pastures is ritualised, with flower-bedecked cows, celebratory processions, and church blessings. Yet it no longer happens in Scotland. Why not?

In brief, from 1707 on, and under the new British rule, Scottish customary overlordships, once a polite indication of timeworn hierarchies of honour, hardened into absolute property rights. The clans lost out, as land was removed from its traditional purpose and became a commodity. Hence, in 1834 the Dukes of Gordon were able to sell the Loch Treig estates, including what is now Corrou. In the decades after, the land was used for sheep and deer forest. Over-grazing meant trees were not able to regenerate, and many ground flora species were lost.

On top of this came the so-called 'Victorian holocaust', so ubiquitous in the Highlands. The term refers to that remarkably thorough, and uniquely British, extermination of all fauna except one or two favoured game species — at Corrou, red deer and grouse. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Corrou game books show how 'sportsmen' at first recorded vast bags of 'vermin' and then, in later years, next to none, as wild >



fauna became rarer or was eradicated. God's creatures were shot, snared, trapped and poisoned: golden eagles and sea eagles; foxes, stoats, weasels, pine martens, wild cats and otters; red squirrels, rabbits and mountain hares; capercaillie and black grouse; black swans, waders, ducks, and geese; jays and ravens.

When we came to Corroun in 1995, there was little left to shoot. A few general predators hung on, like crows and foxes. The latter were still persecuted, at a cost in man-hours that surely exceeded that of a lost hill lamb or two (or indeed of building lambing sheds).

Apex predators have long been eradicated across the Highlands. Wolves were shot out in the 18th century, while lynx and bears disappeared in medieval times. Beavers clung on until the early modern period. Indeed, it is believed that the valley now flooded for Loch Treig, on Corroun, was their last British stronghold. It is heartening to see them return to Scotland.

The wild boar is coming back to Lochaber, too, though the shooting fraternity has renamed it 'feral pig' and many argue it needs to be eradicated. This despite the fact that it is an excellent game species and has a valuable role to play in woodland ecology.

At Corroun, our most important Scottish mentor was Dick Balharry, then chair of the John Muir Trust. In 2007, Dick helped us draw up a management plan that focused on allowing natural processes to take place, and on being guided by habitat response. We conducted a baseline assessment of habitats then, and have measured progress since. At first, we worked only on land. From 2015 on, we also started to survey fish, aquatic invertebrates and aquatic plants.

Today, we do not 'control' predators or 'vermin'. We are reducing deer numbers from about 20 per square kilometre to fewer than five. (This allows the natural regeneration of ground flora and trees as well as improving the health of the remaining deer.) We leave gallowch

“
When we came to Corroun, there was little left to shoot. A few general predators hung on, like crows and foxes
”

and some carcasses on the hills to encourage eagles, ravens and pine martens. And in 2006, to rest the land, we agreed with local farmer George Nairn at Fersit that he would remove his flock of 350 ewes (with lambs). Today his beef cattle roam Corroun pastures in summer.

Some native wildwoods are reverting naturally, but where seed banks are poor or soils exhausted we plant native woodlands. And where we fell commercial conifers, and have replanting obligations, we replant with native Scottish trees. We are also restoring peat bogs. And we have reintroduced hedgehogs and red squirrels.

For their help, we are hugely grateful to our partners and friends, including the John Muir Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage, Lochaber Fisheries Trust, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, the Forestry Commission Highland Conservancy, our amazing estate team and other individuals too numerous to mention.

The Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003 echoes Sweden's *allemansrätt*, which since medieval times ensures all people can walk the land, picnic, camp, swim, climb trees, pick berries, collect firewood, and the like. We welcomed this law and another new-found friend, Dave Morris Macintyre, then head of the Ramblers' Association, helped us improve Corroun's footpaths. Today the estate welcomes more than 12,000 walkers each year.

All the estate buildings are being renovated and maintained. We restore our cottages using traditional methods and local materials, but improve their energy performance. Around the buildings, we plant gardens without use of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or chemical fertilisers. We offer estate workers and their families high-quality housing on the estate, in Corroun village and — closer to schools — at Moy and Luiblea.

We let the lodge and eight holiday cottages, offering visitors the chance to explore the glorious landscape. Since 2016, we have offered three en-suite rooms in the renovated Signal Box on Corroun's station platform, next to the Station House, where we run an inn and a shop.

We always wanted to protect Corroun's independence. After all, industrial fortunes come and go. For years, we saw no prospect of making the estate pay for itself and that worried us, since it is hugely expensive to run. But we have built four hydroelectric 'run-of-river' schemes. They will never make a fortune, but thanks to British governmental green subsidies, they are viable. We don't know how they will be taxed in the future. But hopefully they will allow Corroun to stand on its own, paying for our environmental work and providing good jobs. They also provide enough renewable energy to power Corroun and, via the National Grid, 3,500 homes.

Corroun is our greatest joy. We hope that for many generations to come our family will have the good fortune to help protect for it, together with its stakeholders, in a spirit of co-operation, trust and respect. •