



A walk in the woods

Join Innes Manders in the woods to do so much more than record, chart and map what remains.

When my partner and I moved to Argyll, the first walk we went on climbed up through a narrow avenue of hazel trees. It was early spring, and the light slid through the canopy and caught in a mass of exuberant yellow catkins. Keen to get the lay of the land, we were soon out on the open hill, last year's bracken crisp underfoot, gazing admiringly across to the Paps of Jura, ever a distant blue. Only later, when the drizzle set in and we descended into woodland again, did I notice how abundant with life these woodlands were—the ancient oaks with shaggy coats of vibrant green lungwort and white eruptions of coral lichens, the hazels pockmarked with black lugs of *Sticta*, purplish *Fruillania*

circles, and grey *Degelia* cobwebs. The best kind of journey starts in woodland and ends in woodland. And that's the kind I have been on.

With characteristic nostalgia and romanticism, I sometimes like to think of parts of my childhood as semi-indigenous, or as it would probably have been viewed in any other rural generation before my own—completely normal. Either way, memories of it are a synaesthetic blur of woodland tastes and colours—sweet, gritty blaeberry purple and slimy chanterelle yellow, the pale green squish of sphagnum in a hand and the spruce-green flump of *Polytrichum* under a backside, the bronze rustle of beech leaves and darkening of a box of hazelnuts from green to brown. I picked them early before the squirrels got them, and left

them to rot in a cardboard box, while I gorged on chocolate. No hunter-gatherer, just a kid in the woods.

The woods shrank in my mind, much faster than I grew. By fifteen, I was in the clutches of Polar Bear Enthusiast Syndrome—everything that excited me was big, cold and would probably be the death of me if I ever found it. I yearned for the wild, for a place untouched by human hands. I had developed a geographical misanthropy summed up by my future-planning dilemma of whether to head to the Yukon with a rucksack or study hard enough to get myself on board a British Antarctic Survey expedition.

The only place nature was left was *out there*, in far flung places beyond the sphere of human influence. Somehow, I had reached the absurd conclusion

Plenty cold enough on a November morning in The Trossachs. All photos: Innes Manders.

that a barren ice sheet was natural and interesting, but the lush temperate rainforest in which I had guddled, dammed and denned since I had boots on my feet was not. Looking back, I think part of the problem was that I had internalised the dominant view of nature as external to human life, defined even by our absence. This meant the woodlands I knew, where human management, was apparent, which I knew and felt part of, could not be really nature at all. And so, in poor repayment of my own acceptance into the woods, I condemned them as the messy back gardens of an industrial nation.

Wild woods

It is strange to admit, but I only really came to re-appreciate the woodlands amongst which I grew up, after I started to place them within a context of places which were hundreds of miles away, thousands of years past, or entirely fictitious. The works of Tolkien featured heavily in my early enthusiasm for relict woodlands and ancient trees (and based on Glen Affric's widely recognised 'Last Ent', I am not the only one). However, two weeks walking in the Cairngorms was a more significant experience: the ancient pinewoods of Braemar resonated with something forgotten, wild. They were a fragment of the boreal world I had become obsessed with.

But more than that—they had a story of their own. For me that story was *The*



Great Wood of Caledon. I say story, not myth, because my belief in the utility of this story has survived the reading of plenty of palaeoecological studies and a good few books covering post-glacial succession in Scotland. I will avoid getting too excited about it here—but the basic tenet that Scotland once supported far greater woodland cover, brought me into a world of potential and broke through the confinement of my ecological expectations.

There may have been little of the wildwood left by the time the

Romans named it, but the name awoke me to the fact there had been such a wood at all. At university, I read about glacial retreat and vegetation succession, attended lectures on the genetics of Scots pine, and learned to identify and count pollen grains with a microscope. The past fascinated and excited me. But like dinosaur enthusiasts who cannot tell a pigeon from a pipit, it is an odd thing to yearn for in the past what we ignore in the present.

So, I started to look—really look—at the trees around me. Identifying them was a good place to start, and I soon found I knew less than I thought. *Oak* split in two, *birch* in three and *willow* diverged into a myriad of species, many of which look very little alike (and others admittedly which still do...). This process, of one thing becoming many, was a revelation. The wood had become lush without a single drop of rain. That miraculous act of conceptual mitosis led me to an interest in botany, to the entire woodland ecosystem and beyond. It occurred again and again, with shrubs, grasses, mosses and birdsong. I tugged at a branch and a whole forest came down.

Top: Dwarf birch, *Betula nana*, in autumn.

Left: A particularly impressive hummock of *Polytrichum commune*.





Knowing the woods

Sometimes now, I get caught up in the trap of botanical snobbishness. “Just an eared willow”, I’ll complain to my partner, while we are out scouring the hills for remnant populations of montane willow scrub. She likes to remind me that should not make it any less interesting, and that there is no sense in defining any one thing only in relation to other

Top: The taste still matters - chanterelle, *Cantharellus cibarius*.

Below: A remnant of Caledonian pine forest, Loch Maree NNR.

rarer species. Better to appreciate it for what it is. Reluctantly, I am forced to admit she has a point.

My ignorance of course remains, massive and exciting. Fungi for one, remain an entirely uncharted frontier. I can identify few more fungi than when I was a child. They remain to me dark gooey blobs and yellow trumpets best consumed with garlic on toast. There’s something reassuring about that. The taste still matters. Noticing and not just identifying plants, has brought back to me the

many merits of a childlike interest in a world. You cannot know *Vaccinium myrtillus* until your tongue is purple or *Polytrichum commune* until you have sat on it. Of course, you won’t really know them fully after either, but you will have a full belly and a comfy seat.

The way I see it now, the role of human beings in nature is not just to record, chart and map dispassionately the natural world which we haven’t yet destroyed. There are opportunities for a deeper, richer engagement with the land. In my eyes, exploring those opportunities is our best hope of finding a sustainable and meaningful future. I have not touched upon how central climate change and biodiversity loss are to these issues. The sense of ecological guilt which taints many normal acts of everyday life, such as driving to work and buying food from a supermarket.

I have no faith global systems or technology will resolve these issues. But I am hopeful, that in looking at and living with the land, we will find some answers. For me that act begins where it started—in the woods.

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