

'Mu chraobhan agus ghoibhrean' **(of trees and goats)**

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Trees

'Tuitidh a'chraobh a bhithear a'sior shnaidheadh'
The tree that is constantly hewed will fall.

Gaelic Proverb

Absence of trees is a feature of most of our Highland hills. A stranger to our mountains must be surprised to find that our 'forests' are usually tree-less, heather-covered, boggy moorlands. Similarly the use of the Gaelic 'coille', a wood, and 'doire', a grove, are not usually indicative of the presence of trees.

But once the Highlands were covered by great forests of pine, oak, birch, rowan, hazel, juniper and alder. They provided habitat for many species of animal which have since become extinct – the lynx, lemming, brown bear, wild boar and wolf – to mention but a few.

What then became of the great Caledonian Forest? Many factors have combined to cause its disappearance during the last twelve centuries. Vikings burnt it during raids and to clear land for settlement; later the Highlanders burnt it to produce more arable land and to help in bringing about the extermination of the wolf; Government troops burnt it to oust brigands and 'rebels' from their lairs; land-owners burnt it to improve pasturage for sheep. Little wonder the Highlanders have the proverb

'Is fhurasda tein' fhadadh 'an cois craoibhe' – It's easy to light a fire at the foot of a tree!

The greatest contributory factor, however, in bringing about the destruction of the forest, was the felling of thousands of acres of timber for its commercial value. In particular, iron smelting was extremely avaricious in its consumption of timber. Moreover, the natural regeneration of woodlands was (and still is) prevented by overgrazing; deer and sheep soon destroy scrub hazel, birch, willow and gorse.

However the memory of our great forests is kept alive in many place-names. Lochs, mountains, islands and rivers frequently recall to mind the trees and woods of yester-year. Let us now examine some of these names with particular reference to our mountains.

On several occasions when climbing in Ross-shire, I have stayed at Altguish. Now 'giubhas' is Gaelic for 'pine', so 'Altguish' means 'burn of the pine'. But do not expect to find many pines (or trees of any sort) within twenty miles of Altguish! Similarly Meall a'Ghiubhais (2,882 feet near Kinlochewe) is 'the rounded hill of the pine' and Sròn nan Giubhas' (Top no. 339)* is the 'ridge of the pines'.

The Scots' Pine was the predominant tree of the Central Highlands. Vestigial parts of the great pine forest remain at Rothiemurchus, Rannoch and elsewhere. A most attractive feature of the Scots' Pine is the shape of the mature tree which is more akin to that of the deciduous trees than to the typically conical conifer.

A deciduous tree often found in association with the Scots' Pine is the graceful birch. Natural birchwoods have sprung up in many places where land has been cleared and has not become subject to overgrazing. Indeed the birch regenerates more readily than any other tree. Next time you motor from Aberdeen to Ballater take note of the many natural birchwoods which you pass en route. Natural birchwoods of great antiquity are preserved by the Nature Conservancy Board at Inverpolly. The Gaelic for 'birch' is 'beith'. So we have Stob Coire Nam Beith (Top no. 80), the 'top of the corrie of the birches', and Sgùrr a' Choire Bheithe, the 'rocky peak of the birch corrie'.

Last May I climbed Beinn Avon with Donald Hawksworth, Malcolm Johnston and Peter Kelly. Walking along Gleann an t-Slugain towards Slugain Lodge, I noticed the vestiges of an ancient birchwood - hoary, rotten trees, festooned with mosses. Only once did I notice regeneration and that was high up the glen where a few saplings had taken root amongst loose rocks where grazing would be difficult. We returned from Beinn Avon by way of the path which skirts Creag a'Chait (Crag of the Cat). Here are some magnificent pines. The evening sun was high-lighting the russet colouring of the upper boughs and the rich green of the new needles. But alas, not a sapling, not even a 'middle-aged' specimen could I find.

A few weeks later I was walking through the Nevis Gorge, having just climbed Aonach Mòr and Aonach Beag. The woods here were in marked contrast to those we had seen during our Beinn Avon walk. Where the glen is narrowest and its sides steepest, regeneration is much in evidence. Young birches, rowans and hazels abound. Here is a living forest not a dying one.

With its bunches of brilliantly red berries the Rowan or Mountain Ash is a well known tree of good omen. The Gaelic for this tree is

* References to "Tops" and "Separate Mountains" are to Munro's tables.

Caorunn and it is incorporated into the names of many of our highest mountains. So we have Beinn a' Chaoruinn (Sep. Mt. no. 50 and Sep. Mt. no. 79), the mountain of the rowan, Creag a' Chaoruinn (Tops no. 136, 261 and 317), 'the crag of the rowan', Meall a' Chaoruinn (Top no. 538), 'the rounded top of the rowan' and Sail Chaoruinn (Top no. 506). Sail Chaoruinn probably means 'The heel of rowans' where 'heel' is used to describe the shape of the mountain. [Compare this with the use of 'druim' (the back of a man or animal) and 'sròn' (a nose) to describe a mountain ridge.]

Although the woods have by and large disappeared, the walker will frequently see these splendid trees growing in deep gorges or from the ledges of inaccessible crags.

'Fearn' is Gaelic for 'alder'. I have on several occasions stayed at Letterfearn, 'the alder slope' when climbing in the Kintail district. A beautiful walk from Letterfearn takes one to the broch just beyond Totaig. On the way, one passes through fine groves of alder interspersed with birch, hazel and juniper. Taking its name from the alder is Meall Na Farna (2,500 feet, near Ben Vorlich), 'the rounded hill of the alder'. The Highlanders have a peculiar saying concerning the alder:

'Gach fiodh as a bhàrr, ach am feàrn as a bhun' - All wood from the top but the alder from the root.

Next time you are splitting wood, bear this in mind!

The Gaelic for juniper is Iubhar-Beinne (mountain yew) but usually in mountainous areas Iubhar alone is used without the qualifying 'beinne'. Thus we have Sgòr an Iubhair (Top no. 224), 'the rocky peak of the juniper', and Mullach Coire an Iubhair (Sep. Mt. 76), 'the summit of the corrie of the juniper'.

Great forests which were predominantly of oak were once found in the Western Highlands stretching from the Gairloch district southward to Kintyre. Clas Dhearg (red furrow or hollow) in Lorne, is one of the finest remaining natural oak-woods. Another fine remnant oak-wood, well worth a visit, is the Ariundle Oakwood Reserve, north of Strontian. Part of this wood has been enclosed by a fence to prevent deer and sheep from grazing and in this area is a lush undergrowth of hazel and rowan. There is also a wealth of bird life including tree-pipits, red-starts, siskins, whinchats, wood-peckers, long-tailed tits and lesser red-polls.

None of our higher mountains takes its name from the oak tree since it is a tree of the lower slopes and glens. Nevertheless, many less prominent hills and other natural features incorporate the Gaelic Darach in their names. Craigendarroch (the crag of the oak) near

Ballater and Clashindarroch (the hollow of the oak) near Rhynie, spring to mind.

On two occasions I have visited Barrisdale Bay in Knoydart. The descent from the rugged, rock-strewn heights of Màm Barrisdale to this bay on Loch Hourn, takes you through natural woodlands where the oak is still common. Unfortunately the large herds of deer and sheep in this area are now making regeneration the exception rather than the rule.

Apart then from the echoes from numerous placenames, little remains of Scotland's natural forests. Let us hope that the Forestry Commission and enlightened landowners will preserve and extend natural woodlands which not only beautify but provide habitat for our indigenous flower, insect and animal life.

Goats

The goat was once a domestic animal wide-spread throughout the Highlands; it provided the Highlander with milk, cheese and meat whilst its fleece and pelt could be put to a variety of uses.

Highland folklore provides us with much information about the goat. We are informed that they hate dogs; they make good parents; they have a penchant for ivy; they are very sharp sighted and at harvest time are reputed to go deaf. No doubt the last statement would ring true to the poor Highlander trying in vain to separate a contented munching billy-goat from a field of ripe hay!

The following proverb sums up the goats' importance to the Highlander.

'Bainne nan gobhar fo chobhar's e blath, 'se chuir a' spionnadh's na daoine a bha.' Goat milk, foaming and warm, that gave strength to our fathers.

The wild goats of Scotland are the descendants of these domestic animals which went feral many centuries ago. These sturdy, sure-footed animals are at home amongst even the most inhospitable crags. Young are born in mid-winter when the severest weather can prevail. For the young goat it is indeed the case of the survival of the fittest.

Herds which tend to be small are widespread throughout the Highlands and Islands. They thrive in the hills of Rum, Jura, Harris and Arran while on the mainland herds are found as far north as Ross-shire and as far south as Dunbartonshire.

The goats of Beinn Lomond are famous and were known to King Robert the Bruce who took a great interest in them. No doubt Bruce

also knew about the goats of Glen Trool for it was here that he defeated an English punitive force in the year 1307. The Nature Conservancy Board have recently established a Wild Goat Park in Glen Trool. The non-mountaineering naturalist will thus find it easier to see these magnificent animals for himself.

It is not surprising that the Gaelic word for goat 'gabhar' or 'gobhar' has been incorporated into the names of many of our mountains.

The following are found in Munro's Tables.

SECTION IV

Stob Ghabhar (Sep. Mt. no. 54), - Peak of goats.

SECTION V

Stob Coire Gaibhre (Top. no. 351) - Top of Goat-Corrie.

Sgòr Gaibhre (Sep. Mt. no. 148) - Rocky peak of a Goat.

SECTION IX

Càrn Nan Gobhar* (Sep. Mt. no. 148 and Sep. Mt. no. 150) - Cairn of the Goats.

SECTION XIV

Mullach Lochan Nan Gabhar (Top no. 58) - Summit (above) the Lochan of the Goats.

SECTION XV

Càrn Nan Gabhar (Sep. Mt. no. 32) - Cairn of the Goats.

SECTION XVI

Lochnagar (Loch na Gabhair) [Sep. Mt. no. 20] - Loch of the Goat.

Next time you climb any of these mountains keep a sharp look out for a shaggy bearded apparition on the sky-line. It *could* be a member of the Lairig Club but it will more likely be a billy-goat keeping a wary eye on you!

* Gobhar is pronounced gó'-ur and is declined

	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
Nom. } Accus. }	Gobhar	{Gobhair {Goibhrean
Voc.	A Ghobhar	A Goibhrean
Gen.	{Goibhre {Gobhair	Ghobhar
Dat.	Gobhar	{Goibhrean {Gobhair

'Gabhar' is an alternative form of 'Gobhar'.