

PIPER'S WOOD. REPORT 1989-1993

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Since the plot in Glen Ey was enclosed by deer fencing in 1989, there have been noticeable changes in the vegetation. These are not as yet visible at all seasons of the year, but in summer the abundance of herbs flowering at full height and the luxuriant growth of grasses, clearly indicates how protection from grazing animals allows native plants to reach their natural size. The contrast between the close-bitten turf outside the fence, heavily grazed by both sheep and deer, and the colourful sward inside, was apparent the first summer after enclosure and becomes more marked each year. Some plants have increased or appear more dominant because they are now able to flower, while a few have diminished due to the increasing dominance of grasses.

The birches:

The 16 old, isolated, and ailing birch trees are now reduced to 14, two near the lower fence having fallen in the winters of 1991/92 and 1992/93, one being completely dead while the other still puts out green leaves. However, the vigorous growth put on in the last two years by many of the small, multi-stemmed birches which were repeatedly grazed almost down to ground level before enclosure, give grounds for optimism. In 1992 many put on 15cm of growth and more in 1993. At this rate they could be expected to reach three metres in 10 years, assuming total protection from grazing. Their rate of growth should increase as they produce more foliage and a larger root system, year by year.

Every zone within the enclosure except the upper marsh, contains numerous birch seedlings, all of which show the many-stemmed bushy growth of repeatedly-browsed plants, and can be several to many years' old. So far I have been unable to identify any one, two or three-year-old seedlings, which would be recent progeny of the old birches. Only a few of these old trees produce a little seed, and the bushes now growing will not do so for some years. However, if the fence is kept in good repair, I do believe that the existing small birches will grow quite rapidly to form small groves, providing a more varied habitat for wildlife and justifying the title of Piper's Wood.

Notes on changes in the vegetation zones:

This section should be read in conjunction with the full botanical survey and map which were published in the 1991 edition of the 'Cairngorm Club Journal'.

D – The dyke and the strip of grass and heather hummocks:

There is now a striking contrast between this and the grazed heath outside the fence. The dry heather hummocks are disappearing, becoming overgrown

by grasses and sedges. Creeping Willow has greatly increased and shows great variability in leaf size and shape. The large colony of Fragrant Orchid which was a wonderful sight in 1989 with over 150 flowering spikes, seemed to have failed in 1990, but has since reappeared though not flowering in such quantity. The old dyke is becoming increasingly overgrown and a wet ditch is developing above it. The Northern Bedstraw flowers abundantly on the dyke and the conspicuous Melancholy Thistle flowered for the first time in 1992. Three Rowan seedlings grow in the N.E. corner.

UB – The upper bank:

This is now completely covered with vegetation, whereas before enclosure there was some bare soil. Heather appears to have increased; seedlings are numerous but it is nowhere dominant. The annual Field Gentian has greatly increased and a second site has been noted for the Moonwort Fern. There are many small birch seedlings on this bank.

UM – The upper marsh:

The narrow strip of wet ground at the base of the upper bank appears to be getting wetter and extending to the north. The bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) seem to be increasing. Flote Grass was first recorded in 1993.

G – The grassland:

Here there is a notable contrast between this and the closely grazed grass outside the fence. Grasses and herbs flower at full height. Tufted Vetch and Red and White Clovers have appeared. Lady's Bedstraw has greatly increased and flowered abundantly in 1993, as did Yarrow, Sneezewort, Bird's Foot Trefoil and Devil's Bit Scabious. Heather appears to be increasing on the slightly drier knolls where birch seedlings are most numerous. Thecroft house ruins are becoming overgrown by grasses.

LB – The lower bank:

This is still very dry but with much less open soil than before. Erosion at the top is being reduced by plant growth. Bell Heather is most abundant here as is Yarrow and Mouse-eared Hawkweed. Cat's Ear covers a dry knoll at the north end. Small birches are very numerous and show great variation in size and shape of leaf. The Melancholy Thistle has appeared in a new site beside the runnel, just north of the bank.

LM – The lower marsh:

This seems drier than during the first year after enclosure, and is becoming more like damp grassland than true marsh. The grass Yorkshire Fog now dominates the rushes and sedges. The pool of open water dried out in summer 1992, and in 1993 the mud was colonised by Toad Rush and Yorkshire Fog. More than 40 birches are growing well near the south fence.

R – The river gravel:

This is still an open plant community with few species, but some new ones have been recorded in the slightly increased vegetation cover. Many small birches are showing steady growth, although more slowly than those in the lower marsh. There is a particularly dense group just below the dead fallen tree. Spignel, Harebell, Thyme, Alpine Lady's Mantle and Cow Wheat have appeared, the last being a new record for the enclosure.

Additions to the flora:

Species numbering 26 have been noted since 1989. Some of them would have been present before then, but were overlooked as they were prevented from flowering by grazing animals. It is interesting to note that of these 'new' species, almost half are marsh plants. Does this indicate that the enclosed ground is becoming wetter? About as many species have been noted as having extended their range within the plot since enclosure.

Additions to the flora of Piper's Wood, 1990-1993

EQUISETUM FLUVIATILE – Marsh Horsetail. LM
 NASTURTIUM OFFICIALE – Watercress. LM
 CARDAMINE PRATENSIS – Cuckoo Flower, Lady's Smock. UM,D,LM
 HYPERICUM PULCHRUM – Slender St. John's Wort. UB
 MONTIA VERNA – Blinks. UM,LM
 VICIA CRACCA – Tufted Vetch. G
 TRIFOLIUM ALBUM – White Clover. G
 TRIFOLIUM ROSEUM – Red Clover. G
 POTENTILLA PALUSTRIS – Marsh Cinquefoil. UM
 POTENTILLA STERILIS – Barren Strawberry. UB
 FILIPENDULA ULMARIA – Meadow Sweet. UM, LM
 EPILOBIUM PALUSTRE – Marsh Willow Herb. LM
 RUMEX ACETOSA – Sorrel. G
 ERICA TETRALIX – Cross-leaved Heath. LM, D
 MELAMPYRUM PRATENSE – Cow Wheat. R
 GALLIUM PALUSTRE – Marsh Bedstraw. LM
 TARAXACUM OFFICINALE AGG. – Dandelion. G
 CIRCIUM HETEROPHYLLUM – Melancholy Thistle. D, LB,UB
 DACTYLORCHIS ERICETORUM – Marsh Spotted Orchid. LM
 CAREX ECHINATA – Star Sedge. UM
 CAREX CURTA – Pale Sedge. LM
 DESCHAMPSIA FLEXUOSA – Wavy Hair Grass. UB G
 CYNOSURUS CRISTATUS – Crested Dog's Tail. UM
 POA PRATENSIS – Smooth-stalked Meadow Grass. G
 HOLCUS LANATUS – Yorkshire Fog. G, LM
 GLYCERIA FLUITANS – Flote Grass. UM