

PIPER'S WOOD. REPORT 1994-1996

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Since my first report (1989-1993) on changes in the vegetation within the enclosure, only two full years have elapsed and half of a third (to June 1996), yet there have been further changes. The botanical details may not be immediately obvious, but the general aspect of the plot is strikingly different to that before the enclosure. The whole area is greener and grassier, and groups of small Birches and a few Rowans are now clearly visible when in leaf. 14 gaunt old Birches remain upright; they, and one fallen tree remain alive, but only just. Little seed is being produced and I believe we have to rely on the existing, formerly browsed, many-stemmed small Birches to grow taller and produce seed before a crop of 'normal' straight-stemmed trees can be expected. This does not matter, for the food and shelter which the bushy trees provide, will be equally attractive to wild life.

Notes on changes in the vegetation zones.

This section should be read in conjunction with the botanical survey and map published in the 1991 Cairngorm Club Journal.

D - The dyke and strip of ground above it:

No longer can this be described as 'grass and heather hummocks'. The Dwarf Willow which previously was overtaking the Heather is now becoming obscured by other plants. The area is becoming wetter and water now flows along the ditch above the old dyke for three quarters of its length into the runnel at the south end. The north section remains dry. Increasingly wetter, acid bog conditions are indicated by the appearance of Deer Grass (a new record for the enclosure) and Sundew. The Fragrant Orchid reappeared in 1994 with over 100 superb flowering spikes, produced only a few in 1995 and could not be found in 1996. Most ground orchids require a grazing regime to compete with grasses, so we may lose it. On the other hand orchids do have resting seasons so it will be interesting to note what happens in the future.

UB - The upper bank:

This is now completely covered with close turf consisting of grasses and numerous herbs, the composition of which alters slightly each season. Heather is present but nowhere dominant. Annuals such as the Field Gentian are decreasing as the growth of grasses leaves fewer spaces to seed into. The tiny Moonwort Fern, recorded in small numbers from the north end of the bank, could not be found in 1996 but is easily overlooked. The Alpine Cinquefoil, an uncommon and local species, grows at the north end of the upper bank and is a new record for the enclosure.

UM - The upper marsh:

This appears to be getting wetter, with open water in pools and runnels and more Sphagnum Moss. In early summer it is colourful with lilac Lady's Smock, yellow Kingcup, and white, fluffy heads of Cotton Grass.

G - The grassland:

This, the largest vegetation zone within the enclosure, continues to provide the greatest contrast with the closely-grazed turf outside the fence. The grass is becoming tussocky as it remains ungrazed, and fewer herbs are able to compete, though a number still grow and flower. Chickweed Wintergreen was abundant in June 1996. Hogweed has appeared near the south fence, and the newly recorded Alpine Cinquefoil extends down the north fence from the upper bank. Blaeberry and Heather remain on small drier knolls which are becoming less conspicuous each season. Numerous small Birches are growing well on grassland nearest to the south fence.



Cardamine pratensis
Lady's Smock

LB - Lower bank:

The vegetation cover continues to increase and is now almost complete except for some boulders. Erosion has ceased. Heather is increasing but Bell Heather remains dominant. Small Birches and Rowans are numerous but make slow growth. Small patches of bare soil at the north end are a favourite haunt of adders. (see Fauna)

LM - The lower marsh:

The south end of this area continues to become more like wet grassland than true marsh. The pool which dried out in 1992 has not reverted to open water, and its area is now filled by grasses and abundant Lady's Smock. Marsh Spotted Orchid flowered in 1994 and Water Avens is increasing. This area has the largest and most vigorous group of birches; a few have attained 1.5m. The northern part of this area, up to the runnel which divides it from the grassland, is much wetter and has hummocks of Bogmoss (*Sphagnum* sp.) and the dark green moss *Polytrichum Commune*.

R - The river gravel:

This remains an area of low vegetation but is becoming increasingly varied, with new species appearing year by year. Yellow Vetchling was a new record for the enclosure in 1996, and Petty Whin flowered prominently then as well. Birches are numerous, though they do not grow as fast as those in the lower marsh.

Additions to the flora of Piper's Wood, 1994-1996

With the main body of the flora already recorded, it is obvious that only a few new species will present themselves each season. Only four additions have been made since 1993.

LATHYRUS PRATENSIS - Yellow Vetchling. R

POTENTILLA CRANTZII - Alpine Cinquefoil. D,UB,G.

HERACLEUM SPHONDYLIIUM - Hogweed. G,R.

TRICHOPHORUM CAESPITOSUM - Deer

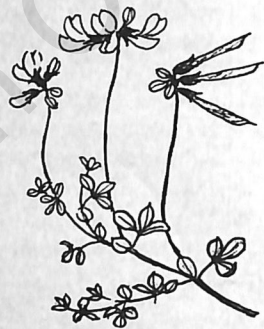
Grass. D.

Fauna

With growth of herbs to flowering size and hopefully shelter provided by the growing Birches, it is to be hoped that Piper's Wood will increasingly attract wildlife. For example Lady's Smock, now flowering in the marshes, is a host plant for caterpillars of the Orange-tip Butterfly. Can we hope to see these flying in June in future years? Similarly Bird's-foot Trefoil which flowers on the banks is a host for the Small Blue Butterfly.

Reptiles are already in residence. The Common Lizard is occasionally glimpsed and Adders have been seen on every visit. Their favourite haunt is the lower bank, where on June 20, 1996 I encountered a large female and smaller male together. So keep your eyes on the ground when you walk in Piper's Wood!

Of mammals, only Moles indicate their presence under the grassland. There are many Red Deer outside the enclosure. On June 20, 1996 we saw nearly 500 stags on the east-facing slopes across the river, grazing in three large groups. The sight of them emphasised the importance of maintaining the deer fence around Piper's Wood in good condition - vital if the Cairngorm Club's input and effort into this interesting, and so far successful experiment is not to be wasted.



Lotus corniculatus
Bird's-foot Trefoil

Please send any observations on flora and fauna of Piper's Wood (via the secretary or to me direct), so that a more complete record can be compiled. Heather Salzen, 25 Rubislaw Park Crescent, Aberdeen. AB15 8BT Tel. 324503.