

Piper's Wood, Glen Ey: the First Decade

Heather Salzen

For a description of the habitat recording zones, sketchmap and flora, see Cairngorm Club Journal 1991.

The enclosure has now been protected from grazing for eleven seasons. So what has changed? The plot now has a very different aspect from that at the time of first enclosure. Groups of young birches are clearly visible from the track across the river and the whole aspect of the vegetation has changed, becoming higher and more varied than the closely deer-grazed sward outside the fence. "Piper's Wood" is not yet a wood but now encloses groups of small birches which are showing steady growth. As yet they do not cast enough shade to influence the ground flora, but with increasing leaf fall each autumn enriching the soil, there is the possibility of a birchwood flora developing beneath them.

Trees

The *birches* fall into three categories:-

1. The original 14 scrappy old trees, which are now reduced to 11, two of which will not survive much longer. Only a few bear a few catkins, so little seed is being produced.
2. Small birches, which as seedlings before enclosure were repeatedly grazed to ground level, forming many-stemmed mats. These, with the absence of grazing, have grown into many-stemmed bushes. Several have reached a height of three metres, where one of the stems has grown away from the others. These "old" small birches are the most visible result of the enclosure.
3. Much younger seedlings, which have originated since enclosure and thus have not been grazed. Birch seeds are very small and need bare soil on which to establish successfully. Hence this category of birches are most numerous on the upper and lower banks and the river gravel, where there were patches of bare eroded soil at enclosure. It is very unlikely that they will ever become numerous on the grassland, where matted grasses prevent delicate birch seedling roots reaching mineral soil.

Rowans are becoming almost as numerous as the birches. New seedlings appear each season and a few saplings are as tall as the tallest "young" birches. Since only one stunted old rowan exists on the upper bank, berries have, presumably, been distributed by birds (though I have rarely seen a bird in, or near, Piper's Wood!).

Four young *Scots Pine* have now been recorded. Three of these are three to five years old, and growing vigorously. The fourth, slightly older,

is in a poor state of health, appearing to suffer some insect attack. Seed must have blown in on the wind. At present, it is not possible to tell whether any or all of these plants are the native "Caledonian" pine (*P. sylvestris* var. *scotica*) or of plantation origin. The latter is most likely.

Willows: A bush of the *Goat Willow* grows on the lower marsh, and the creeping *Dwarf Willow* survives above the dyke.

The Herbaceous Flora

In contrast to the trees, whose growth was not immediately noticeable after exclosure, the herbs very soon showed great changes. Cessation of the grazing allowed them to grow to their full (natural) height and to flower, giving several seasons of bright and varied colour, especially on the upper and lower banks. (This, I believe was a glimpse of what rural Scotland was like before the advent of the all-devouring and too numerous sheep and deer!). Annual species such as the *Field Gentian* were able to seed into patches of bare soil but once these were covered by perennials such as grasses and heather they were unable to do so, and so declined, becoming rare or virtually extinct within the plot. The *Moonwort Fern*, which was a notable "find" in the first year has disappeared, overgrown by grasses.

The grasses, being ungrazed, seed and now dominate much of the vegetation, while heather successfully competes above the dyke, on the upper and lower banks and on the river gravel.

One of the features of the ground vegetation (apart from the dominance of grasses and heather) is the dispersion of species from a single original site into new areas. Examples are *Rockrose*, which has spread to the grassland from the upper bank, and *Goldenrod*, which has spread from the river gravel to all habitats apart from the marsh. Some species which were first noted as a few non-flowering plants have spread and now flower abundantly, for example *Melancholy Thistle*. In 2000 the beautiful yellow *Globeflower* first flowered in the upper marsh, and in 2001 *Oxeye Daisy* arrived in the grassland.

The colony of *Fragrant Orchids* is of interest. They occur only along the strip of ground above the old and now crumbling head dyke, an area originally a patchwork of short grassy turf and heather hummocks, now becoming wetter and more acid, as shown by the arrival of marsh species such as *Bog Asphodel*. Previous experience indicates that ground orchids need a particular regime of grazing to keep down growth of grasses, with which the orchids cannot compete. Over 200 flowering spikes were counted in the first season after exclosure. Since then numbers have fluctuated widely and were down to very few in some years, but over 30 plants flowered in 2001.

Wildlife

There are few records so far. The small trees have not yet attracted birds. This may change when the rowans start fruiting. *Adders* are common; they have been seen on every summer visit since 1989, except on one cool, wet day. The grass tussocks probably shelter a population of *voles* (I have not seen any, but their holes are obvious) affording an ample food supply, and shelter, to the adders (wear boots and watch your feet in Piper's Wood!). Only three species of *butterflies* have been noted as yet: *Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary*, *Small Blue*, and *Pearl-bordered Fritillary*. *Lady's Smock*, foodplant of the Orangetip, now flowers in the marshes, but no butterflies have appeared.

I am sure there are many sightings of animals and plants by Club members which have not been recorded, which is a pity. Please send any such records to the Secretary, or myself:

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Globe Flower, Trollius Europaeus