

## GLEN EY WOODS UPDATE

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When Piper's Wood was enclosed in May 1989 a survey was undertaken to arrive at a list of all of the types of tree and plant then on site. It was always the plan to carry out further surveys at reasonably regular intervals, so as to monitor how these trees and plants fared once no longer regularly nibbled by deer, hares or rabbits and to record any changes in the diversity noted. The survey in 1989 recorded 85 species and within the next few years another 26 were recorded.

An additional area next to Piper's Wood was enclosed in 2013 and when it was surveyed that year, 80 species were recorded, with another 9 recorded two years later.

The two areas at Altanour were fenced in September 2015. A survey in July 2016 recorded 114 species, and 33 more were recorded in August 2019.

The Covid pandemic meant that no re-survey of Piper's Wood was possible when it otherwise might have been done, but plans were formulated and then carried out to have the two areas at Piper's Wood and the two at Altanour surveyed in July 2023 – July being the month when most plants are likely to be visible. Two persons with botanical knowledge were approached and agreed to take on the hoped-for surveys – Andrew Painting, who works a lot with National Trust Scotland (NTS) at Mar Lodge, and David Elston, the Vice-County Recorder for the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland's (BSBI) Kincardineshire and North Aberdeenshire divisions, who worked with Biomathematics and Statistics Scotland (BioSS) and also with the James Hutton Institute.

A mutually acceptable date was agreed – 9 July. It was established that neither surveyor particularly needed Club members to be there. However, having set up the arrangements I decided that I ought to be present, at least at Piper's Wood, and Richard Frimston also volunteered to come, with his Range Rover, which the Mar Estate kindly agreed we could take up the glen.

Over the three or four days before the surveys the weather forecasts were looking most unpromising, but by the day before, the worst forecast was for overnight rain lasting until a little after we planned to start. In fact, by the time that we met up it was dry, and it stayed dry, and indeed mainly sunny, all day, with enough of a breeze to keep any midges at bay. David had his wife, also a knowledgeable botanist with him, partly as an extra pair of eyes, partly to keep notes of what we saw.

I went only to Piper Wood. Richard Frimston was able to drive his Range Rover over the ford in the Ey close to the wood, and four of us headed to the stile. I had given David a copy of the sketch map showing the zonation of the original area as noted by Heather Salzen in 1989.



Scouring the Extension Area

Photo credit Richard Shirreffs

He reckoned that we should go along the successive zones in turn, noting what was seen. We had enough prints of the list from past surveys to allow David and his wife to use a separate print for each zone to tick off plants as we saw them. At the end of each pass of a zone, we reviewed the ticks and assessed the abundance of the different plants using the DAFOR scale – for Dominant, Abundant, Frequent, Occasional and Rare. In some cases, the abundant growth of birches made it difficult to work out where the different zones had had their edges. In the Piper’s Wood extension area, we had no zones as such, but every so often we interrupted our looking around to compare notes on how we appraised the relative frequencies.

There were many plants seen which had not been seen before - over 40 in the original Piper’s Wood area and some 30 (including many of the same 40) in the extension. The new finds in the extension which David Elston was most interested in were *Eleocharis quinqueflora* (Five-flowered Spike-Rush), *Selaginella selaginoides* (Lesser Clubmoss), and *Tofieldia pusilla* (Scottish

Asphodel). He also found it noteworthy that *Potentilla crantzii* (Alpine Cinquefoil) was no longer in any of its former three zones of the original area but was found for the first time in the extension, perhaps indicating intolerance of overcrowding. There were in fact almost 40 species previously seen in the original area but not seen on this occasion.

Apart from being the first to spot one or two of the plants, I was not in a



position to contribute much to the botanising. However, I did notice one or two other things and kept a mental note of some things seen by others. We had one encounter with an adder, one with a lizard, and one with a shrew. There were a few frogs. There was rabbit or hare droppings in quite a few places, and there was at least one place (where the stream exits the site

Round Leaved Sundew Photo credit Richard Shirreffs

on the north boundary) where rabbits or hares would be able to get in or out, and another place where they could move between the original Piper's Wood area and the extension; there was however no particular sign of damage to the vegetation. One of the party saw what she thought was an owl and I certainly saw an owl pellet. I also saw what I think was a pine marten droppings, though it struck me that the area might not be all that rich in pine marten prey. In the Piper's Wood extension, I was impressed at how abundant the birches were becoming. There was a definite pattern, as if the greatest deposit of seeds was in the direction that a SW wind would blow them from the densest part of the original area. But the soil/ground conditions may also have had something to do with this pattern.

The last CCJ article about Piper's Wood, written by Lydia Thomson and Hazel Witte, and printed in issue 112, ended "Access to this extension can only be made through the original Piper's Wood, which means forcing a route through well grown birch trees with entwining branches. Has the time come for the Club to consider whether there is a continuing need to exclude deer from this area?" As noted in the Projects section of the following issue of CCJ, there is in fact now a stile giving direct access to the extension on its south boundary, one constructed by Ken Thomson and Richard Frimston in 2019. And in relation to

the question of excluding deer my own inexpert opinion is that the birch and more mature rowans could well withstand a bit of browsing by deer but that there are other flora which might disappear (or just be cropped back to be invisible) if deer had free access.

For Altanour Andrew Painting kindly provided a detailed report of his survey. This now appears on the Club website, but the key points are recorded here. The survey in July 2016 recorded 114 species, and 33 more were recorded in August 2019. The 2023 survey recorded another 4. More significantly as many as 228 larch seedlings were now visible above the height of adjacent vegetation, some reaching over 3.5m in height. There were also a few birch, rowan and willow seedlings. The clear implication was that the fencing at Altanour had been successful in its aim of kickstarting woodland regeneration there.



Altanour Larches, Birch and Heather

Additionally, Andrew drew attention to some changes to the Altanour plant flora with the enclosed areas generally improving for heathland and tall herb species, whilst reducing in utility for species which demand short sward and disturbance. He felt that this reduction was of minimal conservation concern, as the species declining within the fenced areas remain common outside them. The increase in tall herb communities he saw as particularly welcome, as these are among the most threatened in Scotland's uplands.

There were also animal species noted at Altanour. Water vole, field vole, mole, and signs of mountain hare were recorded within the survey area, also common lizard and adder. A merlin was heard nearby, suggesting that there is a breeding pair in the area, and a pair of spotted flycatchers was seen - a species which needs mature trees for breeding, and so, is indicative of the importance of woodland areas within otherwise open landscapes.

All in all, the surveys carried out in 2023 were not only successful as surveys, but they have borne out that the regeneration concept which inspired the original enclosure at Piper's Wood is one of considerable ongoing value. Indeed, Andrew Painting made the observation "Every time I go past Piper's Wood, I see black grouse using it, and that is the best sign of success that I can think of."

For anyone wishing more detailed information, lists of the species seen in the different areas in the different survey years are now to be found on the Club's website, at

[www.cairngormclub.org.uk/miscellaneous/gleneywoods/gleneywoods.htm](http://www.cairngormclub.org.uk/miscellaneous/gleneywoods/gleneywoods.htm)