

What to do with the Black Wood?

By Alastair Riddell

Introduction

The area which we refer to locally as the 'Black Wood' is part of the Glen Lyon Woods SSSI at the lower end of the glen. It is not the Black Wood of Rannoch, which is entirely different! Our Black Wood is a small area of about 52ha on the north and south sides of the River Lyon of which about 28ha lie within my North Chesthill Estate – see **Location Map** below. It was designated for its lichen interest and also as a wet woodland. You can find out more about the site at this Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) link: <https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/714>.

Over the past few years, we have been trying to develop plans to improve the wood, which SNH monitoring indicates is in Unfavourable Declining condition, but are becoming frustrated in our attempts to do this. The purposes of this article are to try and articulate some of the issues involved and to suggest improvements to agency processes which might mitigate these. The issues we are facing will almost certainly ring a bell with other farmers and landowners who have to manage such sites.

Current Position

The Black Wood is a key part of the landscape and amenity of lower Glen Lyon, and we are mindful of this. For visitors especially, it helps them form their first impression of the glen, reputed to be the longest in Scotland. The woods are very diverse, with a range of tree

species and age classes. Autumn colour can be spectacular, and the amenity of the area in the spring months is very special. The bluebells are some of the best in the area. This is what most people see, but there are threats to the woodland which need to be addressed.

The beautiful beech trees which add so much to the amenity of the wood are also the biggest threat to its future diversity and designated interest, in that they can out-compete every native tree species, shade out the lichens and deplete the ground flora. There are three main age classes of beech scattered through much of the lower wood.

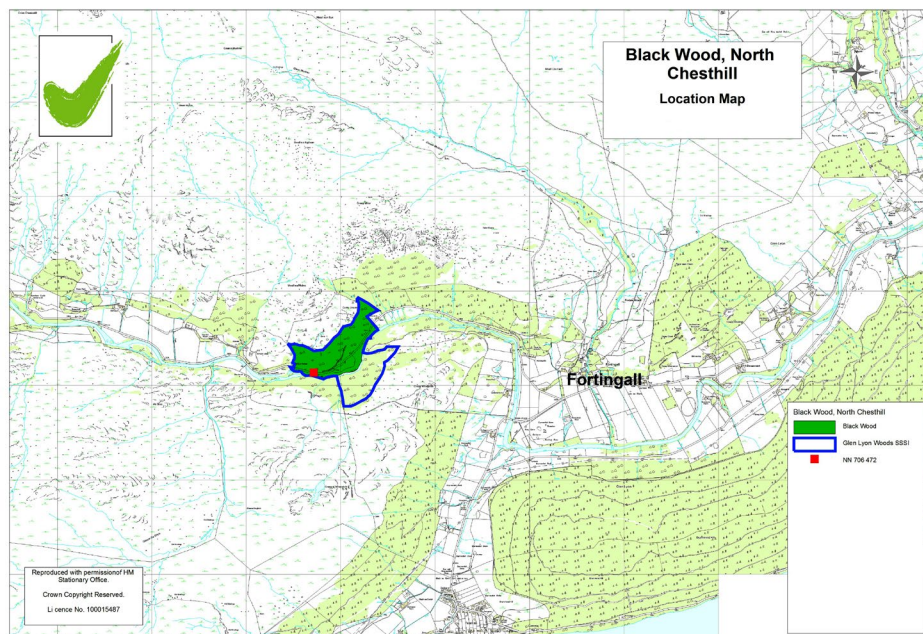
Deer browsing is a problem in the upper part of the wood. The lower part has regenerated well over 30 years or so with a range of native species, but the opportunity that allowed these to grow has also increased the area of beech very significantly. The threat from deer is secondary and much more manageable than the threat from non-native tree species, which is much more insidious and difficult to address, and the invasive



rhododendron which has a very high price per hectare to eradicate.

Chalara ash dieback is present locally, and while not yet obvious within the glen, its arrival is imminent and inevitable. As with many other areas of the country, the disease suddenly became very apparent in mature trees in Perthshire in 2019. This will become a particular issue within the Black Wood, because ash is one of the key tree species of the woodland habitat for which the site is designated, and many of the more interesting lichen species are also associated with ash. A serious depletion of ash will therefore impact significantly upon the designated features of the site. The level of threat will be broadly

North Chesthill's Black Wood (dark green) within Glen Lyon Woods SSSI (blue line)



THE AUTHOR

Alastair Riddell is the owner of North Chesthill Estate in Highland Perthshire. He is a long-term advocate and practitioner of sensible native woodland management.

Address: North Chesthill Estate, Glen Lyon, Aberfeldy. Email: alastairriddell@glinternationallimited.co.uk



Left: bluebells in the Black Wood

equivalent to, or possibly more than, the threat presented by the beech trees, and may cause damage which is almost irreversible.

Finally, although there are rhododendrons on the site, they are limited in extent, and present a lower and fairly manageable threat. A small area of non-native conifers has already been removed.

Improving things

The Black Wood is therefore a site with multiple potential threats.

Our approach to the beech, and the smaller area of sycamore, is to follow best practice and reduce their extents gradually over 30–40 years, using the first five years to decrease their overall area and to remove the younger age class. The gradual approach is important for three reasons. Firstly, widespread felling would seriously damage the amenity value of the lower glen, because removing all the beech would effectively deforest much of the area. Secondly, letting light in too quickly would allow aggressive ground vegetation to get away, harming the ancient woodland character of the site. Thirdly, with ash dieback such an imminent threat but with unknown overall consequences, it is important to be cautious and retain woodland cover and some element of diversity, even if the trees retained are non-native. A woodland canopy of any sort is always preferable to no woodland canopy at all.

We want to fence and regenerate the more open part of the site, which has a poorer age structure, and carry out enrichment planting with a range of

minor species which could potentially substitute for the loss of ash. We see this as a key action to make the wood more resilient in the future, taking into account the main threat which is likely to befall it shortly.

We will remove the rhododendron, which is relatively easy.

Problems

Initial discussions with SNH and FCS (Forestry Commission Scotland) gave us an agreed strategy. We set out what we wanted to do and why, and this all seemed to be fine. It all made sense. Everything seemed to fit in with the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS), albeit with a few tweaks. But as time went on and others were consulted, fitting the work required to the scheme available became more and more difficult. Development time and costs increased, and what we would be allowed to do grew further and further away from that envisaged at the outset. Different people had different ideas about how FGS should work, and we now have a scheme which is increasingly unlikely to go anywhere, with us having borne the expense and frustration of developing it. For clarification, no individual is to blame.

The worst bit is that despite our good intent and participation (indeed we took the initiative by commissioning two consultants to progress the plan), we have this site sitting here on which we

are judged to be failing, and judged by those who seem unable to agree a way of progressing things themselves. It will be said that this is our fault, not theirs.

Solutions

We have a number of designated sites in Scotland which have multiple and complex threats like this. These issues are genuinely difficult to resolve, even with good intent. We need to recognise that some of these sites are just very difficult, and that required outputs and time-lines need to reflect this.

It can be very difficult to match a site and its requirements to the grant scheme available. Agency staff appeared terrified of EU inspection, especially those at higher levels, and any tweaking of prescriptions to make things work could not be sanctioned. We need to change this. For difficult sites, senior agency staff need to be able to sanction small variations to scheme prescriptions if this allows a programme of restoration to proceed, as long as this is within the ethos and spirit of what is intended. We need this flexibility. As we leave the EU and responsibilities for the environment are repatriated, then we need a new culture of taking responsibility for decisions, not pushing them onto someone else. At the time of writing (September 2019), in common with many EU initiatives, the paper trail seems to be more important than the restoration. The culture of fear needs to



Dappled shade from beech on the Glen Lyon road



be removed, and when it is removed, our politicians need to back our agency staff to do the right things. At that point, there will be no one else to take the credit or the blame.

Owners need help with development costs. At present, those costs are too high and the prospect of receiving funding is too low. Starting out on an initiative to improve such a site carries too many risks, all of which are borne by the applicant, not the state.

Dealing with sites like this is expensive. There is an actual cost to the state, and an opportunity cost to the owner. We have to recognise this.

At present, record investment is being put towards woodland creation in Scotland, and that is good, but this reduces the funding available for management of existing woodland, including designated sites. If the budget for improving designated woodlands is not there, then we need to know that. If the priority lies elsewhere, then we need to know that. If government cannot fund everything, then we need to know that. We will understand, and can adjust our expectations accordingly.

The agencies are not co-operating in the way that they should. Although SNH are not to blame here, there is an argument for streamlining decisions and giving the Scottish Forestry agency (successor to FCS) responsibility for woodland sites, because they have the skill set. SNH do not have the same woodland management capacity, and the split role only complicates things.

There is currently a moratorium on Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) on designated sites until 2021 while procedures are reviewed. We need to have a proper discussion about what Favourable Condition is and what acceptable time-lines are appropriate for achieving this. Landowners and others need to be involved in that discussion. These decisions should not be made behind closed doors.

The bigger picture

The irony in all of this is that over the period of fifty years in which the Black Wood has been designated, half the lifetime of the Forestry Commission, significant woodland creation and wider management work has taken place on adjacent ground outwith the SSSI, greatly building up and diversifying



Young regenerating beech in the Black Wood.

the woodland network in lower Glen Lyon. Throughout this time, there have been constant and ongoing discussions about the Black Wood and how 'special' it was, and how it needed to be treated differently. These discussions, then as now, always seemed to be inconclusive, with the result that nothing was ever done. If the site had never been designated, then almost certainly it would have been amalgamated into one of these adjacent schemes, and would probably be in better overall condition today. The designation has frozen the site in time and while the woods around it have gone forwards, it has been left behind. The designation has been counter-productive. It is difficult to conclude anything else.

The bigger picture is that the Black Wood is a small, 52ha area in an overall woodland network of several thousand hectares. It is difficult to make conclusions about the lichens as they are so specialised, but the designated woodland habitats in the Black Wood are found throughout this larger area, and often at higher quality. Is zeroing-in on small areas within a landscape the right approach to take, especially if you cannot agree to fund the work you deem to be necessary? Would it not be better to have a lighter touch over a wider area, especially when it is that wider area that is ultimately going to be more resilient and sustainable in the longer term? Perhaps we should have a two-tier approach to woodland SSSI sites, with those under, say 100ha, being treated differently to the larger, more strategically important sites which could be given a higher weighting. This is the sort of fundamental review of designated sites that is currently required, not just chopping and changing a few things around the edges.

What to do with the Black Wood?

If we cannot agree what to do about our designated sites, or if we cannot prioritise funding for them, then why are we designating them in the first place?

It is infuriating for any farmer or landowner to be told that he has a designated site in poor condition, but to have no agreed practical and funded way of improving this. Despite the good intent of many agency staff over 50 years, this is still the position we have today, and it will be the same for many others as well.

If no practical plan of action is forthcoming, then the best way for us to manage the Black Wood must be to have the designation removed so we can manage it like we manage any other woodland area. We have an agreed Forest Plan and a good record of delivery, and can be trusted to do this. Ultimately, we have a shorter chain of command and a stronger appreciation of the area than anyone else, and the outcome would surely be better. It certainly could not be any worse. We need to speak up about such matters when there is an opportunity to do so, and to not let others pass judgement on us for failings that are entirely their own. A more flexible approach will give better results for everyone, including the public interest, and for the Black Wood itself. After half a century of an approach that does not work, we need a different way of doing things in the years ahead.

Acknowledgement

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