

15 October 2024

## **DYNAMIC DUO RETURN TO PERTHSHIRE NATURE RESERVE TO SAVE MOUNTAIN PLANT HABITATS**

- **Seasonal colleagues Lewis Donaghy and James Robinson return to Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve to focus on surveying nationally scarce mountain plants, habitat management and restoration**
- **Mountain willow scrub is a habitat under threat from climate change and over grazing**
- **4,500-hectare reserve is home to Britain's largest collection of rare mountain plants**

The National Trust for Scotland has bolstered its team to conserve Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve's collection of nationally rare and scarce mountain plant species, one of the largest in Britain.

Ecologist Lewis Donaghy, and Ranger James Robinson, who both worked at the nature reserve last year, returned to their roles again this summer to protect Scotland's nature and heritage. Their work protects mountain willow scrub, one of the six priority habitats identified in the Trust's recently published Plan for Nature, which provides a framework and focus for its nature conservation efforts. Restoration of this rare habitat is one of the main focuses of Lewis and James' work at Ben Lawers.

Lewis, who spent his winter working in New Zealand and was eager to return to Scotland to continue his role at the Trust, said: "I was keen to return to my role and get back out in the mountains botanising and surveying mountain species, including rare willows, at Ben Lawers. There are 15 nationally rare and 40 nationally scarce plant species at the reserve so surveying them is important. It provides an indication of how well they are doing and contributes to the long-term data used to measure the health of these populations.

"These plants thrive high up in the mountains where they have adapted to living in colder temperatures and strong winds. The habitats in which they do best are declining due to rising temperatures caused by climate change. Conditions have gotten worse due to warmer winters, with less snow cover and prolonged dry periods in summer causing them to retreat to higher altitudes in search of more suitable conditions. Long term monitoring has highlighted that the reduction in suitable habitats is having a detrimental effect on some high altitude, specialist species with snow pearlwort, mountain sandwort, and drooping saxifrage particularly vulnerable. Despite these worrying trends, other species are doing well, with populations of alpine fleabane in a stable condition."

The restoration of mountain willows, pioneered at Ben Lawers, was started after monitoring highlighted that they were declining. Highland saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*) was also saved from local extinction by conservation action after monitoring revealed that only a single plant remained.

Lewis continued: "To know that my work is contributing to the Trust's efforts to help sustain and grow the collection of rare mountain plants at Ben Lawers is something I'm incredibly proud of. It is thanks to the continued generosity of our supporters, alongside the funds raised by players of People's Postcode Lottery, that have supported my role and enabled the Trust to protect and promote the wildlife, nature and landscapes in its care for the benefit of everyone, now and into the future."

Lewis' surveys are complemented by James' work on the practical management of the reserve alongside managing its tree nursery. Both roles are vital to achieving the ambitions for expanding mountain willow scrub set out in the Plan for Nature.

Ranger James Robinson, who previously managed libraries before studying environmental management and technology at the Open University, joined the Trust after volunteering with conservation projects in the UK and South America and training to become an arborist. James commented:

"My skills as an arborist have been put to good use managing the tree nursery, where I grow saplings from seeds collected on the reserve. We focus on growing mountain willow species, although we also grow hazel, aspen, juniper, and some other species in smaller amounts. These trees are planted on the reserve to support the restoration of a continuous habitat gradient from woodland through mountain willow scrub to mountain plants.

"We currently have approximately 3,500 saplings growing from seed sown last year and have recently sowed seed for this year with the hope of getting a similar number of trees in 2025. It takes between 16 and 24 months to nurture willows from seed before they are ready to be planted out.

"Lewis' role complements my work as the surveying provides evidence of the impact of habitat restoration and also informs priorities for practical action. By continuing our focus on mountain willow scrub at Ben Lawers, we're reinforcing the site as a pioneer in the restoration of this priority habitat, helping to increase understanding and inspire and support other sites looking to undertake its reintroduction."

Players of People's Postcode Lottery have supported the conservation charity's Love Our Nature project since 2022, which benefited from £900k last year. Further funding awarded through Postcode Earth Trust this year will support conservation work at Ben Lawers and across a variety of different habitats, including coastal and marine areas, peatlands, wetlands, woodland, and the eight National Nature Reserves cared for by the Trust.

Head of Charities at People's Postcode Lottery, Laura Chow: "It's great that our players are supporting the Trust's vital nature conservation work at Ben Lawers in this way. Lewis and James have such an important job to do and we wish them the very best."

Players of People's Postcode Lottery have now raised over £3.4m since 2014 to support the National Trust for Scotland.

The Love Our Nature project supports the National Trust for Scotland's vision to care for, protect and share Scotland's nature, beauty and heritage for everyone, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022. For more information on the National Trust for Scotland, visit [www.nts.org.uk](http://www.nts.org.uk).

## **ENDS**

### **Notes to editors**

**Images:** <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/Zs7Pd916pf>

### **Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve (NNR): Mountain plant collection**

The great variety of mountain plants is why Ben Lawers NNR has been in the care of the National Trust for Scotland since 1950. It's also why it has multiple designations for its natural heritage.

Ben Lawers NNR has the most extensive populations of mountain plants in Britain. As the term suggests, these plants are adapted to growing in harsh mountain environments. The underlying geology of Ben Lawers, with nutrient-rich rocks outcropping at high altitude, provides them with unique habitats.

Some of the species and communities at Ben Lawers are extremely rare and threatened. Of the flowering plants and ferns on the reserve, 15 are classified as nationally rare. These include alpine fleabane (*Erigeron borealis*), alpine gentian (*Gentiana nivalis*), mountain sandwort (*Sabulina rubella*), snow pearlwort (*Sagina nivalis*), woolly willow (*Salix lanata*) and alpine woodsia (*Woodsia alpina*). Ben Lawers is the only British site for bristle sedge (*Carex microglochin*). Species classified as endangered in the UK include rock lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla wichurae*) and alpine pearlwort (*Sagina saginoides*).

The site is equally, if not more, important for its lower plants, the lichens and bryophytes (liverworts and mosses). With over 600 species recorded, again including a concentration of national rarities, Ben Lawers is arguably the most important individual site for lichens in Britain. Identifying lichens is a specialised skill, but even at a superficial level it's easy to appreciate their beauty and variety.

Over 30 nationally rare mosses and five nationally rare liverworts have been recorded at Ben Lawers NNR, which puts the importance of the site for bryophytes in perspective. Several mosses are found nowhere else in Britain, e.g. *Roaldia revoluta*. Many of these high-altitude specialists are easily overlooked owing to their diminutive size or by being

confined to ledges by grazing sheep and deer. Some of the few plants that thrive in places where snow persists may be vulnerable to climate change.

### **About the National Trust for Scotland**

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work. For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit [www.nts.org.uk](http://www.nts.org.uk). The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.