

# Planting on Barren Ground

What could be more Scottish than heather?  
Try pines, birches, willows, alders, elms, ashes, oaks...

BY GUY HAND

I'M NOT ACCUSTOMED TO HACKING AWAY AT ICONS. Especially defenseless, shrubby icons. With every half-hearted stab of the spade my enthusiasm fades. Heather is the consummate Highland symbol, the subject of countless Scottish ballads, and drop-dead beautiful when it bursts into bloom across the August moorlands. Cutting holes in it troubles me.

I love heather. My wife, who grew up in these *Calluna*-clad hills, loves it even more. She stands nearby, on her own little heathery hummock, leans against her unused spade, and shoots me one of those what-have-you-gotten-me-into stares. After all, this was my idea. I give her an apologetic shrug and take another feeble stab at the heather, breaking off woody stems and burgundy leaves, slowly clearing a small patch to bare ground. I push my blade into the dark, peaty soil, pry open a hole, and pull a bare-root seedling out of my bag. Then I slip my first Scots pine into the ground.

We've come here from California to help restore the Highlands' wild forest, but on this dreary April morn-

ing, still jet-lagged and disoriented, the thought of spending the next week hacking heather suddenly feels less like ecological atonement than petty vandalism.

After all, I once thought the Highlands were just fine the way they are. Most tourists and many Scots still do. When you're caught here between the wind and white water of the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, it's easy to see why. The emptiness feels endemic. Away from its towns and villages, this northwest portion of Scotland holds little industry and few people—fewer in places than the most thinly settled parts of the American West. The Highlands seem primal, pristine.

They are nothing of the kind.

As I slip another tree into the ground, I remind myself that we have joined volunteers from the Scottish group Trees for Life to right some wrongs, many of them ancient. The Highlands were once covered by what the Romans called the Caledonian Forest, a vast mosaic of pine, birch, willow, alder, elm, ash, and oak. Within that forest lived a Celtic people with a reverence for trees. They taught their children the alphabet using the names of trees. They built their homes, their boats, their lives from trees. But since those days, Scotland has been stripped of 99 percent of its wildwood (as they call it here) and most of the attendant flora and fauna.

The forests fell for all the familiar reasons: for firewood, for timber, to clear land for crops, to graze animals, to build ships and cities, to fuel an empire. They fell, too, because as Britain became a colonial power it saw anything untamed as an obstacle to its fevered dash toward the future. The ax performed the double-edged

**Glen Affric** harbors 14 species of lichen rare in Britain, including one that wasn't discovered until 1994.

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duty of relieving the land of trees while clearing a path to civility, turning nature into culture. Forests were often regarded as "blotches of barbarity," and as one 18th-century theologian put it, "the scarcity of timber... is a certain proof of national improvement." Wood became simply a resource to be gleaned from the "barbarous" corners of the empire. As a result, my wife's homeland today is one of the most degraded, deforested lands in the world.

## I wake from a clattering vision of America as unknowing heir to Highland history.

The heather at my feet has filled the ecological vacuum. Here in Glen Affric, a stunning, steep-walled valley west of Loch Ness, 10 of us stand knee-deep in a near-monoculture of heather where a portion of the Caledonian Forest once stood. I turn in a slow circle, trying to imagine that forest, and can't.

I see, instead, humanity's long, troubled relationship with trees. We seem to cut them as instinctively as we pull in breath. We certainly cut them in the Highlands. Century by century the Caledonian Forest fell, cleared with the relentless force of glaciers, humanity pushing the land back to the Pleistocene, to the tundra and moorland that covered it before the trees arrived. Along the way the Scottish bear, moose, beaver, wild boar, wild ox, wolf, and all manner of other woodland creatures tumbled into extinction.

I rub my eyes. Where once stood wilderness, I now see a land consumed. I see the consequences of a species blind to limits, a species with a hunger large enough to devour the world and the willingness to do so.

I plant another tree.

I shove my spade into the ground because I also see hope. On islands in the middle of lochs, on steep slopes,

and in remote glens, a scattering of wildwood has escaped the ax. The Highlands harbor nine-tenths of Scotland's surviving native forest—and the only land undeveloped enough to allow the possibility of more. To the east, I glimpse the dark silhouette of one of those surviving forests. Beyond this sea of heather, Glen Affric embraces the largest, least-disturbed native woodland in all of Britain. When our group walked into that vestige of Caledonian pine on the afternoon we arrived, we crossed the sharp threshold between Scotland's present and its past, between open heather and a rich tangle of trees. The effect was stunning. Moments passed before we adjusted to the dim light and the realization that these two clashing worlds were rooted in the same soil. Scots pines (*Pinus sylves-trus*), some of them three centuries old, gave us a break from the wind and rain. Their gray trunks stood as solid as Doric columns. Their orange limbs twisted into the sky like flame. Most of our group—all but two of us British—had never seen such a sight. It was a scene dense with life, a jumble of shadow and light, forest scents and sounds.

Yet this kingdom is small, this forest fractured. Most of Scotland's native woodlands occupy less than 25 acres each. Through the pines we caught the somber outline of a ridge, a sharp blade of earth shorn of everything but a tweedy shroud of heather. As we wandered, one of our leaders whispered its ancient Gaelic name: Doire Mor. Big Wood.

**T**HE SKY SLIDES TOWARD melancholy gray and a soft rain begins to fall, but the memory of that forest boosts our resolve. My wife and I come up with a compromise: I'll dig the holes, and she'll plant the trees. Soon we have several dozen in the ground.

For a very long time few people cared about the trees of Scotland. Native son John Muir had left in 1849 as a young boy, and while he worked to save American wilderness, no one


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came to the defense of his homeland's fading forest. The Highland woods continued to fall into the 20th century. Until the 1950s, when a professor and a graduate student at the University of Aberdeen conducted a seminal native-forest study, no one even knew how much old growth was left or where it stood. Their findings were startling: Scotland contained only 1 percent of its original forest, and little of that was protected. The Forestry Commission (equivalent to our Forest Service), which itself had cut much of the native forest, decided to act. In 1960 it declared Glen Affric's forest a native pine reserve and began restoration. Still, public interest didn't coalesce until the 1980s, when international environmental awareness, a resurging interest in Scottish history and land-use policy, and a measure of pure serendipity spawned a collection of grassroots groups aimed at preserving native woodlands.

Some even spoke of reintroducing extinct native animals like the wolf and the bear. "This is not about physical survival," explained British writer Peter Taylor. "It is about the retrieval of soul. Imagine that we . . . say to the world, we are bringing back the animals [and the forest] because they will make us whole again. And to do it, we set aside land and spend large amounts of money, and put parts of the economy aside. We signal that something matters other than material growth and physical security."

**T**EA BREAK—ONE OF THE perks of tree planting in Scotland. We clamber along a steep slope, drop our spades, and cluster around steaming mugs of tea. As we sip, the rain cools to lazy snow. It drifts through the valley like tattered bits of fleece, softening hard edges to misty abstraction. The light goes all dusky blue and beautiful. Then I notice a depression in the moist ground near my feet: the double-crescent track of a red deer.

Free of former predators other than man, the Highland red deer

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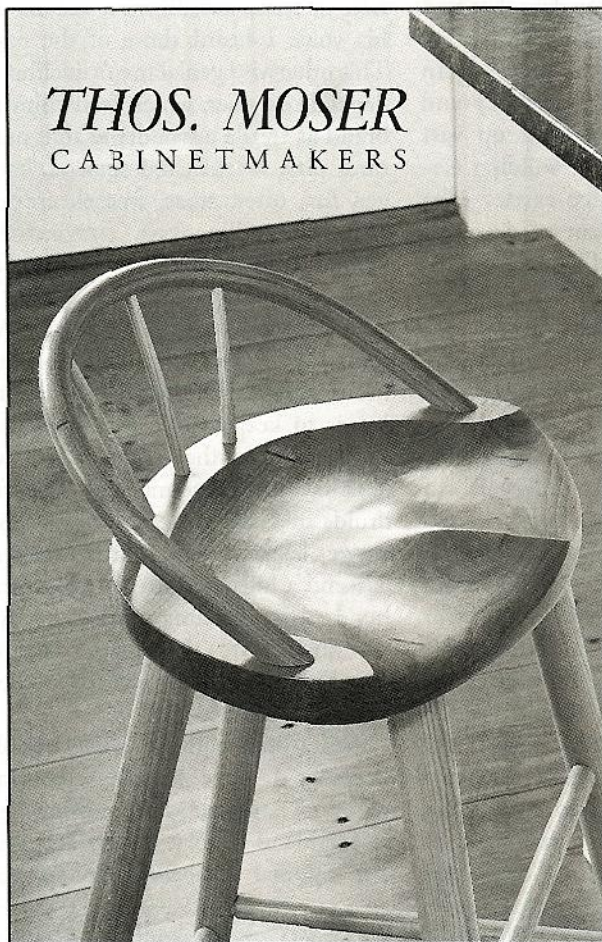
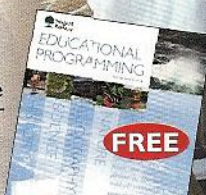


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(*Cervus elaphus*) has exploded in numbers since the 1960s, more than doubling its population to some 300,000. In such multitudes the animals eat virtually every unprotected tree seedling they find, which forces the Forestry Commission to spend much time and money fencing in Affric's forests and shooting the deer that find a way in. Private hunting estates are largely to blame for the problem. In Victorian times, the aristocracy and the merely wealthy bought up vast areas of the Highlands, building elegant homes and faux castles—the 19th-century equivalent of a second home in Aspen. Their grounds, sprawling across thousands of acres, were and still are managed for the hunt, promoting deer while eliminating competing species. Estates control 75 percent of Scotland's private lands, including the high ground surrounding Glen Affric. As a result, in weather like this, large herds of red deer descend into the valley in search of food and shelter; their numbers are five times those that would allow for the natural regeneration of trees.

Estate owners have little incentive to solve the problem. Not only is the worth of their estates tied to the number of stags they hold, but they also consider deer stalking on the treeless heath a noble Scottish tradition, as integral to the Highland mystique

as whiskey, kilts, bagpipes, and—well, heather. One estate owner, his voice edged in anger, told me the growing interest in reforestation was “medieval” and promised that Scotland would never “sterilize three-quarters of its landmass for the sake of some antediluvian vision.” In his voice I heard those of the past. This otherwise genial man's livelihood depends on deer, which leads him to brand as sterile a woodland that nurtures pine marten, red squirrel, badger, fox, otter, stoat, weasel, crested tit, capercaillie, rare dragonflies, lichens, orchids, and who knows what undiscovered wonders.

An icy wind ripples the moor. We hunker down, pull our hoods over our heads, and clutch our teacups in both hands to keep warm. Sitting in that tight circle on that empty slope, we look like nothing so much as prayerful druids in Gore-Tex. A few sips later we get back to work and by evening descend a hillside dotted with several hundred fresh young pines, our day's contribution to the quarter-million that Trees for Life has planted in Glen Affric since 1991.

Still, that night I have trouble sleeping. I wake from a clattering vision of America as unknowing heir to Highland history. I've dreamt that our colonial forebears had spirited

Trees flourish in the Highlands when protected from deer and axes, as here by the River Coe.

their gleaming axes across the Atlantic on a night as black as this, scattering them quietly, surreptitiously through the North Woods of Maine, Michigan, the

Yaak Valley, the Olympic Peninsula, the California redwoods. I pull on my clothes and slip from the stone hut where our group is sleeping and into a moonless Highland night, into starry darkness and a sharp wind no longer mollified by trees. I button my coat to my chin and wonder if a forested Highlands will ever return. And if it does, I wonder what will stop some forgetful future generation from repeating past mistakes.

Can we ever sustain the devotion, humility, and intelligence required to coax a forest from empty ground—and then keep it there? Or will ours forever be a world with fewer trees than reasons to cut them down?

I hear no answers, just the low hiss of heather, like wind across some vast and vacant sea. 🐾

*California writer Guy Hand has wandered the Highlands for 15 years.*

**For more information:** Write to Trees for Life, The Park, Findhorn Bay, Forres IV36 OTZ, Scotland; call 011-44-1309-691292; or visit [www.treesforlife.org.uk](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk).

**Fewer than 800 capercaillie, the world's largest grouse, remain in Britain, most in Scotland's Highland pine forest.**