

Country diary: an ancient forest offers protection from the elements

19 September 2020



'This level of natural abundance is too rare in the mountain landscapes of Scotland and Britain.' Photograph: Carey Davies

Light brightens the tent and nudges me out of sleep. Dawn must have arrived. I open my eyes, expecting morning light, but instead see soft silver shapes flickering across the tent fabric – moonbeams, diffused through the swaying limbs of the huge Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) under which my tent is pitched.

My watch says 3.34am. I unzip the door of the tent and look outside. The previous day was overcast, but the weather is restless and squally, and the wind has torn open a rift in the clouds. The moon is startling in its unsullied brightness. Metallic light plays across the dark forest. Blaeberry and heather bushes, wet with rain, gleam in the lunar glow. Moonlit scraps of cloud drift across the sky like smoke.



Camped amid the resurgent pine forest of Glen Feshie. Photograph: Carey Davies

The trees of Glen Feshie are an ecological link to 9,000 years ago: one of the few remaining remnants of the coniferous rainforest that spread across Britain after the last ice age. As the climate continued to warm, the conifer canopy retreated north into Scotland, but this "Caledonian forest", as dubbed by Pliny the Elder, remained big enough 2,000 years ago to help halt the march of Roman armies. By the 20th century, human-driven deforestation and a wetter climate reduced the Caledonian forest to a handful of isolated enclaves; as little as 1% of its historic extent.



‘Reaching this camping spot, in a natural dome created by the interlocking canopies of several veteran trees, involved careful “bushwhacking”’. Photograph: Carey Davies

But in Glen Feshie, as in many other parts of the Scottish Highlands, the forest is resurgent. Deer numbers in the area have been cut back, and in less than two decades the great 300-year-old “granny pines” that survived deforestation have been joined by a layer of vibrant new growth. Reaching this camping spot, in a natural dome created by the interlocking canopies of several veteran trees, involved careful “bushwhacking” past reefs of bright heather, clusters of infant pines, and grassy meadows vibrant with the late-season colours of devil’s-bit scabious, harebell and yarrow.

This level of natural abundance is too rare in the mountain landscapes of Scotland and Britain. I zip the tent back up as the clouds close up and another squall approaches; but the trees shield me from the wind and rain, and I sink back easily into sleep.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/19/country-diary-an-ancient-forest-offers-protection-from-the-elements>