

Estate of mind



TUCKED AWAY ON SOUTH DEESIDE, GLEN TANAR IS HOME TO ONE OF SCOTLAND'S MOST PRISTINE EXAMPLES OF OLD CALEDONIAN FOREST – AND A PROGRESSIVE ESTATE THAT INTENDS TO KEEP IT THAT WAY, DISCOVERS RICHARD ROWE PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD ROWE; LORNE GILL/SNH; GLEN TANAR RANGER SERVICE

Halfway up a steep track, one that even the Land Rover struggles with for a moment, we stop at a clearing – the Knockie Viewpoint – to savour a scene that underlines just why this part of Deeside is so special. Layers of heavily-wooded hills retreat into the distance for almost as far as the eye can see, before the trees gradually thin and give way to a further sweep of heather moorland that extends to the very highest peaks. It's a big view in a big part of the country.

This is Glen Tanar, a long, picturesque glen – and National Nature Reserve – that cuts into the hills south of the River Dee midway between Ballater and Aboyne. It is an ancient right of way that will be familiar to walkers who have made the long trek over the exposed Mounth Road to Mount Keen – the most easterly of the Munros – and down into the Angus Glens. With more than 100 miles of tracks to explore, it is a paradise for anyone who

wants to lose themselves for a day or two.

We are here on a wildlife safari arranged by the Glen Tanar Estate as part of the first Royal Deeside Venison Festival – a week-long celebration of a gastronomic treat that is in plentiful supply in these parts. We hope to see deer while exploring the woodland and surrounding hills, but for now are content to gaze quietly over a forest of Scots pine, birch, aspen and alder.

The silence is broken by Colin McClean, the estate's Wildlife Manager and our guide for the day. "The glen has tremendous nature conservation value," he explains. "There is commercial plantation here too, but the protected forest you are looking at is about as old as anywhere in Scotland."

That it is still here at all is in part thanks to the estate's history of ownership. The current owners are the fourth generation of a family that has presided over it since 1905 when

Glen Tanar was bought by George Coats, later Lord Glentanar, the owner of a Paisley cotton firm. He must have had friends in high places. While a great deal of similar habitat in Scotland was lost through logging and the demand for timber during the world wars, Lord Glentanar was able to preserve much of the old growth forest. Today, the estate covers some 25,000 acres, around a quarter of which is old growth forest.

One key objective on the estate is the natural regeneration of the old forest – and that means maintaining a low density of deer. As McClean explains, the animals do enter the woodland in small numbers, but are largely kept out thanks to a fence that stretches for 15 miles around its perimeter. "We see a pretty good harmony here between sporting and conservation interests with a higher density of deer on the open hill for sport and low in the forest for conservation," he says.



Taking it all in (clockwise from opposite): enjoying the views at the head of the glen; swathes of old forest; red deer stags; one for the game dealer

Stalking, of course, remains a vital source of income for many estates and an important means of maintaining the health of a herd in the absence of natural predators. Stag stalking, in particular, is very much about timing. In August and September, when stags are preparing for the annual rut, the animals are in prime condition, but come late October the rigours of the rut ensure that they are shadows of their former selves.

"A stag in August and the first half of September couldn't get much better in terms of meat quality, but a stag in the first half of October couldn't get much worse," explains McClean. "They go downhill pretty quickly. The price we get for venison also declines at that time and most game dealers won't touch them by then."

Earlier, the carnivores amongst us had received what was, in this age of supermarket sanitation, an important reminder that in order for us to eat meat, something must die.

As we stood inside the open doorway of the estate's deer larder, a shaft of light shone on the freshly-butchered carcass of a red deer hind that had been shot that very morning. The beast, one of around 350 red and roe deer shot on the estate each year, was now hanging upside down, skin still on, labelled and ready for the game dealer.

ANIMAL MAGIC

Back on the track, the Land Rover climbing steadily through the trees, we pass a huge Wellingtonia planted in the 1870s by a former estate owner. The tree dwarfs the surrounding Scots pines which, despite being a good 50 years older, are much slower growing.

It is in these more remote parts of the forest that much of the estate's wildlife monitoring takes place – although you still have to be lucky to see some of the more secretive denizens of the woods. "There are big chunks of the place where, weekends aside, you don't see anyone here at all, which really benefits the wildlife," says McClean.

In addition to around 700 head of deer, the forest and surrounding moorland is home to golden eagle, Scottish crossbill and hen

harrier – the presence of the latter a nod to the estate's enlightened approach to birds of prey. Deeside as a whole is also something of a stronghold for red squirrel, and no more so than in Glen Tanar; the same applies to black grouse which are here in abundance, although the same cannot be said for their much larger cousin, the capercaillie.

"They have really struggled, despite significant efforts to conserve them," admits McClean. During the past breeding season, the estate was down to just two displaying males, which mirrors a wider decline across much of Deeside. "There is a very real fear of local extinction in the area, which is strange given how much better they are doing over in Speyside," he adds.

A huge woodland grouse – think turkey-sized birds with attitude in the case of males – capercaillie have a tendency to fly fast and low when disturbed, making them susceptible to fence strikes. However, with the deer fence far enough away from the forest, it is not thought to pose a problem in this case. And where it does enter the forest, the fence is marked so that the birds can see it, says McClean. **D**

D Instead, the main problem has been the poor weather in recent springs – a time when chicks can become chilled on wet ground. “It could also be that the terrain and conditions here simply suits predators more than the prey,” ponders McClean. “Over the last 10 years, for instance, pine martens have come back in a big way. They are likely to add to the capercaillie’s problems.”

During the autumn months, pine martens feast on an abundance of rowan berries and their brightly-coloured droppings can be seen all around. To illustrate just how prevalent they are in the area, McClean mentions his work monitoring Scottish wildcats. “One way to find wildcats is to set up a camera trap on a tree alongside a dead pheasant and see what comes along,” he explains. “If you put a camera out here, you’ll have a pine marten at it within a week, but there are now very few wildcats, sadly.”

FIRE HAZARD

Rounding a corner, we pass a deep pond cut in a small clearing, its outflow channelled beneath the track via a drainage culvert. “One of the things we are nervous about when managing a forest of this size and importance is fire,” says McClean.

The pond is one of a network of fire dams dug throughout the forest; the estate is also kitted out with pumps and machines to move large volumes of water around, but the key weapon against fire in terrain like this is a helicopter, usually scrambled from Inverness. The fire dams are designed so that a bucket can be lowered from the sky, scoop up a tonne or so of water and head off to the fire.

Glen Tanar had a helicopter to thank a few years ago when a major fire threatened to burn a large area of forest. “It was lit by someone managing heather for grouse and they didn’t realise how dry it was,” recalls McClean. The fire quickly took hold, burning

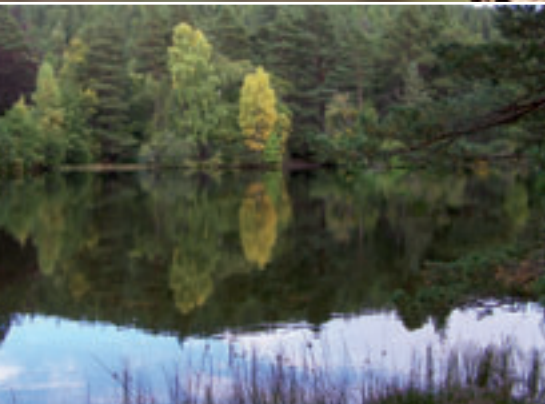
“HELICOPTERS ARE A KEY WEAPON AGAINST FIRE IN THIS TERRAIN”

several trees at the edge of the forest before threatening to jump into the canopy. “That’s very dangerous, the trees become like torches. Luckily the helicopter put the fire out quite quickly together with about 150 people fighting it on the ground.”

The risk of fire notwithstanding, grouse shooting on the heather-bound hills beyond the forest remains another important source of revenue for the estate. The past season has been particularly productive for grouse, generating the kind of money that can make the difference between a loss-making enterprise and a profitable one. “It’s hugely valuable to estates in this area,” says McClean.

So, why have grouse done so well this year? The hard winter helped to reduce ticks, parasites and predators, he believes, although





numbers have been building for a while. Interestingly in these straitened times, shooting them remains as popular as ever. "People love grouse shooting, but it's a rich man's sport, there's no two ways about it," concedes McClean. "It has its downsides, but does bring in a lot of money and supports jobs, so I don't find it wrong."

What he does find wrong, however, is when the management of grouse moors is tied with illegal practices, such as the killing of birds of prey. "One of the things we are trying to do here is have the two live in harmony. But it's difficult. Eagles and hen harriers do take a lot of grouse, but these birds have a place in Scotland and should be here."

To steer aerial predators away from grouse,

Forest life (clockwise from opposite below): Scots pine seedling; pine marten numbers have increased; red squirrels are often seen; the skeleton of a fallen pine; Glen Tanar's well-stocked trout loch

the estate feeds eagles with deer carcasses during the winter and hen harriers with day-old chicks from battery hen farms during the breeding season. "It seems to be working, or at least it did last year. We want to manage these conflicts in a constructive way rather than doing anything illegal."

For someone who works on both the nature conservation and sporting sides of the estate, McClean is keenly aware of the bitterness – and often entrenched views – that exists between the two camps. "It is one

of the major fault lines in the countryside and I would like to help resolve such conflict in a small way. I work on both sides and there are huge similarities between the two jobs, but sadly the different sides don't recognise that."

GOOD FISHING

Having dropped down off The Strone, a landmark hill to the south of the estate, we are now alongside the Water of Allachy, a tributary of the Tanar and an important spawning ground for salmon and sea trout at this time of year.

Clear, cold and fast-flowing, it looks the picture of health and is perhaps one contributing factor behind what McClean says has **D**

It's been an excellent year for fishing on the nearby Dee. With fishing rights along some 14 miles of the river, salmon fishing is the estate's biggest single source of revenue, with fishing parties often returning during the same week every year for decades.

"I don't know why but in spring we were catching huge numbers of fish when many rivers in Scotland weren't catching any at all. We don't know for sure what we are doing right and it could possibly all change, but for now the fishing is fantastic for us."

And not just for humans. During spawning time, otters patrol the shallows looking for salmon, while herons follow the fish upstream to pick them off from the banks. We keep our eyes peeled for both, spotting a heron later much higher up the hill, but there is no sign of any otters.

We soon cross the Allachy and then the Tanar itself, passing several walkers along the way, before heading west along the main track that leads out of the forest and up to the base of Mount Keen. "There was a good metre of snow on this road last winter, so we spent most of our time on skis and snowshoes," recalls McClean.

Free from the embrace of the forest, the landscape is suddenly very different with grand views over bare, open moorland. This is where we stand a better chance of spying deer. As our eyes slowly begin to relax and with the aid of high-powered stalker's binoculars, we spot a handful of animals, most of them beating a hasty retreat.

However, evidence of their presence is all around. Down by the Tanar, we can see the beginnings of more forest where the estate has planted broadleaved saplings, their trunks encased in plastic sheaths to protect them



from hungry mouths. Elsewhere, by the stone-walled outline of an old drovers' inn near the head of the glen, the hillsides are striped with tracks worn by the animals during grazing sorties to and from the valley floor.

And up ahead, beyond a shiny new footbridge over the Tanar, looms Mount Keen – the isolated prize that draws most people this far up the glen. It has to be said that, after the beauty of the forest, it's no looker; bleak and bare-backed, its summit is reached via an ever-widening track that runs like a scar up its flank.

It's steep and hard going, but on a clear day the summit offers plenty of reward, with panoramic views over the surrounding Mounth plateau. But in truth my heart was still in the forest – an intricate, aged otherworld that I already planned to return to and explore on foot the following day. ■

Moorland crossroads: walkers can take their pick (above); Colin McClean with a particularly impressive specimen (below); walkers enjoying the low-level trails



Exploring Glen Tanar

A network of circular trails branch out from the Braeloine Visitor Centre on the estate road into Glen Tanar. All are numbered and marked on a trails guide available at the centre.

CHAPEL (1 mile) – a walk across the valley to the old chapel of St Lesmo, returning downstream along the riverbank.

FAIRY LOCHAN (3 miles) – a stroll past Fairy Lochan before rejoining the Water of Tanar via a ridge and then a return upstream along the riverbank.

KNOCKIE VIEWPOINT (2 miles) – another route across the valley, this time through woods of larch and Scots pine, emerging to fantastic views over the old forest.

OLD PINES (5 miles) – a longer walk that continues upstream through the old pine forest before crossing the Tanar and its tributary, the Allachy, by Victorian bridges.

JUNIPER (0.5 mile) – a short, all-abilities route to a viewpoint on a smooth surface with ample seats along the way.

LONGER ROUTES

(ALSO SUITABLE FOR MOUNTAIN BIKES)

STRONE CIRCUIT (8 miles) – from the Knockie Viewpoint follow the Firmounth (an old drove road) around the Strone. Directions are straightforward: always take the right hand fork, and it will bring you back to the river which can then be followed downstream to Braeloine.

RED CRAIG (14 miles) – follow the Tanar upstream past Etnach, cross at the ford, then head uphill with Red Craig and Black Craig on your left. Staying on the track, head northeast with Clachan Yell on your left. Consider also deviating up the steep slopes of Clachan Yell – a hill with superb views and the inspiration behind the name of one of Scotland's most rocking ceilidh bands.

MOUNT KEEN (19 miles) – the biggy. Follow the Tanar upstream through old Scots pine forest and out onto heather moorland. It's a good six miles just to the base of Mount Keen, so a mountain bike is a good option here. Choose a clear day for magnificent views from the summit (and an early start in winter).

Further info



Three miles southwest of Aboyne, Glen Tanar is reached along the B976 South Deeside road. Access to the estate is from the tower at Bridge o' Ess close to where the Tanar enters the Dee.

Glen Tanar is a perfect spot for day visits, with horse riding and Land Rover safaris available in addition to excellent walking, mountain biking and sporting activities. The Braeloine Visitor Centre is manned by a full-time ranger service and provides interpretation on the history, management and wildlife of the estate. Winter opening hours: 10am-5pm (except Tuesdays and Wednesdays). For longer stays, the estate offers a choice of six self-catering holiday cottages.

www.glentantar.co.uk
rangerglentantar.blogspot.com