



# The Peatlands Partnership Newsletter

Issue Number 1. November 2007

Welcome to the first edition of The Peatlands Partnership Newsletter. The Peatlands Partnership was formed at the tail end of last year following the completion of the LIFE Peatlands Project and aims to develop and build on the work of that project.

The Partnership comprises 'core' organisations, together

with other interested organisations and individuals, who will carry out and help fund the objectives set out in the Management Strategy document, 'The Peatlands of Caithness & Sutherland'. In this first edition, we bring you up to date with our progress so far.

*Linda Hutton, Peatlands Project Officer*

## PEATLANDS PROJECT OFFICER IN POST

**Linda Hutton was appointed Peatlands Project Officer in July** and will work with the Partnership to help implement the objectives set out in the Management Strategy. Linda is permanently based at the SGRPID office in Thurso as part of the 'On The Ground' project which promotes shared services for public bodies whose responsibilities lie within natural heritage, landscape and the environment.

Part of her remit will be to lead or contribute to the delivery of the key actions found within the Strategy document and the development of costed action plans for the working groups which will be identified and set up to tackle the various objectives within the Strategy. Linda is the key contact for general Strategy issues and updates.



## Blocked Drains Win Widespread Support!

For most people it's usually a source of complaint - but Conservation staff at the Forestry Commission in Dornoch are planning to block up 23 km of drains as part of an ambitious peatland restoration project.

The project aims to restore and improve at least 150 hectares of peatlands and is set to make a significant contribution to improving biodiversity in the area.

Graeme Findlay Conservation Contract Manager, said: "The area is within Dalchork Forest, near Lairg in central Sutherland. It is geographically distinct from the flow country although it does lie within the Peatland Partnership area".

David Bruce, Planning and Environment Forester in Dornoch Forest District, said: "Having already restored over 500 hectares of peatland habitat in Caithness & North Sutherland, this project highlights our commitment to improving the diverse range of habitats the Forestry Commission manage in north Scotland. The site is also adjacent to Cnoc an Alaskie SSSI & Ben Klibreck SSSI so we are confident that the operations will have a positive effect on the wider environment of Central Sutherland."

The project has gained cross-border support from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Kyle of Sutherland Fisheries Board and the Kyle Fisheries Trust and other organisations.

## North Peatlands site declared Scotland's newest National Nature Reserve

**Part of the RSPB-owned Nature Reserve has been designated as The Flows National Nature Reserve (NNR) which was launched on the 17th August 2007 by Highlands and Islands MSP Rob Gibson. The internationally important peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland join other national natural treasures like St Kilda and Beinn Eighe.**

At 11,399 ha, Scotland's latest NNR is part of the single largest expanse of blanket bog in the world and is internationally recognised for its habitat quality and breeding bird populations. Other features



Rob Gibson MSP with Stuart Housden (RSPB) and Ian Jardine (SNH) at the opening of The Flows NNR

of importance include wet heath, open waters, otter and many species of waders, waterfowl and birds of prey.

The new RSPB-operated NNR is located around 30 miles north of Helmsdale and extends across the peatlands into west Caithness and primarily comprises land within the former Forsinard and Dorrery Estates.

Officially opening the NNR, Rob Gibson MSP said: "The national and international importance of The Flows National Nature Reserve is reflected in the extensive designations which include Ramsar, Special Protection Area and Special Area of Conservation status. Furthermore, 73% of the new reserve is designated as SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest)".

"Through its role in promoting awareness, understanding and enjoyment of the peatlands, and implementing sensitive land management, the reserve will take forward two of the objectives in The Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland Management Strategy for 2005-2015. This aims to secure a sustainable future for the peatlands".

## FORSINAIN TRAIL GETS UNDERWAY

Aaron Lawton Associates were commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage to carry out planning and concept design for a series of outdoor interpretive exhibits in the peatlands to help and encourage people to visit and enhance their understanding of the area.

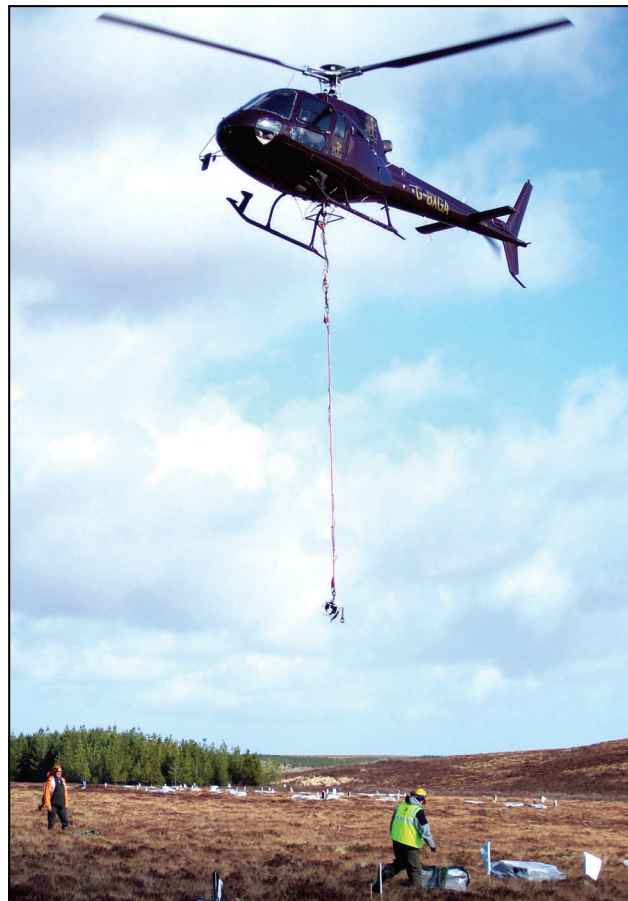
Already underway is a self-guided trail at Forsinain that lies four miles north of the RSPB's visitor centre at Forsinard. The trail will begin on the RSPB Nature Reserve at the parking area on the A897 between Forsinard and Strath Halladale and, when complete, will provide a 6km circular trail. For visitors with limited mobility, a shorter trail is optional. The route will take them past a viewing area for peatland and farmland birds on the nature reserve. The full trail then crosses onto Forestry Commission land taking in a peat bog and unspoilt pool system which will demonstrate at close quarters the variety of bog plants and insects which live there. After following forestry rides and tracks, the route returns along the River Halladale.

In order to preserve the ground, a flagstone trail was recently laid by the Forestry Commission across the rich, wet peat bog area passing by old peat banks which are evident as is the remains of the old farm mill dam cut into the peat bog.

The trail will complement the existing one mile Dubh Lochan Trail at Forsinard providing additional features such as ascents through farmland providing viewing areas for a wide range of birds, woodland and river walks offering spectacular views across the river and beyond, and, at the trail's highest point, views over Loch Bad a'Bhothain, another area for possible bird sightings.

A series of interpretation objectives including colour panels with text and images and/or trail leaflets are planned to provide ample information about each 'exhibit', the surrounding area and issues affecting it.

The Forsinain Trail will fulfil another part of the Strategy objective and it is hoped the trail will be marked out, much of the work complete and open to the public in the first half of 2008, subject to funding being confirmed in the near future.



## PEATLANDS INTERPRETATION : REFERENCES, STORIES AND ANECDOTES

A study was carried out for Scottish Natural Heritage by ARC and The Mackay Country Project to source interpretative material which depicts life on and around the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland. A wealth of information was uncovered from many sources including Mackay Country Archive, Peatlands Study DVD and various published literature.

This 152 page report reveals an invaluable history of our heritage and provides a fascinating insight into topics featuring talented writers past and present such as George Gunn, Neil Gunn, and Mary Beith whose writings tell of their thoughts and feelings living in Caithness and Sutherland from the views from Ben Dorrery to tales from 1935 of travels in an 'old, open car'.

The report is written without prejudice and contains frank contributions from artists, landowners, crofters and archive sources, on topics as diverse as 'peat paper', 'knitting at the peats', 'weather forecasting' and 'peat as a beauty treatment'!

This comprehensive publication is merely a taster of our rich heritage animating life at the peats with humorous, enlightening and often poignant tales from the 1800's to the present day.

If you would like a copy of the report, please get in touch with Linda Hutton.



## Forsinain Sawmill Open for Business

**North Sutherland Community Forestry Trust** has been working over the last couple of years to set up a sawmill at Forsinain Sheds (owned by the Community Trust) to provide employment and a value added product for the local market. Currently, the Trust employs a Sawyer/Manager and assistant and is milling logs taken in part from the timber felled off the peatlands as part of the LIFE programme, but mainly timber from Forestry Commission woodlands in north Sutherland. The Trust has also provided certificated chainsaw training to members who were then able to get employment as part of the LIFE Peatlands Restoration project.

The Trust is run by a voluntary Board of Directors drawn from all the communities across North Sutherland. The sawmill has a number of customers both for its milled products (fence posts, construction timber, etc) and for woodchips. As well as being turned into fuel, chipped trees that were removed from the peatlands as part of the regeneration programme have



also been used to provide a hygienic cushioned floor in corrals for over-wintering cattle and for horse training paddocks. The Directors of the Trust are finding that the principles behind the project – to add value to local timber, supply the local market and reduce carbon emissions from importing goods and provide much needed employment locally – are indeed sound, but the reality of making a new timber business work has been a steep learning curve but well worth the huge voluntary effort.

## PEATLAND INTERPRETATION AT PLANTLIFE NATURE RESERVE

Plantlife has embarked on a project to improve public access and interpretation at its Munsary Peatlands Nature Reserve near Achavanich in Caithness. With funding from Scottish Natural Heritage, the first phase of the project was completed in May this year. Improvements include a new cattle grid, way marking and a small parking area adjacent to the public road. An interpretation panel has also been installed at Munsary Cottage, just inside the entrance to the reserve. Funding is now being sought for the second phase of the project, which will create a 3-mile walking trail from the public road to the cottage, with interpretive signal posts stationed along the route.

Munsary Peatlands occupies an area of over 1,200 hectares and forms part of the Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands SAC and SPA. It is owned and managed by Plantlife with the support of an advisory group, which includes representatives of the local community, SNH, Highland Council and the RSPB.



The Highland Council Planning and Development Service decided to upgrade and modernise the small visitor centre based at Dunnet Bay, Caithness which is run by the Countryside Rangers. Over the winter of 2006/7 the work was carried out and the revamped Visitor Centre, now named Seadrift, opened in June 2007.

The work includes the introduction of interactive material; touch screens focusing on the wildlife and heritage of the area and also new interpretation that covers the local habitats from marine to coastal, woodland to farmland.

As the centre lies next to Dunnet Head, the peatlands were also included in the interpretation and Scottish Natural Heritage funded this part of the project achieving part of the interpretation objec-

tive within the Strategy. As well as the interpretive text “thick, black and squelching with life” and beautiful photography, there is a timeline interactive display focusing on linking various artefacts found in the peat to their estimated age.

These include an old shoe found in a nearby bog (pictured), some ancient birch segments and a fossil fish found in the old red sandstone that underlies Caithness peatlands.

Seadrift has proved popular with schools, locals and visitors and hopefully the new interpretation will inspire people to seek out and explore other areas of the “Flows”.



## Criteria to Aid Forest Restructuring

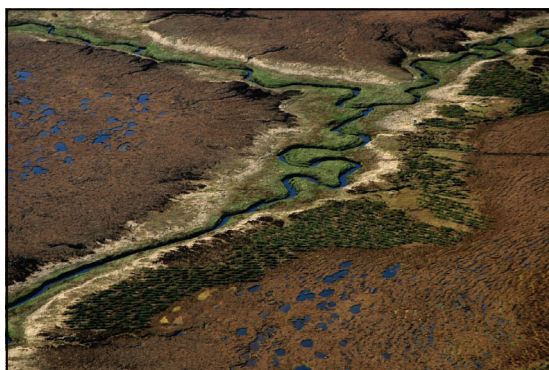
As part of the process of restructuring the woodland cover in and around the peatlands, SNH and FCS have been developing criteria to help identify those areas of existing woodland most likely to be having an adverse effect on adjacent peatland, and hence the highest priority for either early removal and/or for which there will be a presumption against replanting. Whilst still some way from the preparation of formal guidance, desk and field trials of the criteria based on factors such as slope, wetness and the presence of scarce peatland species have proved promising. Further development will be carried out over the coming months.



## SLEACH BOG RESTORATION

Following the end of the successful EU Life Nature funded project in the peatlands of Caithness & Sutherland, there was great support to continue work on realising the Objectives laid out in the Peatlands Strategy. The task of restoring areas of forestry on deep peat back to open peatland is one that has seen great strides, but there is still a long way to go. In order to maintain momentum the 149ha Sleach forestry plantation was acquired by RSPB Scotland in August 2006 with financial support from its members, the Tubney Trust and the Jordan Trust. As it lay deep within the core of the peatlands, adjacent to The Peatlands Natura site, but also in the heavily afforested headwaters of the River Thurso (an SAC for its salmon and otter populations), there were lengthy discussions over potential impacts. A felling license was finally obtained from Forestry Commission Scotland in November 2006 and restoration undertaken with support from Scottish Natural Heritage.

One of the main tasks in the years post-felling will be to control any regeneration of conifer seedlings to ensure that the bogs remain open and treeless. RSPB staff will carry out surveys in the third year after felling to inform control management. Experience shows that the best results are achieved if felled carefully and tree seedlings removed by hand pulling 3-4 years later at low cost (£50-100/ha). But if left just a couple of years later it requires chainsaw and brush cutter work and costs can quickly soar to more than £500/ha and in prolific blocks to levels greater than the cost of felling the original trees.



## CONTACT DETAILS

### Scottish Natural Heritage

Linda Hutton  
Peatlands Project Officer  
E-mail: [Linda.Hutton@snh.gov.uk](mailto:Linda.Hutton@snh.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01847 891402

Andrew Coupar  
Policy & Advice Manager  
E-mail: [Andrew.Coupar@snh.gov.uk](mailto:Andrew.Coupar@snh.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01463 725247

### RSPB

Norrie Russell  
Forsinard Reserve Manager  
E-mail: [Norrie.Russell@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Norrie.Russell@rspb.org.uk)  
Tel: 01641 571225

Pete Mayhew  
Senior Conservation Manager  
E-mail: [Pete.Mayhew@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Pete.Mayhew@rspb.org.uk)  
Tel: 01463 715000

### Forestry Commission Scotland

Tim Cockerill  
E-mail:  
[Tim.Cockerill@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Tim.Cockerill@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01862 810359

Bob Dunsmore  
E-mail:  
[Bob.Dunsmore@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Bob.Dunsmore@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01349 862144

### Plantlife International

Joe Costley  
Reserves Manager  
E-mail: [Joe.Costley@plantlife.org.uk](mailto:Joe.Costley@plantlife.org.uk)  
Tel: 01722 342734

### North Sutherland Community Forest Trust

Billy MacLean  
Sawyer/Manager  
Tel: 01641 571353



If you have any comments about The Peatlands Partnership or any aspect of its work, please get in touch with Linda Hutton.