

Grey Mare's Tail Nature Reserve Newsletter 2010



All change at Grey Mare's Tail

Welcome to the first Grey Mare's Tail NR newsletter. 2010 was a year of considerable change at Grey Mare's Tail. Firstly, Dan Watson the Property Manager for the last 6 years, moved on in late 2009 to take up the Ecologist post at Ben Lawers and Glencoe. His successor Richard Clarkson began in March 2010, just in time for the busy summer season.

The most obvious change for visitors was the complete overhaul of all the interpretation at Grey Mare's Tail. Part funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, this project has enabled the Trust to renew interpretation boards in the car park, at the waterfall viewpoint and also produce a new information leaflet. Perhaps the most notable change has been the replacement of the old wooden Visitor Centre with a mobile interpretation trailer. The 'green hut',



as the visitor centre was affectionately known by many, was removed in late 2009, more than 7 years after its 'temporary' introduction. However, after

providing a sterling service to staff and visitors it was starting to look 'past it's sell



by date'. There was also a desire to remove what was perceived to be a permanent and unnecessary visual intrusion to what is a spectacularly beautiful part of the countryside. The new mobile interpretation trailer arrived in April. Like the old visitor centre, it too was linked to a CCTV camera overlooking the peregrine nest. We now have the flexibility to visit shows and events with the trailer, and also remove it from the

reserve during the winter months.

Monitoring News

2010 was another busy year for monitoring with purple saxifrage, heather, montane willows, White Coomb enclosure, oblong woodsia, alpine foxtail and sheathed sedge all to be completed. Purple saxifrage monitoring in March kicked the monitoring year off. At Grey Mare's Tail this beautiful flower clings to the inaccessible spray soaked crags alongside the waterfall. Monitoring such a difficult to get to site means plants, or groups of plants, have to be counted through a telescope. Although confined to this small area within the reserve, the population is healthy and increasing in number.



Now in its 4th year of monitoring, White Coomb enclosure continues to show very encouraging results. The erection of this fence was the favoured option following the circulation of the 2005 public consultation options paper for future management and conservation of upland plant communities at Grey Mare's Tail. This process came about because of the continued poor condition of montane willows on the north east facing crags of White Coomb. The paper was specifically concerned with determining what direction the Trust would take in conserving the montane willow scrub. Following consultation on the various options, a fence was erected during 2006 and 2007 around the main willow crag;

an area of approximately 1 hectare. The aim of the project is to have a healthy and self sustaining population of montane willows and herbs.

The willows continue to look a lot healthier, with larger patches, increased shrub height and significantly more catkins (male and female). In 2005 just 12 catkins were recorded, whereas this year there was over 680. While there doesn't appear to be any new plants at this stage, 'new' patches have appeared that may have been grazed very low and therefore remained unnoticed prior to the fence going up. Other plants are benefitting too; flowering and non-flowering stems are double that of the 2007 baseline survey and vegetation height has also increased. Although increases have levelled off after an initial flourish, they are still increasing. The winners so far are roseroot, alpine saw-wort, yellow rattle, the St. John's worts, hawkweeds and other members of the daisy family.

There is still a lack of some flowering tall herb species, such as wood crane's-bill, although wild angelica has increased a little, while meadowsweet is still more prevalent on species rich grassland outside the enclosure. For the first time there were also good flowering patches of northern bedstraw and common valerian inside the enclosure, whilst the ones outside were getting munched by sheep and goats.

Further good news came when monitoring revealed that all 59 of the oblong woodsia ferns reintroduced to the enclosure in 2008 have survived and are growing well. This was the second reintroduction of woodsias to Grey Mare's tail. The first reintroduction of 126 plants in 1999 has consistently declined over the years and in 2009 there were 31 surviving. However, this is still a survival rate of just over 25%, which compared to flowering plant reintroductions is very successful. It will be interesting to see how many are left when it is monitored again in 2011. Woodsias in the first reintroduction did much better when planted in scree compared to those planted on cliff ledges, although it used to be thought that this was their more natural habitat. It could be that woodsias have been clinging on in Britain in a sub-optimal habitat where plant hunters and browsers were less likely to find them, when they would have been much happier in scree if only they weren't getting picked and nibbled. In Norway, where they are more numerous, this is where they commonly grow. Monitoring the first



reintroduction has proved invaluable in deciding where to plant the 2008 reintroduction. Hopefully they will continue to do well.

Bird Report

The 'all change' theme at Grey Mare's Tail was also applicable to our nesting peregrines, or not nesting as it turned out. A male was in the usual haunts from early March, but a female didn't appear until April 12th. Brown streaking on the breast indicated that she was a first year bird. Sadly it seems that our traditional female that had nested for many years and successfully raised numerous chicks has perhaps passed away. On a positive note, the young female stayed around for the whole summer and into early winter. So, although we didn't have an active nest for the first time in many years, the signs are good for 2011.

Although there was no nest to watch and observe this year, the peregrines still provided fantastic entertainment. On one memorable morning in May, a cormorant was performing its characteristic ponderous take off flight from Loch Skeen and ascending slowly in circles around the huge corrie. A peregrine made this even more difficult for the cormorant by harassing and stooping at terrific speed past the poor bird. But despite losing height several times the cormorant

continued to try and get properly airborne. Finally though, persistent harassment exhausted it and the bird descended and finally plunged the last few feet back into Loch Skeen.



raven chicks at Grey Mare's Tail

Ravens also had mixed fortunes, one pair failing twice, firstly due to the nest being

inundated with snow and a second attempt was thwarted when a newly and hurriedly built nest collapsed. A second pair successfully fledged four chicks.

Notably, there were two ring ouzel territories, which is good news for this declining species. Other noteworthy sightings included a cuckoo on May 31st, 22 curlew flying over Loch Skeen on August 28th and approximately 50 golden plover feeding just off the summit of White Coomb on October 11th.

Although there were no other breeding raptors this year, merlin, buzzard, sparrowhawk and kestrel were all regularly seen. An osprey was also seen over Loch Skeen. Perhaps the highlight though was a first record of a short-eared owl at Grey Mare's Tail. What made this even more special was that it was during a wildflower identification guided walk. After a nice day botanising in the sunshine, the group were heading back towards Loch Skeen when two peregrines whizzed past after a fleeing pigeon. While we were pondering the fate of the pigeon, a short-eared owl leapt from the heather barely 10 metres away from us. Fantastic, it's not very often you can say that a wildflower guided walk was action packed!



female ring ouzel at Grey Mare's Tail

Icy winter



The year closed with an icy freeze over most of the country, and for the second winter in a row Grey Mare's Tail waterfall froze. It is not often that the waterfall comes into condition for ice climbing, so when it does climbers come from far and wide to bag this classic ice-route. This is not surprising when you consider that ice conditions were only good for a few days over the last

two winters, and previous to that it was the mid 1990s when it was last climbed. To see video footage of the inspiring Scottish mountaineer Jamie Andrew's

ascent of Grey Mare's Tail, visit www.jamieandrew.com and click on Grey Mare's Tail.

What's on at Grey Mare's Tail in 2011

On request from 1 April to 31 October, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

Mountain Navigation/Skills Days: *equip yourself with a range of mountain skills by joining our mountain leader qualified ranger for a full day on the hill.*

Sunday 10 April, 11:00 am – 4:00 pm

Introduction to Navigation: *get to grips with the basics of how to use a map and compass. Suitable for families (children aged 12 and over).*

Saturday 23 April, 1:00pm – 4:00pm

Flora, Fauna and Fossils: *a 2 mile wildlife ramble in the Moffat Water Valley to see the rich flora and fauna of the area, including a visit to Dob's Linn, a renowned fossil site.*

Sunday 1 May, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

Mountain Navigation: *equip yourself with a range of navigation techniques by joining a mountain leader qualified ranger for a full day on the hill.*

Saturday 25 June & Saturday 27 August, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

White Coomb and Lochcraig Head: *the route takes us past Grey Mare's Tail to Loch Skeen, then round the tops to White Coomb, the highest point in Dumfriesshire.*

Wednesday 13, 20, 27 July & 3, 10 & 17 August, 2:00pm – 3:00pm

Fossil Hunt: *visit a renowned fossil site, where we are guaranteed to find plenty of graptolite fossils.*

Sunday 24 July, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

Mountain Wildflower Identification: *for beginning and improving botanists, learn how to identify some of the wildflowers to be found at the best site for upland plants in the south of Scotland.*

Wednesday 27 July & 17 August, 12 noon – 1:00 pm

Minibeast Safari: *search for minibeasts of grassland and burn in the spectacular setting of Grey Mare's Tail.*

Sunday 7 August, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

How to Identify Ferns: *25 different species of fern and fern allies have been recorded on the reserve. During a full day on the hills, we'll see how many we can spot and find out how to identify them.*

Saturday 24 & Sunday 25 September, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm (both days)

Mountain Skills Weekend: *a fun weekend designed to introduce you to many of the skills needed to keep yourself and others safe in the mountains. Navigation (basic to advanced), basic rope work (this is not climbing), river crossings (not deep) and emergency rescue techniques will all be covered.*

Full details of all these walks and how to book are available online at www.nts.org.uk.

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The National Trust for Scotland is a national **conservation charity**, not a government agency. As such it depends on its members, currently about 310,000. The future of the natural heritage at Grey Mare's Tail, and that at all our properties, which include a total of some 74,000 hectares (183,000 acres) of countryside, depends on meeting ever-increasing financial demands. Please support our work: we depend on membership subscriptions, donations and legacies.

Join the Trust at Grey Mare's Tail and contribute directly to the management work on the Reserve.