

RSPB Scotland Abernethy Reserve

Visitor & Access Plan

DRAFT 6

for Cairngorms LOAF meeting

10 November 2021

Background & Context

This plan is linked to the **60-Year Vision for Abernethy**, an initiative which began in 2019, the 60th anniversary year of the RSPB's involvement at Loch Garten. That year, the idea was born between Nethy Bridge & Vicinity Community Council and the RSPB to work together towards a vision for Abernethy for the next 60 years, a vision shared and developed jointly by RSPB and the community.

Since March 2021, a number of community meetings have taken place, and visitor management and access were identified as one of three priorities to take forward. On 22 June 2021, the **Visitor & Access Group** was formed by 12 residents from the community who responded to calls in *The Nethy* and on the community's social media pages to get involved. RSPB's representatives on the group are Uwe Stoneman (Senior Site Manager), Sarah White (Community Ranger) and Jess Tomes (Site Manager and Visitor Operations Manager). The group is co-chaired by Uwe Stoneman and Sandy McCook (who is also Chairman of Nethy Bridge & Vicinity CC). The group has now met four times monthly now comprises 15 community members.

It was agreed at the Nethy Bridge & Vicinity Community Council meeting on 4 March 2021 to use the Scottish Land Commission's guidance on community engagement as the framework for joint working between the RSPB and the community around the 60-Year Vision, including the Visitor & Access Group.

This plan sits alongside the RSPB's 5-year reserve management plan for their Abernethy reserve and will be reviewed in 5 years. The next management plan period is due to start in April 2022.

The Visitor & Access Group and the RSPB are fully committed to meeting all legal obligations under section 3 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, promoting, and implementing the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) and are aware of the significance of Core Paths and Rights of Way.

The Visitor & Access Group recognises constraints and opportunities posed by the wider context, including Abernethy's many designations (SSSI, NNR, SPA, SAC, RAMSAR, and the Cairngorms Mountains National Scenic Area), and by Abernethy being part of Cairngorms National Park and Cairngorms Connect.

The Group also acknowledges that the RSPB's needs to adhere to its own operating framework and policies and that the RSPB must implement other plans which are already in place (e.g. its current Long-term Forest Plan for the site) and respect and honour existing agreements with third parties.

This plan refers to the RSPB Scotland's Abernethy Nature Reserve, which largely overlaps with Abernethy National Nature Reserve, but also includes Craigmore Wood, Sliemore Wood and areas of common grazing and woodland in Tulloch. It excludes Dell Wood, which is managed by Nature Scot (see appendix for map).

The final draft of this plan will undergo consultation by the wider communities of Nethy Bridge and Boat of Garten, the Cairngorms Local Access Forum, CNPA and Nature Scot. The consultation report will be included in the appendix.

Our joint vision

Over the coming 5 years, Abernethy will continue to provide an attractive alternative to other, busier parts of Cairngorms National Park, for visitors and local residents who seek tranquillity and a high-quality nature experience. The reserve will be managed in a way that benefits and supports health and wellbeing. At Abernethy, nature comes first and the local way of life is preserved and respected – a place where people and nature can thrive. Abernethy's trails and Core Paths will be well maintained and promoted as part of the wider local trail network. Some areas of the forest with sensitive habitats and species will be set aside as refuges. Many visitors will meet rangers (paid and volunteers) who will welcome them, enhance their experience, and promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Rangers will also play a key role in wildfire prevention and reduce disturbance. A higher percentage of visitors to Abernethy and local residents will visit the Loch Garten Nature Centre to learn more about Abernethy and meet the RSPB. We will have more and better facilities for people with disabilities, including a 'Changing Places' facility at Loch Garten, more accessible trails and off-road wheelchairs and scooters for hire.

Why we need a Visitor & Access Plan – Issues and Concerns

The Visitor & Access Group was formed at a time when visitor numbers increased rapidly after the covid lock-down was eased, and we noticed changes in visitor behaviours. During their first two meetings, the group identified the following issues and concerns, some are related to recent changes, some are not.

Impact of an increasing number of visitors (local, national and international) on wildlife and habitats, through **irresponsible behaviour** (wittingly and unwittingly) and the **cumulative impact of responsible behaviours**, including an increase in traffic in the forest.

Need to better promote increase awareness of SOAC. In our experience, not all visitors to Abernethy are aware of SOAC or understand the concept of responsible access or how they apply to nature reserves. Over the last two summers, we have seen that increased ranger cover helps to promote SOAC and that most visitors appreciate being informed how they can take responsible access.

New behaviours – New technology and trends changes what visitors do, which can pose challenges for land managers and people who live in the area.

Challenge to welcome and communicate with a wide range of different audiences and to understand what they need and want.

Social media are increasingly used and trusted by visitors, making it more **difficult for us to communicate with visitors** and influence their behaviours on site. Social media can sometimes spread **inaccurate information** about the area.

Available resources – the RSPB's Abernethy reserve covers 14,000ha. As visitor numbers and associated pressures increase, we expect that more and more resources will be needed to welcome and manage visitors over this vast area.

Potential conflicts – Abernethy is a nature reserve, which means that nature comes first – but we also want to welcome people and give them a chance to connect to nature and enjoy it. Visiting a nature reserve can have impacts on nature, the local way of life and on other visitors. Visitors are important for the local economy and access to nature is critical for local nature-guides and businesses. To balance these aspects is difficult and we must accept that there may be occasional conflicts of interest. We hope this plan can help to manage them.

Aims and Objectives of the Visitor & Access Plan

The Visitor & Access Group has agreed that the below listed aims and objectives will guide the management of the site and how we react to new challenges and opportunities for the duration of this plan.

Nature comes first (sometimes expressed as 'Primacy of Nature') – Abernethy is a National Nature Reserve which has national and international designations for its habitats and species – 20% of which are classed as rare or scarce. With regards to visitors & access, we will increase public awareness about the importance of Abernethy for nature and people and about RSPB's conservation work here. RSPB will continue its current strategy to promote Loch Garten and its Nature Centre as a quiet enjoyment destination, and not promote the rest of the reserve. We will encourage those who visit other parts of Abernethy to treat it as a place of quiet enjoyment and respect their surroundings.

Visitors will feel welcome - we will assume positive intent in our visitors and treat them as welcome guests, potential allies, and supporters. We will help them have a high-quality experience and help them to take responsible access and manage their impact on nature and the community well. We are committed to taking an approach to communication and signage that is respectful, friendly, and positive. We will only change this approach if we have evidence that it is not working.

High-quality and appropriate visitor experience - the Nature Centre and surrounding trails offer a rare opportunity for an increasingly nature-disconnected public to experience nature in a 'safe' environment, and we will strive to maintain an excellent visitor experience there. Elsewhere, we will ensure visitor facilities, including the strategic path network, are in-keeping with the location / habitat and appropriate to the purpose – maximising visitor experience and minimising impact on the habitats and wildlife.

Respect for the local way of life - we recognise that the cultural heritage and character of the area, including its residents, are an asset which should be respected, and residents' privacy considered, when visitor access and facilities are planned.

Provide for visitors of all abilities – we will strive to ensure Abernethy is as accessible for all users as is practicable and we will embrace and positively encourage visitors from under-represented groups, particularly to the Nature Centre, where they will receive a high-quality experience in nature.

Projects planned, for which all or most funding is already in place

- Project at Loch Garten Nature Centre to instal running water, water treatment, better toilet facilities when the centre is open and a 'Changing Places' facility for disabled adults and children who depend on such a facility for a day out in nature. The project also includes three double charging stations for electric vehicles, to facilitate green transport. NOTE: The RSPB hopes to complete this project by March 2023.
- Reduce vehicle access to Forest Lodge, before it becomes unmanageable. Increasing numbers of vehicles bring more and more people into the core forest, which is a key sanctuary for some of Scotland's last remaining capercaillie. We will continue to welcome responsible non-motorised access under SOAC. NOTE: In the first instance, we hope to achieve this by placing an unlocked gate at the start of the access track, which we hope will reduce the number of vehicles using the track. We will monitor and add signage if necessary. Closing the track to unauthorised vehicles will only be considered as the last resort. The track is owned and maintained by the RSPB, and is currently used by vehicles at the at the RSPB's permission as the landowner. (see map in appendix)
- Work with the community to establish and train a volunteer ranger team to help RSPB staff to patrol hotspots and carry out occasional patrols on the wider reserve.
- Scope out a possible realignment of a section of Speyside Way between Nethy Bridge and the road to Loch Garten, which is on RSPB land to create a larger unfragmented area for wildlife, including capercaillie, and to improve visitor experience and accessibility along this stretch. (see map in appendix)
- Sensitively promote the Loch Garten Nature Centre as a quiet enjoyment visitor destination. Since a peak of 90,000 in 1977 (including many bus tours), the number of visits to the centre declined to 70,000 in 1988, then 40,000 in 2009 and 18,000 in 2019. The RSPB's would like a larger proportion of the current 100,000 annual visits to the Abernethy reserve and local residents to visit the Nature Centre. Our aim is to gradually build visitor numbers back up towards 30-35,000 over the next 5 years. We hope this will be helped by current and recent investments (including funds from the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF) and the name change from *Osprey Centre* to the more inclusive and holistic *Nature Centre*. Visitors to the centre are an important income stream for the RSPB at Abernethy, they secure local jobs

and support the wider economy. Visits to the centre also enable us to promote SOAC and responsible access.

- Reinststate a redundant forest track at Clais an Eich back to viable habitat and allow natural regeneration. The Track is a dead-end and is only very rarely used by visitors. Once reinstated, the track will be assessed on a regular basis for any significant health and safety issues. This will have conservation benefits and will allow RSPB to focus resources on maintaining Core Paths and other popular trails and increasing accessibility elsewhere. (see map in appendix)
- Reinststate unofficially created informal lay-bys, parking areas, where these have a negative conservation impact, e.g. on tree roots, or where they carry a safety risk for other road users. NOTE: only limited funds are currently available.

Aspirational projects depending on additional funding and resources

- Employ at least two seasonal rangers to patrol 'visitor hotspots' (Loch Garten/Loch Mallachie, Tulloch, Core Paths, Ryvoan) to promote SOAC and help visitors to responsibly access and enjoy the reserve and to improve their experience.
- Employ at least one seasonal ranger to patrol busy and fragile areas on the high ground (incl. Loch Avon, Ben Macdui, Cairngorm, Bynack), monitor disturbance and impact, and raise awareness of responsible access, adding to visitors' experience and liaise with neighbours and stakeholders to participate in a partnership approach where possible.
- Implement a rolling programme to update, maintain and improve interpretation and information panels and visitor infrastructure.
- Replace and upgrade the existing people counters (12 in number) with more sophisticated models which can distinguish between walkers and bikes and ideally automatically download data. Review counter locations and identify new/additional count points, as the use of the site by visitors changes.
- Provide a short (say 500 metres) all access circular board-walk route over a section of bog woodland as part of the visitor experience at the Loch Garten Nature Centre.
- Upgrade the Two Lochs/Big Pines Trail to be all-abilities and suitable for use by wheelchairs and powered wheelchairs.

- Provide for hire and maintain at least one off-road mobility scooter and one all-terrain transit wheelchair and install a storage, charging and maintenance facility at Loch Garten Nature Centre.
- Ensure suitable woodland trails are maintained (and if necessary upgraded) to a standard which allows access for all.
- If a practical, reasonable and fundable option to realign the Speyside Way (see above) is found and supported by statutory and stakeholder/community consultation, work with the community to raise funds to realize it.
- Increase public awareness among road users that they are entering a special place, by placing welcome signs at the two points where roads enter Abernethy NNR.
- Produce a partnership leaflet to promote the combined trail network of Dell Wood, Explore Abernethy, Speyside Way and RSPB reserve trails (Two Lochs Trail, Big Pines Trail, Nethy Bridge to Ryvoan Core Path) and improve the signage on these routes.
- Provide more seasonally changing information about important wildlife and RSPB management.
- Involve the community in interpreting some of the cultural history, such as old farmsteads, past forest management and floating dams.

Glossary:

RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

CC – Community Council

SOAC- Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Designations - legal protections applying to land and features depending on it

SSSI – Site of Special Scientific Interest

NNR – National Nature Reserve

SPA – Special Protection Area (protecting birds)

SAC – Special Area of Conservation (protecting features other than birds)

RAMSAR – (not an acronym) wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention

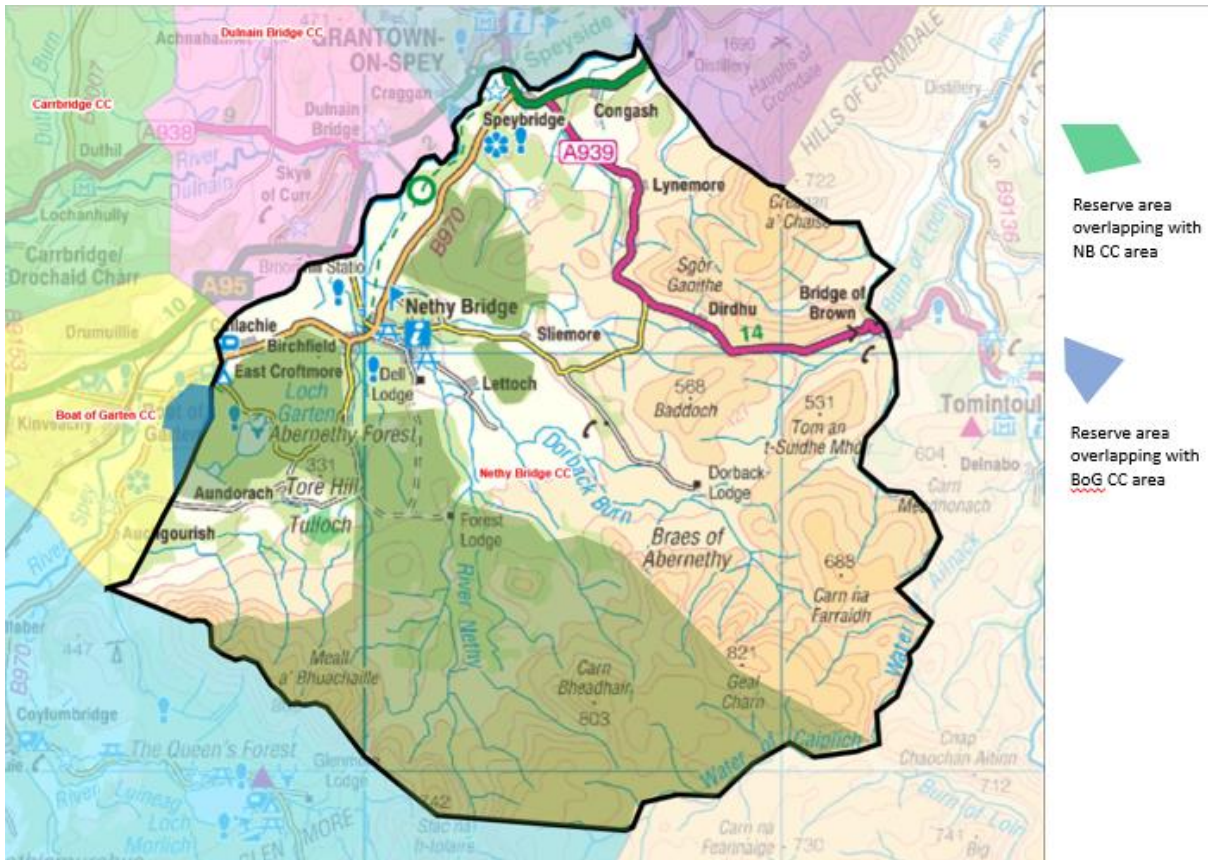
CNPA – Cairngorms National Park Authority

Appendix

Map of the RSPB reserve area in relation to the NNR area



Map showing the overlap of the RSPB reserve area with Nethy Bridge and Boat of Garten CC areas (indicative only)



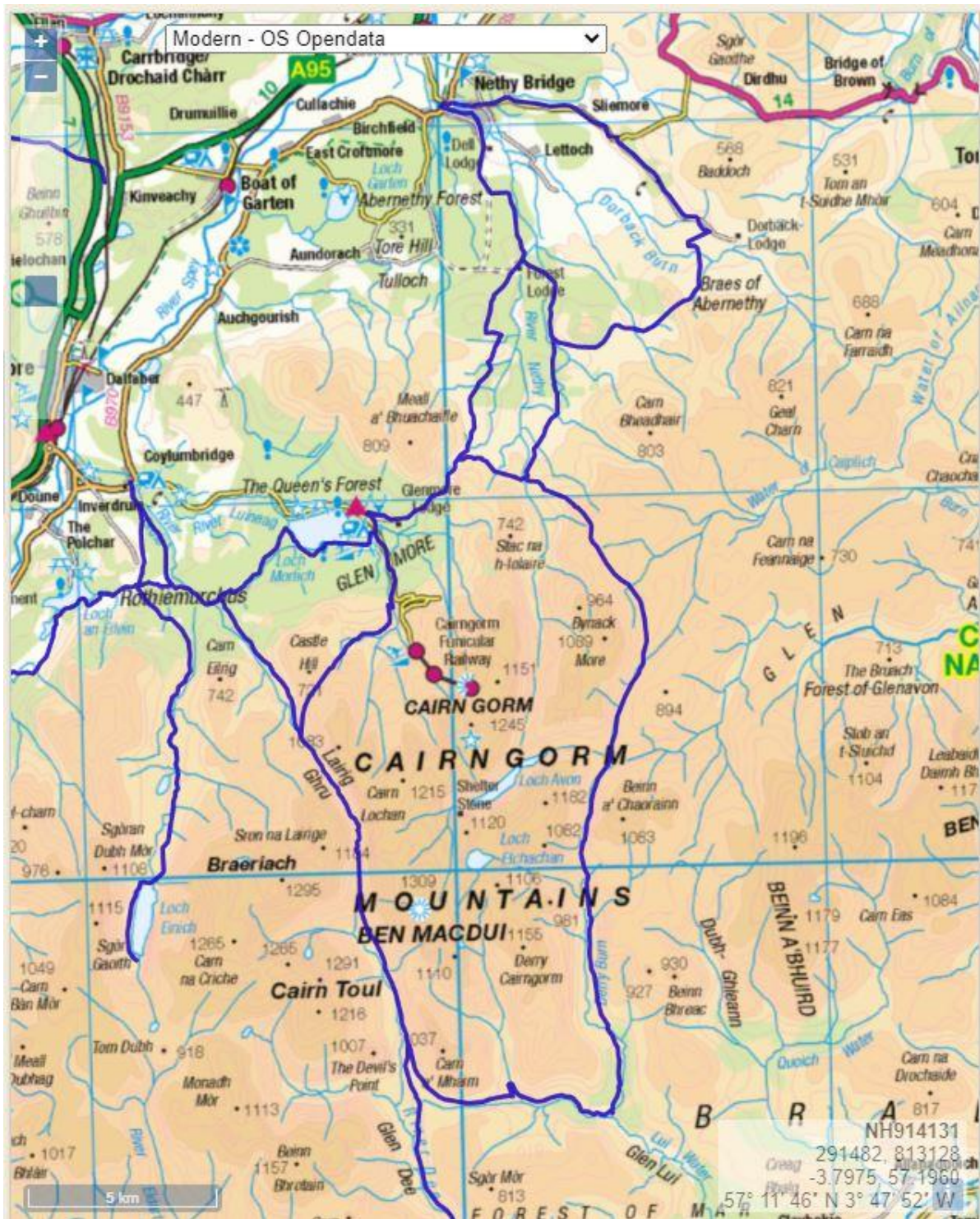
Screengrab of Core Paths on the reserve from <https://www.nature.scot/enjoying-outdoors/routes-explore/local-path-networks>



Core Paths in Scotland

Paths shown as blue lines, provided by SpatialHub, copyright: One Scotland Mapping Agreement (OSMA))
Background map: OpenStreetMap.org

Screengrab of Rights of Way on the reserve from <http://www.heritagepaths.co.uk/>



Map showing the section of the Speyside Way which we would like to realign (blue line between A and B) and an indicative possible option for a realigned route (dashed red line)

Map of core paths in Scotland

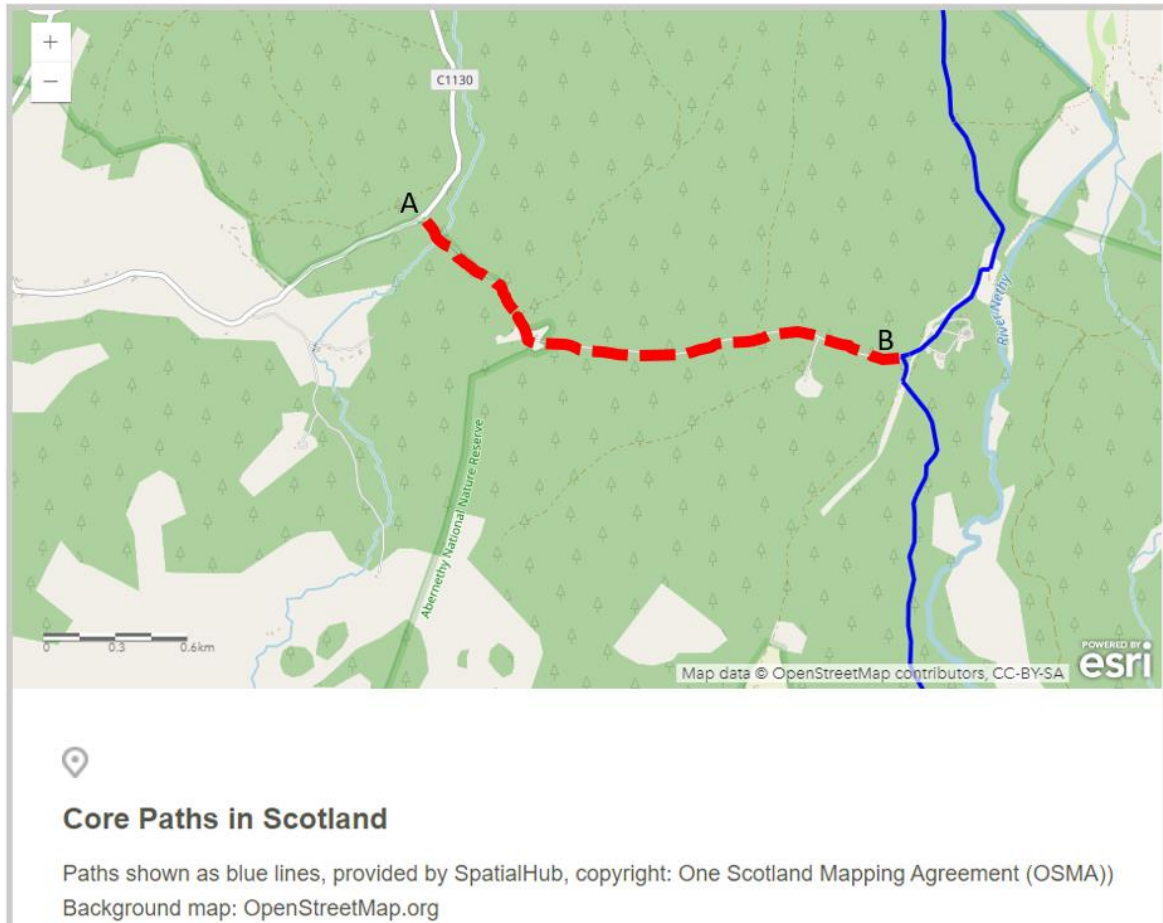


Core Paths in Scotland

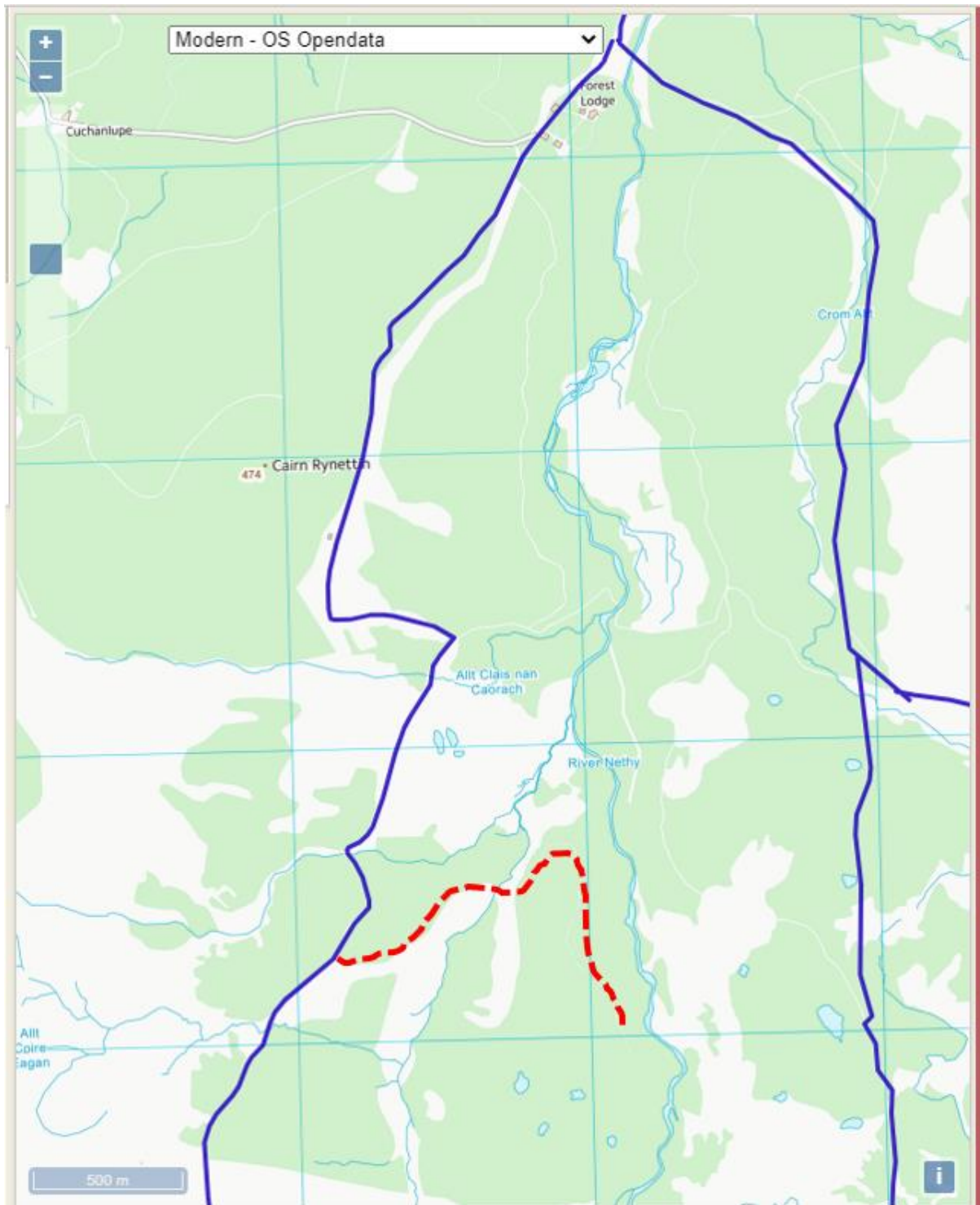
Paths shown as blue lines, provided by SpatialHub, copyright: One Scotland Mapping Agreement (OSMA)
Background map: OpenStreetMap.org

Map showing the Forest Lodge access track (dashed red line from the road at point A to where it meets the core path at point B near Forest Lodge)

Map of core paths in Scotland



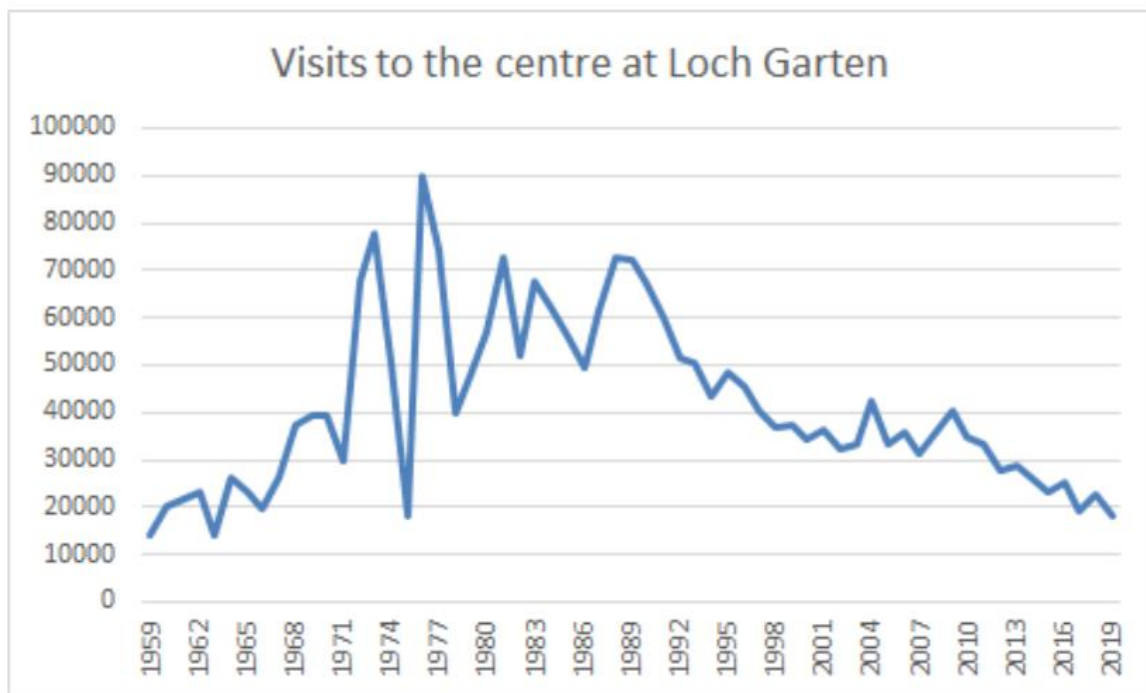
Map showing the Clais an Eich track to be reinstated to viable habitat (red dashed line) – blue lines showing rights of way



Map of other points of interest (e.g. location of welcome signs by the road)
(still to be compiled)

Graph of Visitor figures for Loch Garten Osprey/Nature Centre

Visitor numbers to the centre at Loch Garten 1959 - 2019



END

Uwe Stoneman 29-10-2021