winter 2026

cairn

The magazine of the Cairngorms National Park



Looking ahead

Bold ambitions for the National Park's future

Inside

Wildfire focus
Stories of recovery and resilience

Rural life
School kids down on the farm

Do you have a question about something in the National Park?

Go to **cairngorms.co.uk/directory** or scan the **QR code** for our contacts list to find the correct person or organisation for support.

Get on board!

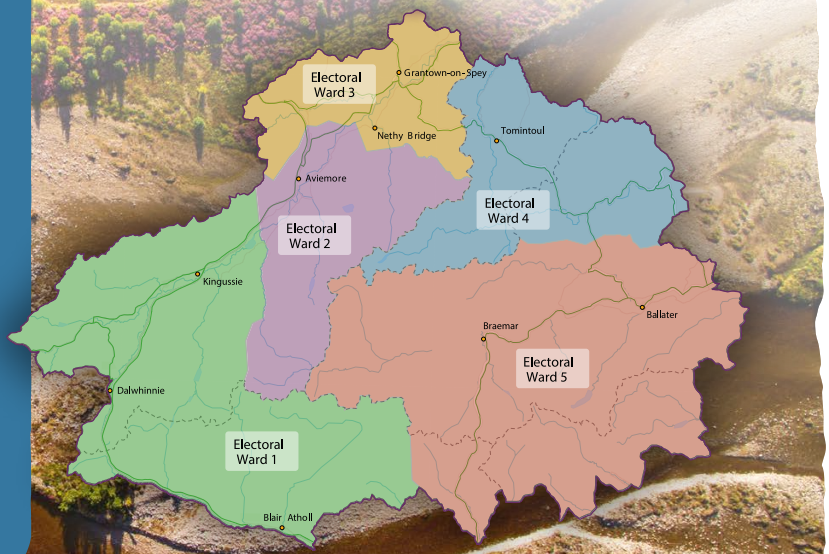
Could you help guide our work in the National Park?

Five of our board members are directly elected by the public – and we're seeking people from a wide range of backgrounds to stand for election in 2027.

- It's a paid position that involves working two to three days a month
- You have from **22 January to 18 February** to submit your paperwork
- Elections are on **25 March**

Find out more at **cairngorms.co.uk/elections**

Cairngorms National Park Authority
Ùghdarras Pàirc Nàiseanta a' Mhonaidh Ruaidh



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Let us know what you think about this issue of *Cairn*: call **01479 873 535** or email **haveyoursay@cairngorms.co.uk**

This document is available in other formats on request.

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Front cover image: Autumnal aerial view along upper Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park © Peter Cairns / scotlandbigpicture.com. **Other images** © Adam Alexander, Angus Trinder, Brian Goldie, Bumblebee Conservation, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Catriona Parmenter Photography, Charlotte Milburn, Colin McClean, Delbog Croft, Ewan Weston, Grantown Museum, Heidi Stuart, Jacki Munro, James Shooter, Jess Tomes, Jodie Hagan, Kelli Tungay / unsplash.com, Lara / Cairngorms Pride, Louise Took, Malcolm Smith, Marie T Smith, Mark Craig, Nick Baker, Pete Short, Ronan Dugan / WildLand, Rupert Shanks, Sara Denner.

Highlights



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Byelaw round-up

Fàilte / Welcome

Welcome to the winter edition of *Cairn*, a magazine which has been created for all the folk who live and work in the National Park.

As 2026 draws to a close, it's a good moment to pause and reflect. It's been a busy year in the National Park, with challenges along the way; the wildfire in Glenmore and Strath Nethy is still fresh in many people's minds.



We saw a heroic effort to tackle the wildfire, backed up by community members who rallied to provide support. Throughout this magazine, you'll see reflections from people who were involved in different ways. Our Head of Land Management Colin McClean, one of many volunteers on the frontline, kicks this off on page five.

We remain incredibly grateful for the contribution of all those who worked tirelessly to protect this special place. It is that same spirit we take forward as we rise to the climate challenges ahead.

And that's a key focus of our next National Park Partnership Plan, which we're gathering views on this winter. Read on for more about our ambitions for the next five years.



Grant Moir, Chief Executive (left), and **Sandy Bremner**, Convener, Cairngorms National Park Authority



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Regal rock



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Caper progress



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Wildfire weapon

Quick wins, big impact

The new Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund is live – and already benefitting projects across the National Park.

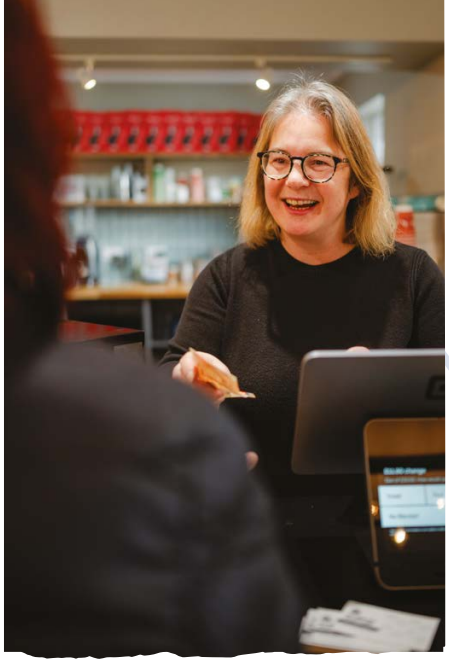
Among the first to receive funding were planting initiatives in Kingussie, a community fruit growing project at Broughdearg Farm in Glenshee and a nature friendly grazing and climate resilience project in Glen Clova.

The small grants pot (£500-£5,000) is open on a rolling basis, in order to offer 'quick wins' for projects that can deliver practical benefits for people, nature and the climate.

The entire fund was designed by a panel with a range of backgrounds and experiences. They recommended that a smaller paid forum be set up to make decisions on medium and large grants of up to £100,000 at select times over the next two years. The new forum is now in place – find out more about its members and what comes next by scanning the **QR code**.

Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund

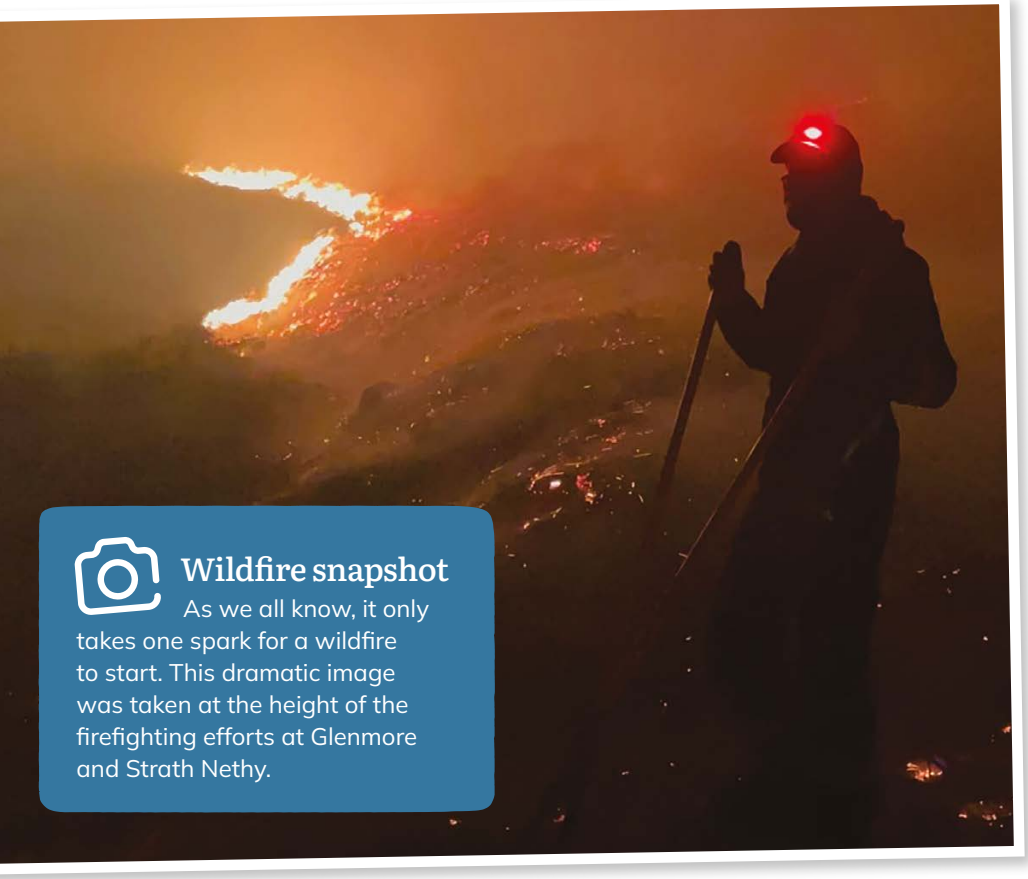
Taing dhan | Made possible with A' Mhaoin-Dualchais Heritage Fund



Boosting business

It's been a tough time for businesses affected by this summer's wildfire at Glenmore and Strath Nethy.

As the entire community rallied to support them, the Scottish Government's announcement of a £3 million fund for affected businesses was welcome. So far, hundreds of thousands of pounds have been distributed from the Cairngorms Fire Recovery Fund, administered by The Highland Council. The Park Authority is also funding a visitor campaign, working closely with partners including VisitCairngorms and VisitScotland as part of coordinated efforts to encourage people back to the area. After all, the autumn and winter months are some of the most magical to visit the Cairngorms National Park!



Wildfire snapshot
As we all know, it only takes one spark for a wildfire to start. This dramatic image was taken at the height of the firefighting efforts at Glenmore and Strath Nethy.



"There were many days when the fire was too intense to fight and all we could do was box it in with bulldozers. But one day we could fight it really stands out for me, when 60 of us piled into Abernethy Forest with 17 vehicles. Farmers hauled water for grouse keepers, RSPB staff, estates, machinery contractors and NatureScot teams who fought the fire with real determination. Land management differences were put aside and folk worked together with good craic abounding. We put out kilometres of fire line that day – although the fire did fight back. It was a fantastic community effort which everyone can be proud of."

Colin McClean,
Head of Land Management,
Park Authority

Byelaw in numbers

The first season of our new byelaw, banning fires and barbecues across the National Park, concluded in September.

Rangers went out on more than 1400 patrols throughout the spring and summer, engaging with people enjoying the countryside. And the figures for this year are encouraging. A total of 34 active fires were recorded in the 2026 patrol season; that's almost a third of what was reported last year (98). That compares with 191 in 2024 and 168 in 2023. Obviously we want to bring that number down even further; the byelaw is designed to be a deterrent with enforcement a last resort. This was well illustrated by the fact the vast majority of people spoken to by rangers extinguished their fire or barbecue when asked. However, two parties were reported to the Procurator Fiscal after refusing to comply. We'll reflect and learn from the first year as we begin preparations for the 2027 season.



Getting creative

People have been expressing their connection to the National Park at a range of workshops offered by the Cairngorms Creative Collective this autumn.

From making natural inks in Glen Esk and leather-working in Glenlivet, to willow weaving in Dinnet and poetry writing at Loch Insh, there was something for everyone. The workshops, part of the Cairngorms 2030 programme, drew inspiration from the nature, heritage and culture of this special landscape.





In the spotlight

Hands-on fieldtrips and thought-provoking workshops were on a packed programme for the UK National Parks Conference in Aviemore.

The event was attended by 200 delegates from all 15 UK National Parks and other conservation and community experts. Highlights included a trip to a peatland site and a canoe journey on the River Spey to observe beaver habitats.



On your bike

Every pupil at Strathdon Primary got involved in a weekly bike bus – a group of children and adults cycling to school together – over the summer. With help from our project partners, bike buses are also operating in areas including Aviemore, Nethy Bridge, and Ballater. It's hoped that other communities will be inspired to follow suit.

Route ahead

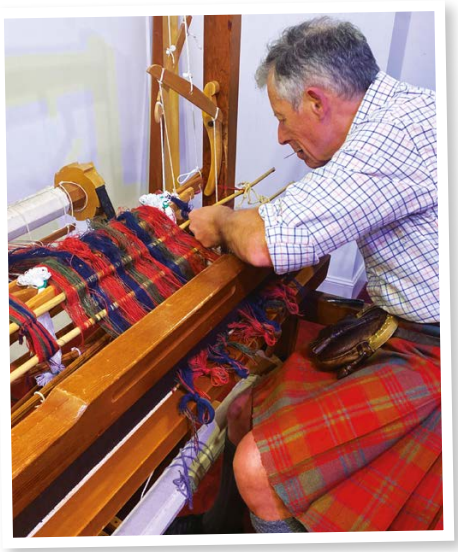
A segregated active travel path from Aviemore to Carrbridge has been given the green light. The nine-kilometre route will be delivered by Transport Scotland as part of the A9 dualling project. It's a boost for people who want to travel safely and leave the car at home.





A whittle day out

In early autumn the Anagach Woods Trust hosted a spoon whittling workshop for the local LGBTQ+ community, the latest in a series of events powered by Cairngorms Pride. From logs to usable utensils, participants learned new skills and about the work the Trust does for nature and people alike.



Funds on offer

A wide range of funding is available from the Park Authority and the Cairngorms Trust to help deliver our vision of a National Park where people and nature thrive together.

From cultural heritage to youth work, a variety of funding pots are available. Fill out our online form and we'll be in touch to chat it through. Scan the **QR code** for more info.



"At the height of it I think we were feeding 500 people, with 70 volunteers. It's been truly overwhelming. What a village, I think we have done amazing and everyone should be really proud."

Heidi Stuart,
Community food co-ordinator



Royal rock reveal

His Majesty The King recently visited Lochan Uaine to unveil a commemorative stone and meet junior rangers and members of the community who were affected by the wildfire.

The visit acknowledged a new twinning relationship between the Cairngorms and Shenandoah National Park in Virginia in the United States. More than 250 million years ago, the mountains of Scotland and Appalachia were part of the same ancient mountain range, before geological change separated them across the Atlantic.

Shaping the future of the Cairngorms National Park





From pioneering conservation work to inspirational community projects, we've achieved a great deal since the Cairngorms National Park was established almost 25 years ago. None of that could have been done without a mammoth team effort.

Behind the scenes is a five-year plan which guides the work of the Park Authority and our partners. At its heart is a long-term vision to ensure the National Park is a place where nature and people thrive together.

As we reflect on the progress of the 2022-27 plan, we have drafted the next: our most ambitious yet. We're now gathering your feedback at community events and online. Hard copies are also available at public libraries and our offices in Grantown-on-Spey and Ballater.

"We are proud to be a place for innovation, trialling new ways of meeting the key challenges of our time," explains Grant Moir, Chief Executive of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

"This Partnership Plan makes a case for the changes that will have the biggest positive effect on the National Park. It affects us all – so we are keen to hear your views as we shape our collective priorities for the next five years."

The Park Authority is responsible for co-ordinating the Plan's delivery and has a statutory duty to put it into action alongside other public bodies and Scottish Ministers.

The 2027-32 Plan is broken into three missions. There is, of course, crossover between these themes, but here's a flavour of each.

Nature and climate resilience

We are facing many challenges in a changing climate, with increased risks of wildfires and flooding and the threats posed to precious habitats. This Plan sets out ambitious steps to make our land more resilient, while protecting the businesses who are sustained by it.







This mission covers some massive pieces of work: upland management; sustainable farming; catchment resilience; landscape-scale restoration; species recovery and climate mitigation.

There are big targets around native woodland expansion, peatland and river restoration – as well as action on key species. These will be backed up by new approaches to long term management agreements and support.

Communities

We want our communities to be vibrant places where people and businesses thrive. That means a focus on affordable housing, community development, business and enterprise, transport and cultural heritage.

While there has been progress with affordable housing developments and short term let controls, the Plan calls for more action to help people get on the housing ladder. By 2030, we want three-quarters of new housing to be for social or mid-market rent, or other affordable categories.

The Plan also sets out the importance of boosting the value of tourism to the economy and communities particularly in autumn, winter and spring. There's also a commitment to develop skills and training for new entrants to land-based businesses.

National Park for all

Though the benefits of connecting to nature and the outdoors are well known, access to these is not yet equal and many face barriers in participation. We want to continue our work to make the National Park a place where everyone is and feels safe and welcome.

To strike a balance between tourism impacts and protecting the natural environment, we want to improve our network of paths and trails, invest in accessible facilities and create more opportunities for volunteering and outdoor learning. We're also aiming to recruit at least 200 volunteer rangers to help look after the National Park by 2030.

We're keen to build on innovative Cairngorms 2030 green health projects: the Outdoor Brain Health and Dementia Resource Centre and green prescriptions.



"We are proud to be a place for innovation, trialling new ways of meeting the key challenges of our time."

Grant Moir,
Chief Executive, Cairngorms National Park Authority

Partnership Plan 2022-27 highlights

7,369ha
peatland restored

8,931
interactions with school pupils and junior rangers

£2.5m
conservation investment from Nature Restoration Fund

159
affordable houses built

90km+
rivers restored

Our consultation on the draft Plan runs until 13 January. Scan the **QR code** to read it in full and give us your thoughts: **cairngorms.co.uk/partnershipplan**

Musselling in

Freshwater pearl mussels are fascinating. They filter more water every day than we use in an average shower, helping to keep our rivers clean for salmon, trout and other wildlife.

And their survival depends on a unique bond with these fish. Tiny mussel larvae, called glochidia, attach to their gills to hitch a ride upstream, before dropping off to settle and grow in the riverbed.

A new project between the Park Authority, Spey Fishery Board and NatureScot is helping mussels return to tributaries. At just the right time, glochidia are carefully collected from female mussels and introduced to young salmon and trout. Once the larvae have attached, the fish are released into the Spey tributaries to swim about with their tiny passengers.

As they establish, the mussels will help keep more of the Spey catchment clean and healthy. Spreading the population will also help this endangered species cope with our changing climate, including low water levels that can leave mussels stranded and floods that can disturb the riverbed and wash them away.



Far bee it

The moss carder is one of our most threatened bumblebees, with only one recorded in the National Park in the last five years.

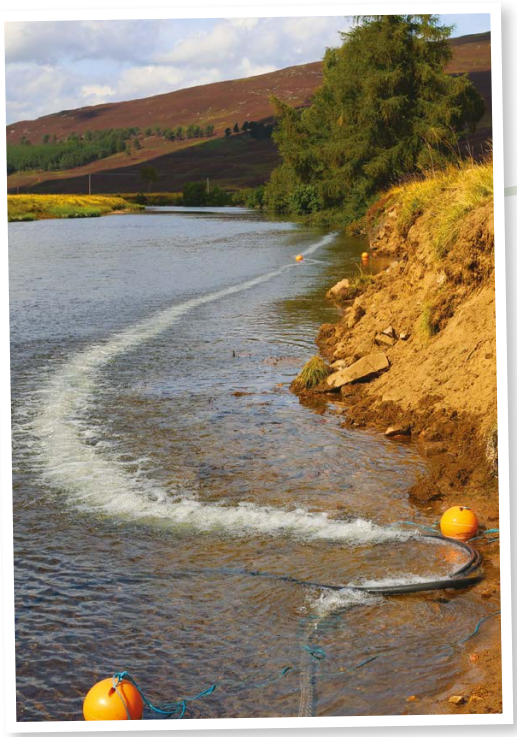
That was until this summer, when BeeWalker Jos spotted one in Deeside. BeeWalkers are volunteers who monitor bumblebee populations on specific routes, providing vital data to help steer conservation efforts. The moss carder discovery was the highlight of the year.



Royal cohabit-ants

A rare queen has been found on Balmoral estate – good news for the Cairngorms Ant Project.

The narrow-headed ant is one of the rarest ants in the UK, only known to survive in a few places, so a colony in a new location is a milestone for their recovery. It's hoped it will help to re-establish the species in Deeside.



Blowing bubbles

Our Upper Dee restoration project was in full flow earlier this autumn, with novel techniques being used to protect the river's wildlife.

Man-made rock armour was removed from the sides of the Dee to let it flow more naturally, but this can release silt into the water. To stop it going further into the river and affecting fish habitat, a 'bubble curtain' was created by a pipe on the riverbed attached to an air compressor. The bubbles created lines of turbulence which held the silt back.

Caper focus

Work to help capercaillie is stepping up this winter with a further £500,000 investment from the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund.

The funding is a boost for local contractors – they're robocutting dense heather to improve forest habitat and removing deer fences that are a collision risk to capercaillie. Meanwhile, farmers are grazing cattle in woodland, improving over 6,000 hectares of capercaillie habitat.

Martin Mackenzie, a farmer from Boat of Garten, recently joined the Park Authority to help develop woodland grazing further – and while capercaillie are the focus, other wildlife will benefit too. Areas being targeted for robocutting and grazing are already showing positive results for insects, birds, fungi, lichens and plants such as twinflower. These approaches are helping create healthier, more varied woodlands, and breaking up dense vegetation can also help make our forests more resilient to wildfire.



"The hardest thing as a tourism business which normally would have been welcoming hundreds of happy visitors a day, was the feeling of uncertainty. The best feeling when we were given the okay to re-open, was how much support we had from all our wonderful guests. We are so thankful for all the brilliant fire fighters and volunteers who managed to bring the fire under control and save Glenmore Forest Park."

Brian Goldie,
Glenmore Campsite





Seeing double

It's been an unprecedented year for golden eagle twins hatching in the Cairngorms.

Four sets have been satellite tagged as part of the Cairngorms Raptor Project, including two on East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership estates.

Tagging allows us to track where the young eagles travel to and spend their time. Over winter, one of last year's tagged chicks flew almost 50km south-east and then more than 120km to the west of its fledging site. Whereas another chick was more of a 'home bird' – never venturing further than 30 km. We'll be keeping a close eye on all the twins as they start adult life and will let you know how they get on.

The project has also been busy counting the merlin population in the National Park. The numbers will be crunched over the winter to help us plan conservation efforts.

Peatland with altitude

Our 'peatland laboratory' is not just for scientists! The site, in a high-altitude area of Donside, is being used to trial and monitor peatland restoration techniques.

Following an initial phase of work in 2024, the 'lab' is being used by the Park Authority peatland team to train land managers and contractors.

Now volunteers have been getting the chance to visit, learning all about peatland restoration, trialling hand labour techniques and monitoring progress. From removing old fences and building dams to setting up trail cameras and surveying species, it's been an incredible opportunity for people to get involved in restoring this important habitat and making a direct difference in tackling climate change.

Volunteering sessions are being delivered through Cairngorms Peatland ACTION and are also part of the Cairngorms National Park Authority's Cairngorms 2030 programme, made possible by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.



Sucker punch

It's been a bumper year for aspen, with many trees producing seeds as a stress response to the drought last summer.

In normal years aspen clone themselves by putting out suckers, but seeds produce a more genetically diverse and resilient tree. Following a public appeal to map out catkins, enough seeds have been collected to generate over 25,000 trees in the coming years.

Around 4,500 seedlings have been put into individual nursery trays so far. These are growing into healthy young saplings and should be ready to be planted out across the National Park this season. The remaining seeds are being frozen and should remain viable for several years. Thanks to everyone who reported sightings earlier in the year.



Crofters join project

Emily, pictured, and Malcolm Grant were farming in Perthshire before taking on Delbog near Nethy Bridge, not far from Malcolm's roots in Laggan.

As the Cairngorms 2030 future farming project's first croft, they are using scenario modelling to help decide how best to use their in-bye and common grazings, the stock numbers it can support and when best to calve and sell. The support package, still open to farmers and crofters, helps identify sustainable, cost effective options.

Scan the **QR code** or go to **cairngorms.co.uk/our-work/scenario-modelling-support-package** for more info.

Future farmers

Calving and milking cows were on the timetable for pupils visiting Auchernack Farm in Strathspey for the latest Food, Farming and Countryside Day.

Children found out more about how our food goes from farm to fork and learned about how big machines and tiny beasties work the soil in their own way. Organised by the Royal Highland Education Trust, more than 100 pupils got involved, even making their own burgers for lunch!





Pockets of hope

The devastating fires of the summer are over, and the work to assess the impact is well underway.

The Park Authority team is heavily involved in monitoring efforts, using a thermal drone to assess the area. Across the scorched landscape, pockets of natural resilience – including burns, functioning peatlands and damp, boggier ground that has been grazed – can be seen.



"When we were evacuated from Forest Lodge, I felt compelled to place my hands on the Victorian timbers and plead under my breath 'please be OK', before we drove away. I felt like I was in a disaster movie and I'll never forget it."

Jess Tomes,
RSPB Scotland

In conversation with Duncan Grant



Duncan Grant runs a forestry and agricultural plant contracting business, Duncan G Grant Ltd, from the family working croft, Auchlean at Feshiebridge. Duncan modified a large-tracked dumper truck from his own fleet into a customised wildfire-fighting unit, part-funded by the Climate Adaptation Fund.

Why did you come up with the idea of adapting the tracked dumper truck to tackle wildfires?

The idea grew from my own experiences at wildfire incidents. All terrain vehicles (ATVs) can reach difficult ground during wildfires, but the volume of water they can carry is limited. Crews need to make repeated journeys to refill from water sources that can be a considerable distance away. When every minute matters, those round trips can affect efforts to bring a fire under control.

The potential of a different approach became clear to me during the fire at Dava Moor in 2025. We used a Morooka tracked dumper truck to follow ATVs near the fire front, replenishing their water supplies in under five minutes. Without it, they faced a 90-minute round trip. The system fitted to the dumper truck was fairly simple, but its performance proved the concept and inspired me to go on and develop a purpose-built firefighting unit.

How was the vehicle modified?

Working with Evan's Engineering and Fire Fogging Systems Ltd, we modified the truck to make it safer and overall, more efficient in wildfire situations. It now features two fogging pumps, twin hose reels, a high-volume pump for filling and discharging water and a 4,200 litre water tank. It also has safety railings and access steps, improved lighting, cameras and a protective ring of high-pressure jets to suppress fire around the undercarriage to safeguard the vehicle in hazardous conditions.

We put the system to work for three weeks at the Glenmore and Strath Nethy fire. Initially, my crews used the twin fogging pumps at the fire front while also transferring water to estate ATVs. We also tackled flare-ups and back-burning areas. Large volumes of water had to be driven deep into the peat before the surface was flooded using the high-volume pump.

“It was a test of willpower and an emotional rollercoaster as there were many areas that we thought we had extinguished but within several hours would reignite. At the time, it felt like it would never come to an end, but slowly the tide turned in our favour and the battle was won!”

Duncan Grant
Plant contractor

Read more on **page 15** and for the full story, go to our **website**







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