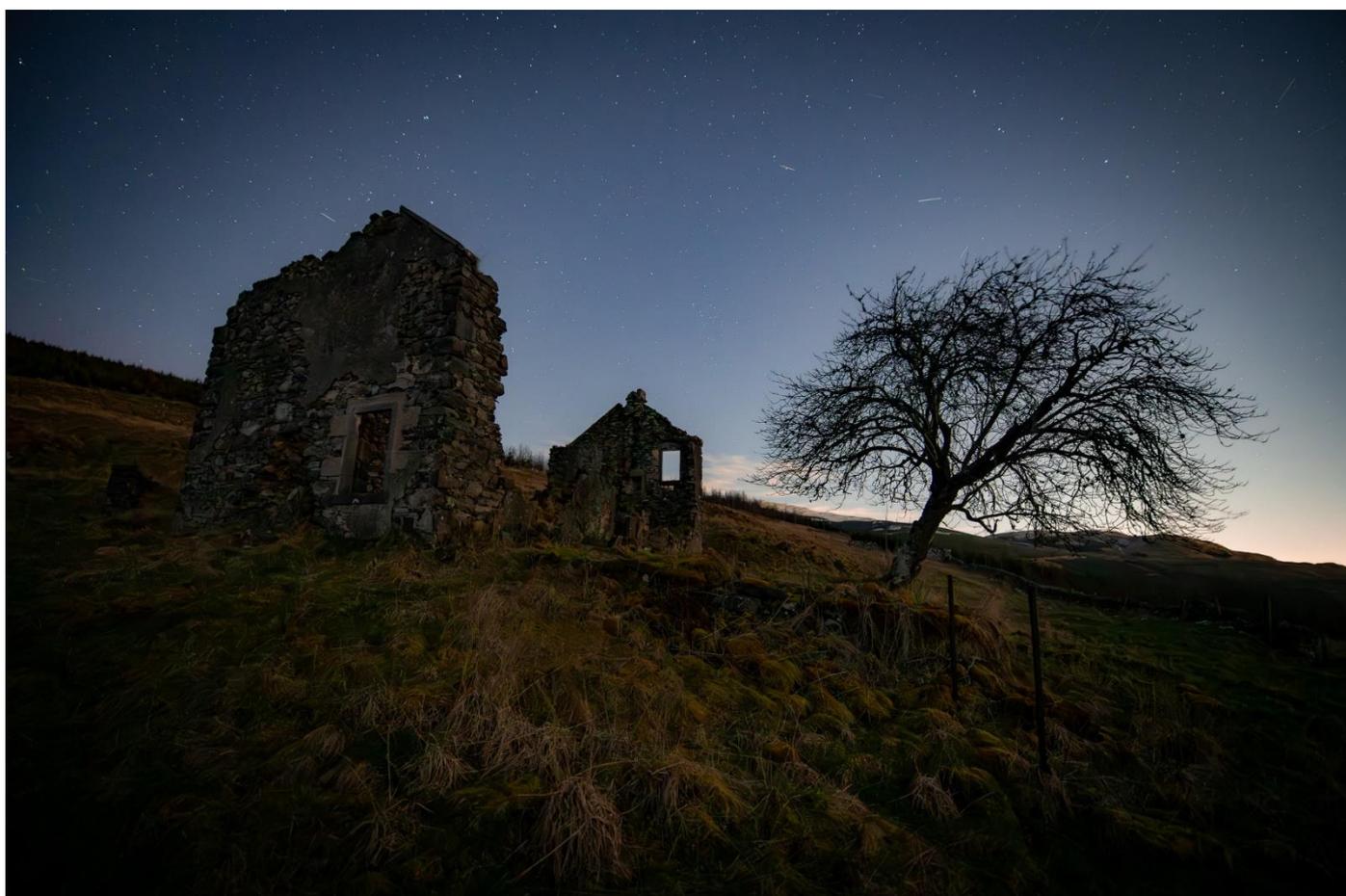


Friends of the **Ochils**

March 2024 Newsletter



Editors' foreword *by Chris Bowness*

We are glad to present another edition of the Friends of the Ochils (FoTO) Newsletter. I am, as always very grateful to those who have contributed articles.

There has been a lot of activity this year which has kept the committee busy. With all that's going on, any assistance offered from member and non-members is much appreciated.

I have added this edition a "Latest Developments" page. This is so that members can see what is going on with proposals and applications to transform parts of our local hills from their present state.

Change of course isn't always a bad thing, but a lot is at stake, both for the inhabitants of the various habitats affected and for those like me, who like to wander the hill and enjoy the solitude and scenery that could be degraded without care.

Of course, there are many reasons and arguments for and against these changes. FoTO must navigate what are complex arguments in dealing with these matters.

Stuart Dean, the Chairman of FoTO, has contributed an article about the challenges of the current wind farm proposals that are being made across the Ochil Hills

Julie Wilson from Edinburgh University, kindly presents in the next article, information about the plans and progress of their Drumbrae project on the western side of Dumyat.

Matt Aitkenhead, of the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen, helpfully describes the mix of soils around the Ochil Hills.

I then share a short story of a past walk in early June on King's Seat Hill. I was walking under the skylarks which is a fantastic experience.

Finally, I present a recent post from our Facebook page to encourage you to like or follow, if you haven't already!

I hope that you enjoy this newsletter. Please let us know of any feedback and please reach out if you wish to contribute an article to future editions.

In this edition:

- Latest Developments
- Windfarm applications.
- Drumbrae
- Soils of the Ochils
- Skylarks in the Ochils
- From our Facebook page

Cover picture: "Jerah at night" by Chris Bowness.

Latest Developments

Below we share information on work done by FoTO regarding developments and issues around the Ochil Hills. If possible, we also provide a link to the website or relevant information.

Dumyat Woodland Creation:

FOTO has provided a consultation response on this development as well as attending site visits.

<https://thefutureforestcompany.com/dumyat/>

Drumbrae Woodland Creation:

FOTO has again provided a consultation response, undertaken site visits and participated in a workshop on interpretation boards. See article on page 5.

edin.ac/drumbrae

Deer Fence blocking path to Law Hill:

FOTO, along with other individuals and organisations made representations to Clackmannanshire Council, objecting to the erection of a deer fence across the path to the Law Hill trig point. Agreement has been reached with the landowner on the inclusion of a gate in the fence to allow access.

Wether Hill 25m communications mast

PKC Planning Application 23/00702/PAT. FoTO objected to this development on grounds of its negative impact on recreational and visual amenity and the negative cumulative impact with the Burnfoot Hill/Rhodders and Green Knowes wind farms. The application was nevertheless approved.

Brunt Hill windfarm

See article on page 3. The developments website: <https://brunthillinfo.co.uk/>

Craighead windfarm

See article on page 3. The developments website: <https://craigheadwindfarm.co.uk/>

Windburn windfarm

See article on page 3. The developments website: <https://windburnwindfarm.co.uk/>

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) Report

RSE has published a report on the environmental and social impacts of public subsidies for the forestry sector in Scotland. FOTO submitted a response based on its experience of forestry developments in the Ochils. The report makes a number of significant recommendations.

<https://rse.org.uk/expert-advice/inquiries/tree-planting-inquiry/>

Wind Farms Proposals *by Stuart Dean*

At the time of writing, the three current Ochils wind farm proposals, Brunt Hill, Craighead and Windburn are still at the pre-application stage. Provisional submission times for applications, obtained from the developers, are mid-April for Brunt Hill; end of April for Craighead and May for Windburn.

Originally all three proposals were over 50 MWs with each being determined by the Scottish Government Energy Consents Unit (ECU) but, during the pre-application stage, one of them, Craighead, was reduced to 48 MW and will therefore be determined by Perth and Kinross Council.

Once applications have been submitted, it will be necessary for FOTO to decide how best to respond. For objections, any case will need to be the strongest possible in planning terms in the hope that, for the two section 36 applications, Brunt Hill and Windburn, the local authorities, when consulted, do object, thus bringing about a public inquiry for each and, for Craighead, that PKC refuses, with the likelihood of an appeal and, again, a public inquiry.

It is anticipated that the key planning issues will be the impact on the landscape, including cumulative impact, biodiversity, impact on peat and, in the case of Craighead and Brunt Hill, their impact on the Loch Leven Basin and its historical connections.

We believe that, by going to public inquiry, applications have the best opportunity of being tested against all the relevant material considerations. For the current proposed developments, a conjoined inquiry would surely be the best way of assessing, in particular, the cumulative impact of all three applications with each other and with the existing Ochils wind farms - a situation not dissimilar to that which transpired many years ago when the Little Law, Snowgoat Glen, Mellock Hill and Lochelbank windfarm applications were all refused by PKC and, following appeals, three out of the four were refused after a conjoined public inquiry.

Friends of the Ochils will respond to each application as and when the determining authority asks for comments. However, any comments will be based on the detail in each application, including information in the Environmental Impact Assessment. Certain matters are still not clear despite the numerous consultation events held by the developers. For example, the visualisations seen so far at public consultations do not give a full picture of the visual impact that the turbines and related infrastructure will have on the Ochils landscape. Neither is the full cumulative impact of each proposal with the other proposals and existing Ochils wind farms entirely clear.

An issue about which there is concern relates to the determination process when there is more than one application in the pipeline. The Scottish Government Energy Consents Unit (ECU) has indicated to FOTO that each windfarm application is dealt with on a case-by-case basis and that it would not attach one application to another, even if it were to be in proximity to another wind farm application. That could imply that they will be dealt with on a first come, first served basis rather than by a conjoined approach.

However, according to the ECU, it may be that a conjoined approach may be followed if more than one application proceeds to inquiry although the decision on whether to conjoin applications at inquiry rests with Scottish Ministers.

To add to the complexity of the current situation is the fact that the Windburn wind farm covers two council areas, PKC and Clackmannanshire. Again, the ECU has stated that if one planning authority were to object then this may trigger a public inquiry, and this would not be impeded if another planning authority chose not to object.

To make things even more complicated is the uncertain impact of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) on the determination of wind farm applications. It would appear from

decisions already made in relation to windfarm applications elsewhere in Scotland that NPF4 is making approvals more likely but, having said that, applications have also been refused.

Another unknown at this stage is the likely position of the statutory bodies such as NatureScot towards any application. However, NatureScot's response to the scoping reports suggests that they have concerns about what is being proposed. For example, they stated in their scoping opinion on Brunt Hill that they: "... consider that the proposal could potentially give rise to a significant and substantial change, individually and collectively, to the distinctive landscape of the Ochil Hills." Similarly, in relation to the Windburn proposal, they state, again in their scoping response, that: "We consider the proposed development could result in extensive significant effects and cumulative effect on the Ochils Hills, a prominent band of hills forming both a barrier and a gateway between Perthshire and Kinross-shire and the setting to both which has a clear identity as a distinctive, highly valued landscape of unique character within Scotland." We will have to wait and see how such concerns are reflected in the comments by such statutory bodies on any applications.

As indicated above, the least that FOTO would want to see is, in the case of the two Section 36 applications (Brunt Hill and Windburn), for the local authorities involved (PKC and Clackmannanshire) formally objecting to any applications thus resulting in them going to public inquiry rather than being determined directly by the ECU. In the case of Craighead

which, given that the proposal is now less than 50MW and will be determined by PKC, a refusal would no doubt result in appeal with the application, again, going to public inquiry.

The current proposals have created a difficult and complex situation for FOTO and other interested parties. If they are approved, turbines up to 200m could create a windfarm landscape in the Ochils where turbines are the dominant feature. The enjoyment of that landscape will be seriously damaged for the thousands who visit the Ochils or view it from outside the range. There is only so much that the Ochils can take before the hill range is damaged beyond repair. Already there are three significant wind farms in the range (Lochelbank, Green Knowes and the Burnfoot Hill complex of turbines), along with the Beauty-Denny powerline across Sheriffmuir. More windfarms would result in significant widespread and non-localised effects. Their cumulative impact would be particularly significant.

Finally, given the growing concerns about climate change, I would want to emphasise that the Friends of the Ochils is not against renewables per se. Our mission is to uphold our aims and objectives, in particular the promotion and conservation of the landscape, natural beauty, and wildlife of the Ochils, and the protection of the historical and social character of the surrounding communities. The current Ochils windfarms are making a significant contribution to renewable energy output, and we believe that what is now being proposed with turbines up to 200m goes well beyond what is reasonable for a much-loved range of hills.



Drumbrae Woodland Creation

*by Julie Wilson, Community Ranger,
University of Edinburgh*

I started as the Community Ranger with the Forest and Peatland team at The University of Edinburgh at the end of 2023.

In October 2021, the University announced a multi-million-pound, long-term commitment to capture and store its unavoidable carbon emissions, and benefit nature, through restoring peatlands and expanding forests in Scotland.

Last year, The University of Edinburgh purchased a 431-hectare site at the western edge of the Ochils, near Dumyat, that we call Drumbrae. Drumbrae is the first of several sites where we will create woodland and improve open habitats.

Drumbrae community consultation

We hosted a public consultation for our woodland design for Drumbrae and held a community event which had over 80 attendants. We were pleased to receive lots of contributions from local communities and organisations, the majority of which were positive, with 84% of respondents saying they felt good, or very good about the proposed plans. You can find more information about the woodland design and the consultation responses on our website: edin.ac/drumbrae

Where possible, we have adjusted our woodland creation proposal for Drumbrae based on ideas and suggestions from the consultation. We continue to welcome feedback on the project which can be directed to SRS.Department@ed.ac.uk.

Alternatively, once our plans are visible on the Public Land Register (in the coming months), further comments can be made. We'll provide the link on our webpages when it becomes available. We hope to begin work on site this summer.

Nature and history projects

In addition to work associated with woodland creation, there will also be other activities taking place on site this year. As part of my role, I will be working with community organisations, interest groups, and schools to provide opportunities for members of the public to get involved. I'll be working with local partners on a number of biodiversity projects, aiming to re-establish some rare plants and support our special butterfly species.

As well as celebrating our natural world, we are also keen to explore the rich cultural heritage at Drumbrae. Our Archaeology Report unearthed an array of historical treasures, revealing 48 unique sites that encompass homesteads, cairns, standing stones, farmsteads, military training trenches, and more. It will be great to work alongside local archaeologists to learn more about these sites and how people lived in this landscape.

Information boards

Interpretative materials such as information boards will be provided at key locations, including at main entrances. As part of this project, we hosted a community workshop in February to hear from local residents and interest groups to shape the content of our interpretation panels. Our interpretation could include information on the local wildlife and ecology, access and recreation, and historical context.

From a cultural heritage perspective, we want to share the stories including the Battle of Sheriffmuir, post medieval rural settlements and the early prehistoric and funerary monuments. The interpretative material used will be developed in collaboration with Stirling Council's Archaeologist, Historic Environment Scotland, and interest groups, including the Scottish Battlefield Trust.

Get in touch.

We can't wait to get started, and we are looking forward to working with local groups and communities in the area.

If you would like to get involved or have any ideas for a potential project, then please send an email to jwilso2@ed.ac.uk



Looking down over Drumbrae land towards the Wallace Monument

Soils of the Ochils

By Matt Aitkenhead, the James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen

In July and August 2022, my colleague Richard Hewison and I coordinated the International Soil Judging Contest, taking over 100 students and soils scientists to see the soils in and around Stirling.

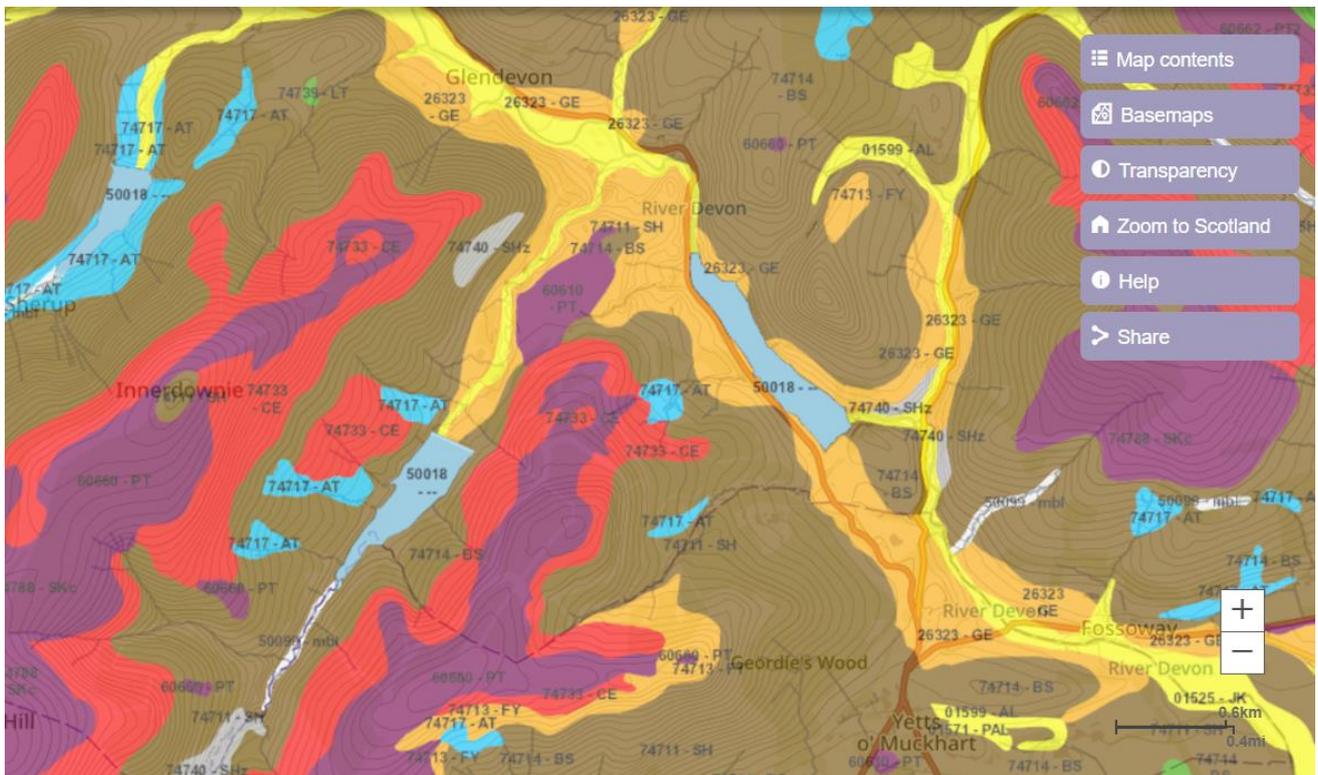
The Contest wasn't about judging the quality of the soils but was a contest to see how well the teams of students from 10 different countries could describe and characterise a range of soils.

Common Scottish soils are all represented across the Ochils. Given how easy it is to travel to and into these hills, this makes them perfect for soil teaching. Over the course of a week, we took them to see the main soil types that exist in Scotland, including:

- Peat – covering almost a quarter of Scotland, this is soil made almost completely of organic material that has not fully decomposed. It forms in wet, cold areas (#Scotland!) and stores a huge amount of carbon when it's in good condition. One of the most important peat bogs that we showed the students was Glenquey Moss, which holds around 20 thousand tons of carbon and has spectacular biodiversity.
- Podzols – these soils often form under coniferous forests and show distinct 'bands' where soluble minerals have been leached from upper to lower parts of the soil. Often steeply sloping, these areas make poor grassland but great forests.
- Brown Earths – a lot of Scotland's soils are comparatively young (since the last glaciation period) and on relatively flat ground and with good drainage, these soils form fertile, brown and fairly uniform soils. They are often found under agricultural land or where grazing has been carried out in the past.
- Gley soils – unlike brown earths, gleysols form where the drainage is poor and the water table is often near the surface. Unlike peats which form under moss and other bog species, gleys usually have grass, shrubs or trees. They are difficult to work but make good grassland and can store a lot of carbon because of the wet conditions.
- Alluvial soils – where rivers flood (or have done in the past), valley bottoms often have these soils. They are formed of fine sediments, often with multiple layers from repeated flood events, and make some of the best agricultural land.



Richard Hewison in action on Glenquey Moss



This map is clipped from the Scotland's Soils map at https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil_maps/?layer=1.

It shows how varied the soils are around Glenquey (yellow and orange are alluvial soils and mineral podzols, brown and blue are brown earths and gley soils, and red and purple are peaty podzols and peat respectively). So, within this small area between the Castlehill Reservoir and the Glenquey Reservoir, you can see that there is a big diversity of soils (I've put photos of four of the soils types below).



Peat (it's hard to take a picture of a peat soil in its natural state, as the soil pit tends to fill up with water very quickly!



Podzol



Brown earth



Gley (this one wasn't taken at Glenquey, but on the Carse of Stirling)

This made Glenquey perfect for the final day of the Soil Judging Contest because it meant that we could base ourselves right next to Glenquey Moss and within easy walking distance, reach four or five very different soil types. The students had a great time and learned a lot about how topography, vegetation, land use and geology combine over time to produce varied and interesting soils across such a small area.

It also meant that when I got home after a busy few weeks, my wife had the joy of a detailed slide show of all the soils and landscapes I had seen across the Ochils. Despite all that, she still agreed that we should go for a walking holiday across them one day!

Around the Ochils



This picture was taken on Law Hill. A good number of trees here were damaged by Storm Arwen. This tree snapped with the force of the wind.

Skylarks in the Ochils *by Chris Bowness*

My garden is a mess and I hate spending any time on it.

The love of my life is walking. While many desire riches, fame or both, I desire just to walk. I consider myself lucky to have found my calling in life and I'm also privileged as I can often indulge in it. My garden however is one of those things that keeps me from my passion.

It was a sunny Wednesday evening in early June and I was eyeing my scruffy garden through my kitchen window. I'd just finished dinner and my garden was staring back at me through the window, making me feel guilty.

I knew what to do. I grabbed the dog and drove away quickly, knowing that my garden would still be there when I returned.

I parked at the Dollar Glen car park and set off for an evening jaunt up King's Seat Hill. I had walked halfway up when I spied a herd of cattle near the Spitfire memorial. This was new to me and with my dog, I thought it safer to turn around as sometimes cattle can take aggressive exception to a dog in their vicinity.

Cutting my walk short, I ambled back down and instead was able to concentrate on the many skylarks on the way.

The skylarks burst from the grassland, fly up high in the sky and sing their hearts out. As they sing, they sometimes flap their wings rapidly and other times they simply glide before they dive back into the grass from where they came, abruptly ending their song.



Between Bank Hill and King's Seat Hill, looking towards Saddle and Whitewisp Hills

Between King's Seat Hill and Bank Hill, they were particularly busy and it was a pleasure to see and hear them larking in the sky.

Skylarks are celebrated in poetry, literature, art and music and I am honoured through my love of walking to experience them when I walk in the Ochils. In May and June, they are very active and you can't help but notice them.

The sheep-grazed landscape of these hills suits the skylarks and from the numbers I encounter in the summer Ochils, it's hard to realise that their numbers have been in precipitous decline since the 1970s.

The reason for this, according to the British Trust for Ornithology, is thought to be due to agricultural intensification and the changes in sowing from spring to autumn and the loss of winter stubble.

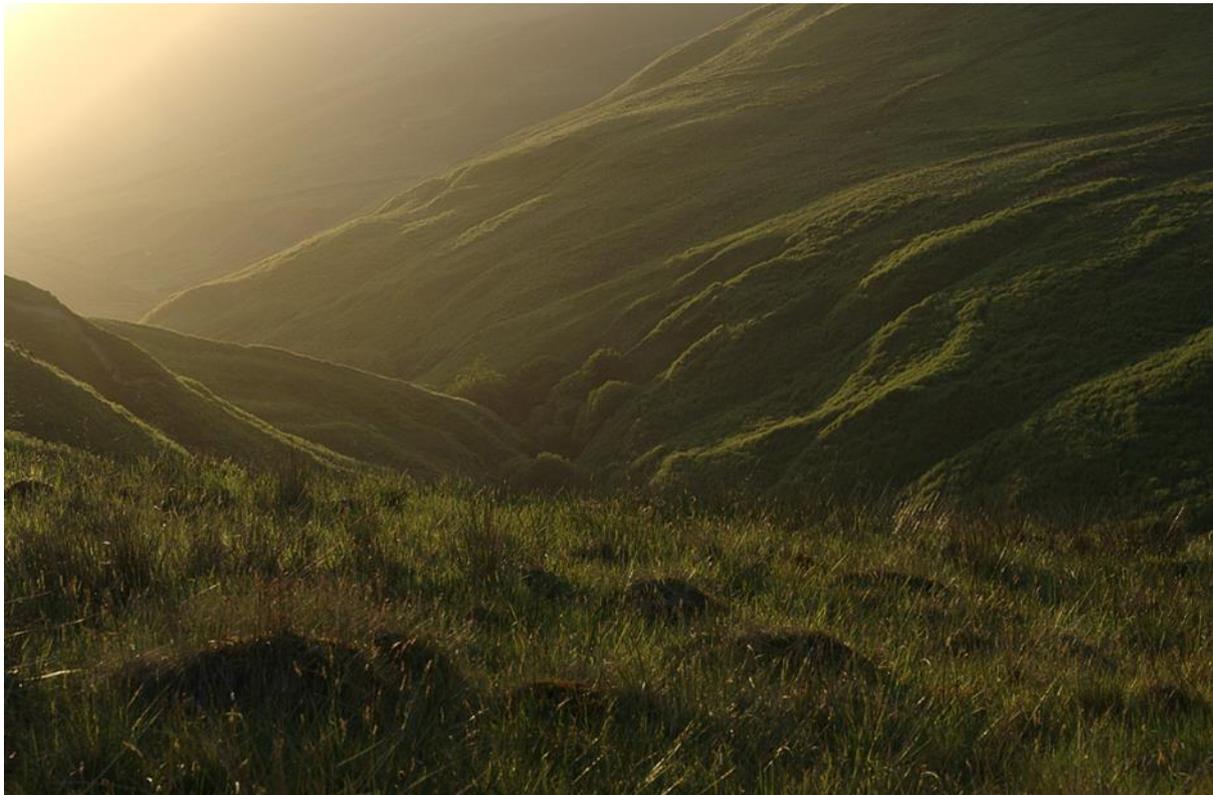
As I walked, I was ignorant of these issues facing the Skylark and was besotted just watching them perform.

As I continued my descent into the sunlit Glen of Sorrow, the sound of the skylarks in the grassland behind me faded away to be replaced with the calls of crows and of sheep.

I then descended into the gorge of Dollar Glen; the soundtrack again changed to the roar of water cascading over waterfalls.

My abandoned walk had only lasted about an hour, but I got much more out of it than I ever could in my garden, listening to the noises of a town with its loud exhausts and the rumble of distant traffic.

I love walking. My garden will just have to wait.



Looking into a sunlit Glen of Sorrow

From our Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/Friendsoftheochils>



This lone tree stands on the Eastern Ochils above Newburgh in Fife.

In the distance you can see the Tay Estuary and the bright lights of Dundee.

FOTO Information

How to Join:

If you are reading this Newsletter and are not already a member, you may wish to join and help us to protect, conserve and promote the Ochils by joining us as a member. We welcome individual, family, and corporate membership. Just fill in our FOTO membership form and email or post it to our Membership Secretary David Scott (details on the form):

<https://www.friendsoftheochils.org.uk/join-us/>

When you become a member, you will receive our newsletter 'hot off the press' and invitations to events and our AGM. You may also subscribe to our FOTO email updates, for the latest campaign and other news.

Membership – annual fees:

Individual - £5.00 Family - £7.50 Concession

(unwaged) - £3.00 Life membership - £100.00

(one-off contribution) Corporate supporter

(voluntary, community council) - £15.00

Corporate supporter (commercial organisation)

- £50.00 Donations - Please get in touch.

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