

Friends of the **Ochils**

November 2022 Newsletter



Editors' foreword *by Chris Bowness*

I am delighted that we can present another edition of the Friends of the Ochils (FOTO) Newsletter. I am very grateful to all those who have contributed articles and I am hopeful that you find them to be of value.

The articles cover some of the issues that have arisen in the Ochils and have been in the headlights of the FOTO committee over the last year.

A big part of this has been forestry and Stuart Dean, the Chair of FOTO, details the considerable knowledge and experience of FOTO in dealing with the forestry consultation and planning process.

On the back of the forestry schemes that have been announced this year, I have contributed an article on carbon sequestration and carbon credits that is becoming a driver for land purchases for forestry projects in the Ochils and beyond.

Keith Broomfield has kindly contributed an article on the problem with the invasive Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam in Glendevon and along the River Devon.

I also share a story of a walk in the Ochils on Wood hill in early 2017 where I was lucky enough to walk above a temperature inversion. The article is full of pictures that I hope you find pleasing.

We also feature a fantastic fund-raising walk in the Ochils by Billy Lennox in October. Billy walked 100 miles over four days, raising funds for the Scottish Charity Air ambulance.

Finally, we present a fantastic map of the Ochils compiled by Susan Beech which she has kindly made available from her website.

I hope that you enjoy this Newsletter. Please feel free to share any feedback and please let us know if you wish to contribute to future editions of the Newsletter.

In this edition:

- Forestry in the Ochils
- Carbon Credits and the Ochil Hills
- Fighting Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam
- One Foggy Morning
- SCAA 100 miles Challenge
- Comprehensive map of the Ochil Hills

Cover picture: "Peaches & Cream on Innerdownie" by Chris Bowness

Forestry in the Ochil Hills *by Stuart Dean*

Forestry development in the Ochils is nothing new with extensive planting over the years on much of the eastern part of the hill range. However, more recently the amount of tree planting has increased, particularly in the western and central Ochils, driven by various forces. Not least of these are the Scottish Government's targets for woodland creation aimed at achieving climate change targets as well as those for timber production.

The move away from sheep and cattle farming in the Ochils has also been a significant factor in the growth of woodland development. Over the past few years, applications have been approved for over 3000ha of forestry development in the Ochils with Jerah and Coulshill accounting for much of that development.

Most planting has been primarily for commercial forestry based on Sitka spruce, although a woodland is currently being designed for the western side of Menstrie Glen consisting of native broadleaf and Scots pine, financed through the sale of carbon credits. (See the article by Chris Bowness on carbon credits). Planting by Woodland Trust Scotland in and around Glen Devon has similarly been based on native broadleaf and Scots pine.

Once forestry developments have progressed through the design stage, normally involving forestry agents, applications are placed on the Scottish Forestry Public Register after which 28 days are allowed for public comment.

The Friends of the Ochils (FOTO) has become heavily involved in this design/application process and, as a result, we have built up an extensive understanding of how best to influence planting proposals.

At the same time, we have a number of concerns about the current approach to woodland creation, many of which we share with other organizations and individuals.

It is our experience over recent years that agents are working more effectively with organizations such as FOTO but the approach is still somewhat patchy. However, increasingly we are being made aware of planting proposals through direct contact by agents - contact that has sometimes resulted in helpful site visits when issues can be discussed on the ground. Covid had also made such visits more problematical, limiting much of the contact with agents to online communication.

FOTO comments addressed to forestry agents have raised numerous issues which we trust will influence the design of a proposal. For example, the impact of planting on access to the hills is a significant issue. Trees, particularly closely spaced Sitka spruce negatively affect access and it is important to ensure that agents, through appropriate consultation with interested parties, fully take into account the interests of hill walkers, fell runners, cyclists, horse riders etc.

Deer fencing is also an issue. Many kilometres of such fencing continue to be erected and, as well as impacting on access, they have a negative visual impact within the landscape. Crossing points in the fencing need to be appropriate for users and placed such that good access is maintained. Of late, FOTO has been encouraging agents to place signs on fence posts indicating the direction of the nearest crossing point in a fence. Coming across a deer fence in the dark or in a whiteout and not knowing the nearest crossing point is a safety issue that needs to be addressed.

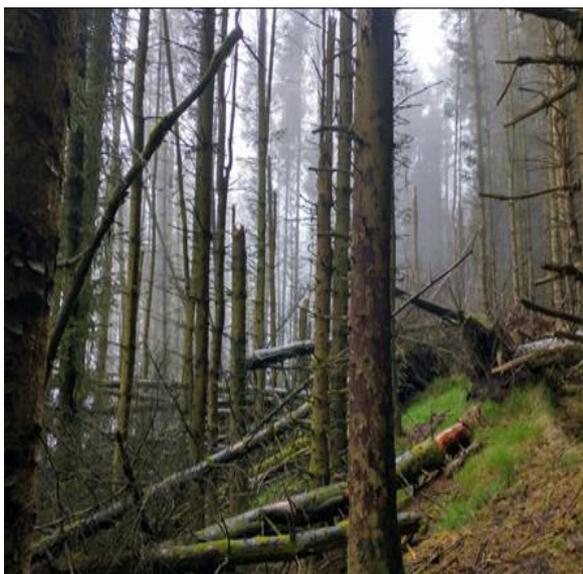
FOTO also encourages agents to share fencing between two adjacent developments where at all possible.

We have also commented at length on the planting of trees on peat. At present the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) which is the reference standard for sustainable forestry management across the UK, presumes against the conversion of some priority habitats such as deep peat or active raised bogs through tree planting.

The UKFS, which is currently undergoing review, states: *“Avoid establishing new forests on soils with peat exceeding 50cms in depth and on sites that would compromise the hydrology of adjacent bog or wetland habitats”*. However, there is growing evidence that peat of less than 50cms holds large quantities of carbon and therefore should not necessarily be planted.

A recent report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature observes that: *“A thin peat layer of 30cms has a carbon store equivalent to tropical rainforests (hectare for hectare)”*. That is quite a thought and FOTO would argue that, given the extent of shallow peat soils in the Ochils, fresh thinking should be applied to the planting of trees on such soils. In fact, it is our understanding that recently published guidance that applies to England states that: *“Woodland creation will not be approved on areas of peat greater than 30cms deep and hydrologically linked surrounding areas”*. We continue to argue that such guidance should also apply to Scotland and that planting policy should follow the science on this matter.

The effect of tree planting on biodiversity is of importance and, along with other bodies such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust, we continue to make representations to agents in the hope that concerns will be properly addressed at the design stage. Sitka spruce is a poor provider of biodiversity.



Other matters addressed in our comments include the impact of tree planting on the landscape and the enjoyment of that landscape by visitors to the hill range. We also emphasize the importance of leaving hilltops free of planting and that views both within the Ochils and out to the surrounding countryside should not be damaged by trees.

We stress that straight line planting should be avoided to ensure a more natural appearance of trees on the hillside along with the use of mounding rather than ploughing. (Having said that, it is good to see that mounding is being used extensively at Coulshill which suggests that practice has now changed on this matter).

We also ask that archaeological sites are protected. In addition to the above issues, the cumulative impact of more and more forestry in the Ochils is of growing concern and needs to be addressed.

Whilst it is fair to say that the design of forestry has improved over the years, along with the involvement of third parties such as FOTO, concerns remain about the application process itself. FOTO is not alone in wanting to see changes to that process, particularly the greater involvement of local communities in woodland creation.

Unlike the planning application process for local authority housing etc. documents relating to forestry applications, including comments by interested third parties such as FOTO, are not placed in the public domain for all to read. We believe that this aspect of the application process should be reviewed. The Issues Log goes some way towards the provision of the required information, but it is not sufficient in itself. Furthermore, no information of any worth is placed on the Public Register - the map provided only shows the outline of the site with no detail on planting, access routes, deer fencing etc.

The whole system needs to be made more open and transparent which in turn would help to involve more individuals and communities in forestry applications.

There is a growing concern that very few, if any, applications have required EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) consent of late. This is the case even when a development greatly exceeds the threshold for an EIA as detailed in the EIA regulations.

For example, Coulshill exceeded the EIA threshold of 20ha for such a development by a factor of over 30 with over 700 ha of planting, yet Scottish Forestry determined that EIA consent was not required.

It would appear that such developments go through an iterative process between the agent and Scottish Forestry such that, by the time Scottish Forestry is required to provide a Screening Opinion under the EIA Regulations, they are satisfied that all significant effects have been addressed.

It is almost certainly the case that, by not requiring an EIA, time, money and effort is saved by the applicant and other parties but that should not be at the expense of a full and proper scrutiny of a project.

FOTO is not alone in having concerns about the forestry application process and the involvement of communities in it. We are aware of organisations such as Communities for Diverse Forestry and the Forest Policy Group both of whom would wish to see changes to the application process and the greater involvement of local communities.

In fact, there is a growing disconnect between communities and land ownership with more and more estates being sold to corporate bodies, investment funds or charitable trusts. As recognised in a recent report by the Scottish Land Commission on Scotland's Rural Land Market and Natural Capital: *"The increase in demand and values for plantable forestry land is a significant shift in the land market, driven by the rise of investors and commercial forestry."*

Of particular interest is a recent report *"Communities' experiences of new forestry applications in Scotland"* published by the Forest Policy Group (FPG). It is authored by Anna Lawrence, an independent social forestry researcher and professor at the Centre for Mountain Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Morag Paterson, community organiser in Galloway.

The report is based on a survey and interviews with individuals and organisations, including FOTO, with experience of dealing with forestry applications, although responses were kept anonymous.

It makes interesting reading for anyone concerned with the development of forestry in Scotland. It puts forward a number of conclusions and makes numerous recommendations aimed at improving, in the short term, better understanding, clarity and implementation of the existing process, and how to address in the near to medium term, more entrenched challenges in the system by adjusting policy instruments. The report is available on the FPG website (www.forestpolicygroup.org).

FOTO is not against tree planting per se but the impact of extensive planting on the landscape, biodiversity, access, local communities, the economy etc is such that the process requires greater and better scrutiny by all interested parties.

Greater openness and transparency are all the more important given that it is public money that is used to pay the grants and subsidies that make many woodland developments financially possible. FOTO will continue in its efforts to ensure that woodland development in the Ochils follows the maxim of "The Right Tree in the Right Place" but will continue to campaign for improvements to the process.

Carbon Credits and the Ochil Hills

by Chris Bowness

In early 2022, the Future Forest Company announced a [consultation](#) for Woodland creation that proposes planting 180 hectares of primarily native broad leaved and Scots pines around Dumyat.

This is broadly welcome news where areas of the Ochils will be planted with forestry that is more sympathetic to the surroundings than other forestry developments in the area.

What is interesting is the reason this forestry is proposed. Typically, forests are planted for the purpose of future harvesting, whilst this forestry is proposed for a different reason.

Carbon Credits

The proposed usage of this land is for carbon sequestration where the carbon emissions of an organisation, will be offset through the purchase of carbon credits that will pay for the tree planting and offset the unavoidable carbon emissions of the organisation that bought them.

Carbon credits are set to become big business in the race to achieving net zero emissions. An example of net zero is that if there is an organisation that emits 1,000 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) in a year through the burning of fossil fuels, they will have to purchase 1,000 tonnes of carbon credits from suitably certified schemes, where the carbon emissions are offset by planting a suitable number of trees (for example) to absorb the CO₂ emitted. In making this purchase of carbon credits, the organisation will then have achieved net zero.

With technology as it is now, where energy consuming items such as transport still require the use of fossil fuels, then this will result in demand for carbon credits in the future to offset these emissions as they occur. This will also tie up the land used for this process as the carbon offset needs to remain locked up.

Commercial Opportunity

The former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, who is now the UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance, has [talked](#) about the commercial positives and negatives of net zero in a published interview.

He said "...And what we have seen increasingly, spurred initially by the Sustainable Development Goals, accelerated by Paris, and then by social movements and governments, is societies putting tremendous value on achieving net zero. Companies, and those who invest in them and lend to them, and who are part of the solution, will be rewarded. Those who are lagging behind and are still part of the problem will be punished."

The above comment was in relation to the question "You have said that the goal of net zero is the greatest commercial opportunity of our time."

These requirements are already evident at corporate level with Investors and Clients requiring Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) returns as part of their commercial tenders. This means that companies bidding to win tenders will have to participate in these requirements, or their ability to compete will be compromised.

The Effects

The commercial rewards of carbon sequestration could therefore be huge. According to some forecasts, such as the one made by [BloombergNEF](#) (BNEF), carbon credit prices have the potential of increasing fifty times from their 2021 value of £2 - £3 tonne by 2050.

This potential has a knock-on effect that is already evident. A BBC news [article](#), published in April 2022 notes that land prices in Scotland had

increased by 31% in 2021. A few reasons are given, but tree planting was in the headline.

Carbon sequestration will continue to grow whilst CO2 produced from burning fossil fuels is seen as an existential threat to the future of humanity. And this has now reached our local hills, our hills that have been grazed for centuries but may now be put to another use.

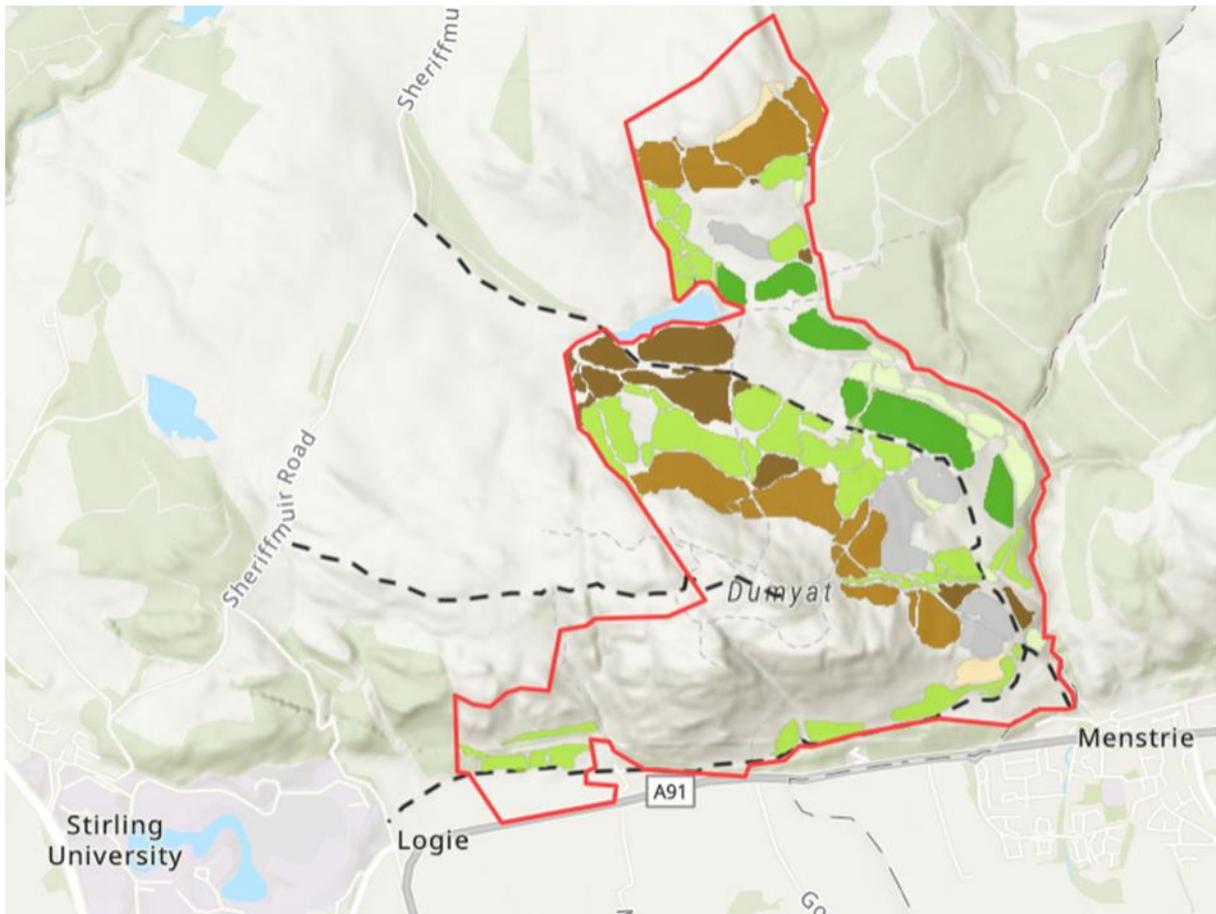
Sources:

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The proposed tree planting around Dumyat by the Future Forest Company



Fighting Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam

by Keith Broomfield

Himalayan balsam has been a long-standing problem on the middle and lower reaches of the River Devon, but now Japanese knotweed is rearing its ugly head and becoming increasingly prevalent on many parts of the river as well, including Glen Devon.

I don't recall seeing much knotweed when I first moved to this area about 15 years ago, but in more recent times, large clusters of this non-native invasive have sprung up in many places and the spread is relentless.

One resident in Glen Devon was so concerned that she got in touch with me recently and we toured several sites between Glendevon village and Glensherup where thick stands of Japanese knotweed now stood. It was depressing, and the extent of its spread is certainly cause for serious concern.

Knotweed is a fast-growing plant and its vigorous growth and impact on habitats near rivers and streams – as well as the fact it is hard to eradicate – makes it one of the most problematic weeds in the UK and Ireland, and one of the worst invasive alien plants in Europe and parts of North America.



Growing up to 10 cm a day in the peak of summer, and reaching to more than two metres in height, knotweed prevents the growth of native plant species, which cannot compete with the tall summer growth, or the thick mulch of decaying canes and leaves in winter. Many of the insects that are dependent on our native plants are also lost.

The thick growth can impede access on riverside paths and contribute to erosion. Furthermore, the roots may cause structural damage to buildings or roads that it is growing adjacent to. Although it rarely sets seed in this country, knotweed can sprout from very small sections of root rhizomes, or even broken parts of stems, providing the ability to spread like wildfire through river systems.

As with knotweed, Himalayan balsam is a non-native and its tall invasive growth shades out indigenous plants and the die-back of extensive stands over winter can leave riverbanks bare and exposed to erosion. Many parts of the Devon below Vicar's Bridge are especially badly affected by balsam.



In a bid to combat the problem of both species, the Devon Angling Association (DAA), assisted by the Forth District Salmon Fishery Board, applied to Crown Estate Scotland (CES) for an Environmental grant through their Sustainable Communities Fund, which would provide support for an eradication programme.

Several methods would be used to manage these invasives and the work would take place at various times of the year, dependent on the species being treated.

Tackling Himalayan balsam is labour-intensive because it does not require herbicide treatment and can be removed by pulling out by the roots. However, Japanese knotweed does need chemical treatment and would require a different approach.

It is, of course a daunting task, but Grace Wilding, Development Officer for the Forth District Salmon Fishery Board, tells me that if the grant application succeeds, one of the key aims would be to harness the support of communities and local organisations – such as the Friends of the Ochils – to support ongoing control efforts.

She says: “Realistically, these two years of initial work would only start the control process, but if other organisations, local communities or groups were to become involved through the provision of extra funding or volunteers for joint work programmes, then perhaps the eradication scheme could be extended for a few more years, which would greatly aid the process of eradicating these problem species from the river and help restore its vibrant habitat.”

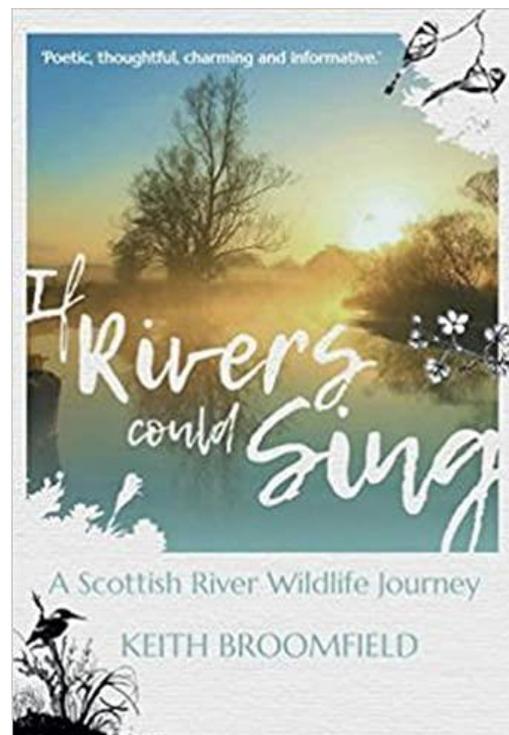


About Keith

Keith Broomfield is a well-known Scottish nature writer, who writes a weekly ‘Nature Watch’ column for The Courier and The Press & Journal newspapers, as well as his ‘On the Wildside’ column for the Alloa Advertiser

He is the author of two books. His first, ‘If Rivers Could Sing’ is about a wildlife year on the River Devon, which was shortlisted at the Scottish National Book Awards. His second, ‘A Scottish Wildlife Odyssey’ is a journey discovering Scotland’s wild secrets. He is currently writing two new books, one on a wildlife journey through Britain, and the other, ‘A Snorkeller’s Guide to the Marine Life of the Mediterranean.’

Keith is a trustee/director of the Forth Rivers Trust, a board member of The Forth Naturalist & Historian, a committee member of the Devon Angling Association, and a member of the Central Scotland Raptor Study Group.



One Foggy Morning by Chris Bowness



It was lunchtime on Friday. I was on my lunch break at work and was contemplating what I could do that Saturday.

I looked at the weather forecast for Stirling; "mist in the morning", it said. "Yes!" I thought, as that meant that there was a chance that I could climb the Ochils and get above the fog to take some photos.

I was planning for an early start to catch the good light, but I awoke at 9am, so scuppered my chances of that. It was however still foggy outside... After the necessary coffee and faffing about, I took a foggy drive and arrived at the Ochil Hills Woodland Park car park just before 11am.

I headed up Wood Hill as I had not been above the cloud on this hill before. I started the climb up through the woods and near the top of the woodland area I started to see the sun breaking through - luck was with me!

The fog started to thin about the 250-metre mark. Views started to appear and I emerged from the oppressive dank mist into the sunny landscape with a beautiful blue sky. The transition was beautiful and other worldly.

Climbing up further, I took ages to gain height due to the number of pictures that were being taken. Digger (my dog) was frequently sighing as he always does when I stop to take pictures - That dog hates standing about!

As I continued upwards, a man caught up with me, it is rare to see another walker here and we stopped and talked about the charms of Wood Hill and the Ochils in general. He told me has been walking the Ochils since 1972 – He explained that he was originally from Ireland where he lived beside the Mountains of Mourne.



The man continued to describe that the Mountains of Mourne, although higher, had a similar character to the Ochils.

He also told me that when he comes this way. He always checks on a fallen tree that has lain on its side since he first came across it 45 years ago – every year he checks it and every year it is still green.

The man seemed taken aback at my lack of ambition to walk further afield than just Wood Hill. He was planning a jaunt over Ben Cleuch and back down the Law into Tillicoultry. I however, just like to stand about and take scenery pictures when on my own in such grand conditions. At this point we parted company and the man took off up the hill at an impressive pace.

I slowly headed up to near the top of Wood Hill, called Rough Knowles, which has a pond on it that Digger always drinks from.

This spot is 525 metres above the Forth Estuary in the valley below, where my car was parked and I was now looking down on the fog 300 metres below me. It was a glorious sunny day up here, not the frosty, foggy day everyone below in the gloom was getting. I understood now, standing in the warm sunshine, why those in the know describe this foggy occurrence as a temperature inversion.

From this vantage point I dropped down towards the treeline on the East side of Wood Hill that is fenced off from the sheep.

On the way down I came across a lonesome tree that stood above the fog. It was very picturesque, but it had needed the expanse of fog below for me to notice it as I had passed it many times before without a glance.

I then followed the fence westwards snapping away merrily from the steep slopes above the fog.





Eventually I dropped back down to where I had started and took some final snaps before walking back into the fog. As the fog enveloped me, the change in temperature was dramatic.

In an instant it changed from a beautiful sunny day to the oppressive cold and dark of heavy fog. Frost still lay on the ground here and I wanted to turn back around and stay in the sun.





I carried on down the slope and headed back to my car through the gloomy woodland on the slopes of Wood Hill.

I had a happy heart whilst driving home through the vague landscape as my tired dog snoozed quietly in the boot.

Clarity

*Strive out of the dullness,
climb harder, climb fast.
See the sun growing brighter,
emerging from gloom.*

*Escaping the cold murk,
visibility clearing.
The blue sky appears,
the fog fades away.*

*Rise up in the warm sun,
and head for the top.
A pinnacle moment,
the summit is small.*

*Stand still looking over,
a lonesome tree yearning,
above the many, invisible,
beneath the cold veil below.*

*Time it is counting,
Can't stay for long.
Must again join the world,
where we can't see the sun.*

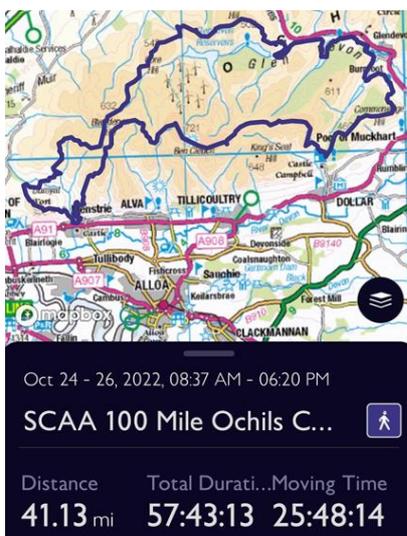
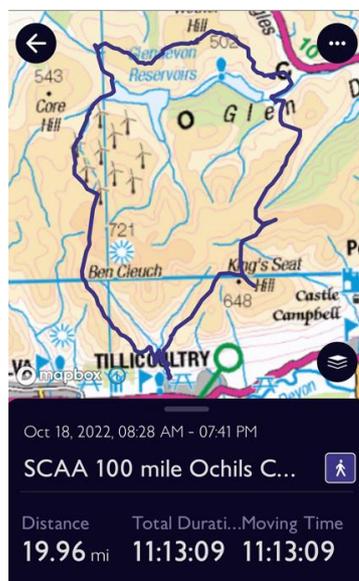
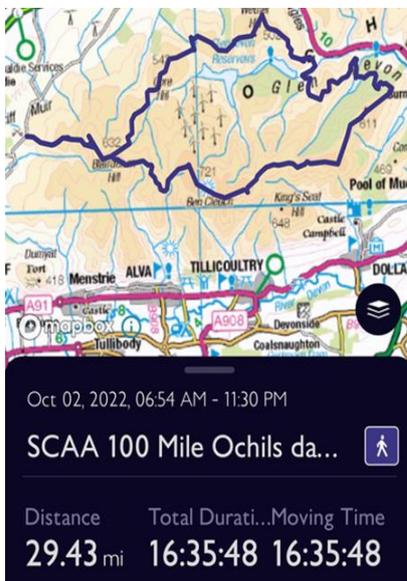
*Heading back downhill.
The fog it looms larger.
I'm back in the cold haze,
alone with the rest.*

SCAA 100 miles Challenge

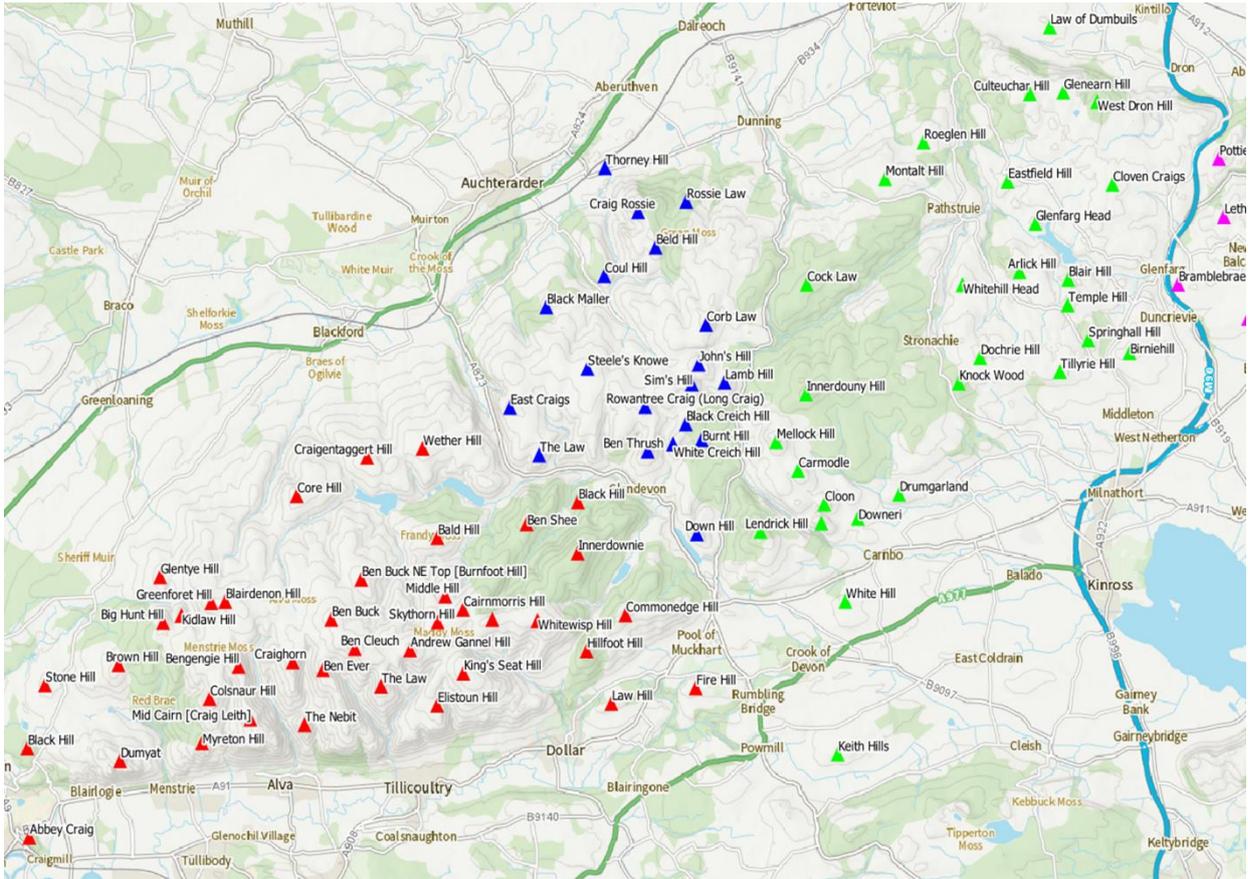
In October, Billy Lennox, who is the Admin for the [Ochil Walkers Facebook group](#), completed a walk of over 100 miles in the Ochils and raised around £600 (at the last post) for the Scottish Charity Air Ambulance (SCAA).

Billy commented "Totally overwhelmed with all the donations that were happening while we were up on the hill. It really is a great charity and being a truck driver, I sadly see these air ambulances all too often in Play parks, farmers' fields etc. attending all sorts of incidents."

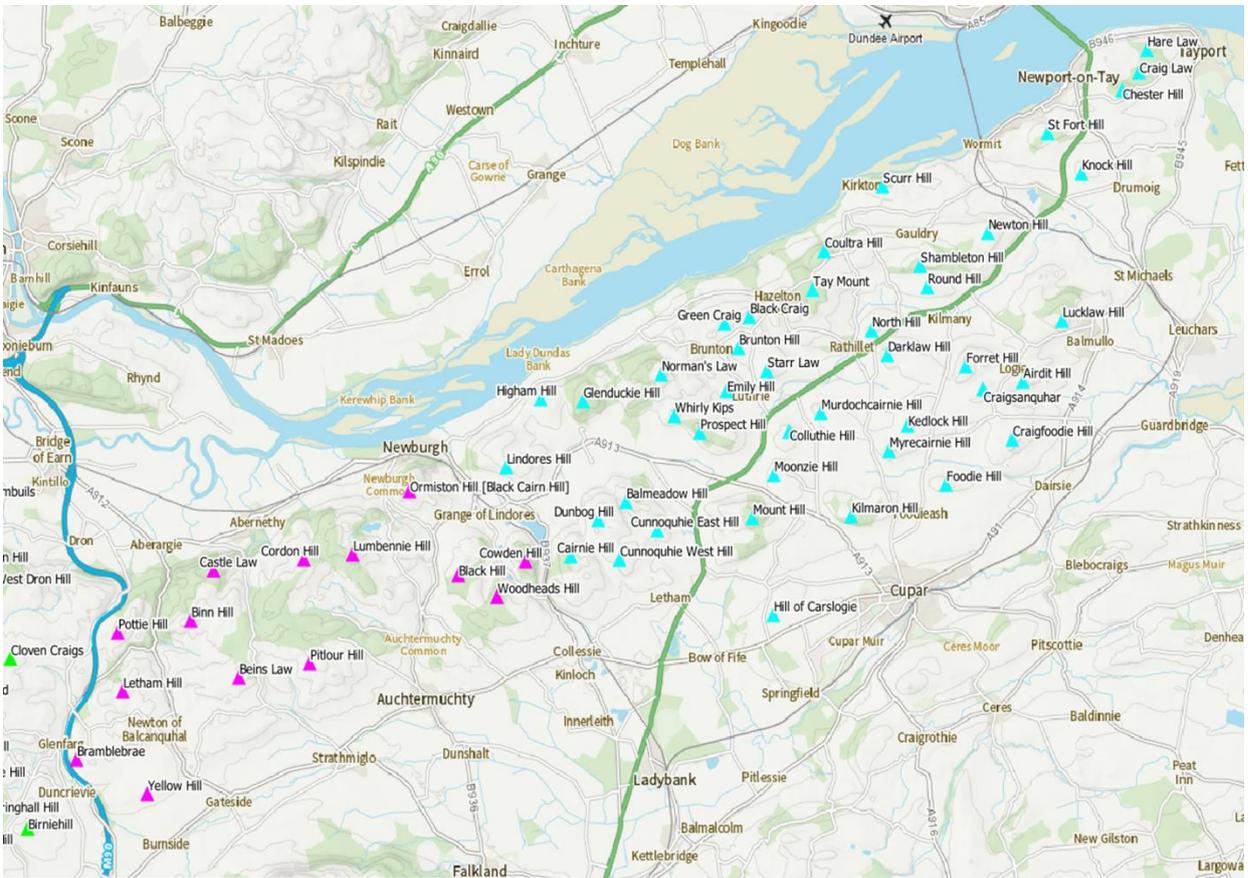
You can see the routes that Billy took below and he was accompanied the whole time by his faithful dog Sunni. Very well done both!



Comprehensive map of the Ochils



Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2021)



Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2021)

The above map of the Ochil hills has been compiled by Susan Beech who runs the [Fife Walking website](https://fifewalking.com/) (<https://fifewalking.com/>).

The maps intention was to list every hilltop of the Ochil Hills all the way to Tayport on the banks of the river Tay.

The map is provided in the form of an excel spreadsheet due to the large amount of data stored in it and it can be downloaded from the [Ochil Hills](https://fifewalking.com/ochils/) section of the Fife Walking website (<https://fifewalking.com/ochils/>)

The map features 145 hill names and they are separated into the western, northern and eastern Ochils; as defined by FOTO, up to the dividing line of the M90 motorway to Perth.

They are then defined as the Innerdouny (Marilyn) outliers between the M90 and Newburgh, before being identified as the Fife geographic outliers from Newburgh to Tayport.

The provided spreadsheet also provides grid references, height, prominence, parent Marilyn and summit features as well as links to maps, pictures and data.

With the geographic map that has also been provided within the spreadsheet, this is a fantastic resource for those who wish to explore the range further.

Susan's website also provides useful guides to walking these hills for those who enjoy discovering all that our surrounding area has to offer.

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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