



Dundreggan Rewilding Centre: a gateway to Scotland's Caledonian forest

*Trees for Life's Rewilding Centre ensures that nature is accessible to all,
as Laurelin Cummins-Fraser reports.*

Since 2008, the charity Trees for Life has been rewilding its 10,000-acre Dundreggan estate in Glenmoriston, to restore important fragments of Scotland's Caledonian forest which once covered much of the Scottish Highlands. This was a diverse landscape brimming with life but over time the wild forest began to retreat after centuries of use by humans and grazing by animals, which depleted the biodiverse and nature-rich woodland.

For the last 30 years, Trees for Life has been rewilding the Scottish Highlands and restoring a revitalised

wild forest that provides space for wildlife to flourish and communities to thrive. In 2008, the charity bought the 10,000-acre estate at Dundreggan in Glenmoriston where important fragments of the Caledonian forest are now expanding and flourishing. Since then, Dundreggan has been integral to rewilding the Scottish Highlands, but people must also be involved for long-term and sustainable success. Developed in consultation with the local community, the new Dundreggan Rewilding Centre opened in April 2023. A world first, the centre celebrates the close connections between people and nature and is a gateway to Dundreggan's unique landscape rich in natural and cultural

heritage. Visitors can explore ancient pinewood, discover centuries of Gaelic history, and connect with a landscape undergoing transformation through rewilding.

A gateway to nature

The project consists of a visitor centre, accommodation building and a network of footpaths that help visitors to explore this special landscape. The Rewilding Centre has two classrooms, a storytelling area, a large presentation space and a café, as well as an outdoor playpark and pond. Its design is inspired by Gaelic heritage and history, and by the Caledonian forest—with verticals representing trees, changing light to reflect how light plays in

Rewilding Centre external. Photo: © Kieran Chambers, PhotoGraphics.



woodlands, and materials and colours conjuring up bracken and forest bark.

Designed by Threesixty Architecture, the building is simple, elegant and in harmony with its surrounding landscape. The overall site layout is influenced by Celtic and Gaelic architecture to suggest a settlement on a hill, where the balance between buildings and environment is carefully considered. Dundreggan and Glenmoriston are areas rich with Gaelic folklore which stretches back through the centuries and offers a window into this landscape and the long relationship between humans and nature in the Highlands. Nature is a prominent thread running through Gaelic culture and is woven through the place names, folklore and poetry from this area which is highlighted in the Rewilding Centre. The design philosophy behind the Rewilding Centre prioritises a seamless connection with its natural surroundings, to ensure abundant natural light, ventilation, and accessibility.

Clockwise from top left: Dundreggan Rewilding Centre exterior; *Am Bile* sculpture; Interactive interpretation. Photos: © Paul Campbell Photography.

The focal point of the Rewilding Centre is *Am Bile*, the 'Gathering Tree' sculpture which was created by sculptor Helen Denerley using recycled and reclaimed metal. The creatures in the branches were chosen by local schoolchildren who helped with the design during workshops with Helen. The tree is a powerful symbol in many cultures and in Gaelic tradition *Am Bile* is the sacred and respected tree symbolising leadership and protection. It is the 'tree of life' connecting heaven and earth and represents the Trees for Life rewilding vision.

Realms of the forest

The Rewilding Centre aims to recreate the experiential quality of a forest by interpreting and integrating key features of a tree-scape such as the canopy, tree trunks and open clearings. Like a forest canopy that collects and filters sunlight in different ways to provide a variety of experiences, the skylight controls the way that light passes through the building and creates diverse atmospheres in varying weather conditions.

The palette of materials used in construction is inspired by the local

vernacular of Glenmoriston and the wider Highlands. Taking some important visual cues particularly with regards to colours, the building presents a fresh and contemporary appearance. Simple and robust detailing was adopted with minimal maintenance materials which are appropriate to the Highland climate. From the outset, local and low embodied carbon materials were prioritised.

Timber cladding serves as the primary finish for external walls, creating a contrast with the roofscape. The timber cladding boards are home grown Scottish larch manufactured locally at Russwood sawmill in Newtonmore and the primary structure is predominately Glulam (glued laminated timber). By incorporating Glulam, the building not only actively reduces embodied carbon but uses the structure as a tool to introduce warm timber tones and create internal spaces that harmonise with nature.

The roof's red metal cladding was chosen for durability and robustness to suit the rural setting and is a modern



Above: Volunteer planting trees. Photo: © Trees for Life. Below, left to right: Accommodation building An Spiris. Photo: © Paul Campbell Photography; Dundreggan tree nursery. Photo: © Trees for Life.

interpretation of the red tin roofs synonymous with agricultural ‘but and ben’ cottages that are common throughout the Highlands. The roof’s coating uses unique bio-based technology which replaces a substantial portion of the traditional fossil oil with rapeseed oil.

The arrangement of these materials is layered to reveal accent colour and juxtaposition which highlights and accentuates key features of the building.

Sustainability was a fundamental part of the project to create a low carbon visitor centre and accommodation building. An integrated renewable energy system was installed for both

buildings including air source heat pumps, solar heating and electric vehicle charging points, and existing buildings on the estate were retrofitted with energy efficient measures. Environmental sustainability is achieved through passive design strategies, optimising insulation, heating, cooling, ventilation, and harnessing the power of natural daylight. The material palette not only responds to the vernacular and

surrounding landscape but uses resilient materials with low embodied carbon properties. The architectural concept embodies adaptability, catering to diverse user groups and accommodating their varied needs.

Access to nature

A core aim of the Rewilding Centre is to ensure that nature is accessible to all. Although elevated in the landscape, a gently sloping processional walkway was designed to lead visitors under a sheltered canopy lined by timber columns, and into the single-storey Rewilding Centre. The open-plan layout and flexible space blurs the boundaries between inside and out, and the poetry of the architecture lies in the connection created between the internal spaces and the outdoors, while views are curated and controlled for a gradual reveal of the wider landscape.

The Rewilding Centre is positioned efficiently to work with the topography and threshold areas which provide both shelter from the elements and a smooth transition between indoor and outdoor space. The building is characterised by a unique sculptured roof form and elements of wall and timber colonnades that form an enclosure around the external spaces.

The cloistered edge of the buildings blurs its boundaries, culminating in a ‘clearing’ that forms the central gathering space where *Am Bile* is situated. The visitor centre is the heart of the wider Dundreggan estate which is reinforced by its elevated position and represents the gateway through which visitors cross into Scotland’s wild forest.

Created to inspire people to explore and engage with our wild places and to come together with nature, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre is a place of hope that offers connection and inspiration. It is embedded not only in the landscape but in the community who now share this space. For 15 years, Dundreggan has been a beacon for rewilding our landscapes and with the addition of the Rewilding Centre, it will now be a beacon for rewilding people too.

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