

# AWARD-WINNING ACTION

Patrick Laurie says despite all the threats and concerns around upland management, there's actually a whole lot to celebrate, which is exactly what the Golden Plover Award does



## THE HEATHER TRUST

The Heather Trust is an independent charity promoting integrated moorland management across the UK, from sporting interests to agriculture, conservation and carbon management. For more information, you can contact the Trust at:

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Amid the various threats to grouse shooting and upland land management which continue to do the rounds in the press at the moment, it is easy to get gloomy, particularly in Scotland where land reform proposals threaten the very foundations of the sporting estate. It is easy to get lost in all the hype and lose track of the good news, which seldom attracts the headlines or draws a crowd, and it is worth taking a step back from time to time in order to see that the clouds are not as black as they sometimes seem.

To recognise some of the sterling work put in by upland estates, the Heather Trust and GWCT Scotland established the idea of the Golden Plover Award for Moorland Management in 2013, hoping to focus on and provide some of the hardest working upland estates with a bit of much-deserved recognition.

The winner of the inaugural award was Edinglassie, one of the Dunecht estates in Strathdon. A good deal of the criticism levelled at grouse shooting from many quarters is the perceived threat to peat as a result of heather burning, and it is worth noticing that Edinglassie was the site of some of the first trials into "re-wetting", which has recently

found that withdrawing the grit did not lead to an immediate resurrection of worm numbers, and while the situation is being closely monitored, it seems that "holidays" like these could have an important role to play in the future of medicated grit.

The Edinglassie team was well represented at the Scottish Game Fair when the prize was presented, and it gave the joint Heather Trust and GWCT team a hard task in selecting a successor for 2014's award. Working with the Wildlife Estates Scotland initiative, a selection of nominees was finally put forward for consideration.

Loch Choire estate in Sutherland was the first on the list for a visit by the judging panel, who were impressed with this stunning property which provides some great stalking, fishing and walked-up grouse. The terrain at Loch Choire represents a glorious North Highland wilderness, and the land is home to a fantastic range of bird species, particularly waders. Loch Choire is rightly proud of its breeding greenshanks, which can only be found on well-managed peatland in the extreme north and north-west of Britain.

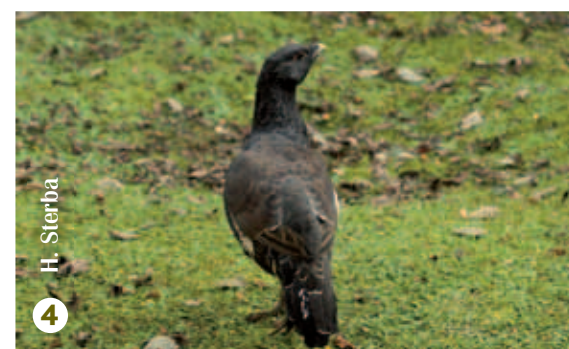
There was then a visit to Gannochy Estate in Angus, above Glen Esk. The team at Gannochy has been working extremely hard for the past decade to restore some of the grandeur of the estate's glory days, and this has told in an impressive return of grouse numbers. With an emphasis on quality of birds over quantity, Gannochy now describes itself as a sportsman's paradise in one of the most beautiful of the Angus Glens. Judges were extremely impressed with the level of work and commitment shown by the keepers and staff, and the estate scored very well on all the key criteria for assessment, including conservation and farm management.

However, the third candidate broke the mould in terms of the Golden Plover's remit to discover and promote the very best in integrated, sustainable moorland management geared at a whole range of outcomes. Finzean is a family-run estate near Banchory on Deeside, with a fantastic mix of different projects and interests underway, all balanced to compliment and work with one another.

The estate comprises 4,000 hectares, with moorland representing just over a third of the area. Game and wildlife management at Finzean is undertaken to support a wide range of species, particularly black and red grouse, and golden eagles, merlin, curlew, golden plover and lapwings are also present.

In recent years, targeted conservation work has focused on sustaining and improving capercaillie numbers, and this has involved customised habitat management measures both in Finzean's woodland and out on the open hill. In a national context, the Scottish population of capercaillie continues to decrease, and recent figures suggest that numbers have declined by a further 35 per cent since 2003. Proper management of the remaining capercaillie habitat is vital if we are not to lose these birds again, and Finzean's hard work in this area is a great example for others, particularly on Deeside where numbers have continued to dwindle in recent years.

Some of this management has tied in to work the Heather Trust is carrying out on heather cutting, and one of the key capercaillie habitat management techniques at Finzean has been to cut forest vegetation below the canopy of scots pines so that birds have a continuous spread of forage available



to them. Tractors and toppers are used to carry out this work, and the effects have been extremely encouraging.

Red and roe deer are managed on both the open hill and in woodland, and Finzean may also be strategically important for the conservation of wildcats.

Until the 1980s, the moor produced bags of 600 brace of grouse a season, but then suffered a steep decline in fortunes. Since then, considerable effort has been put in to improve the upland habitat alongside other conservation initiatives. This has resulted in steady recovery, which has been built in to the many other estate objectives. In common with several other neighbouring areas of ground in Kincardineshire and Aberdeenshire, investment and hard work is paying off on a landscape scale to restore many of these estates back to their former glory.

There is also a great story behind the estate's strong and positive approach to community, and Finzean prides itself on its farm shop and commercial interests that actively involve local people and retain families in the area for several generations.

Balancing commitments to biodiversity across farmland, woodland and upland is a very significant task. Working in collaboration with a variety of partners to achieve this aim, Finzean was a worthy winner of the Golden Plover Award, and they were represented at the Scottish Game Fair by owner Andrew Farquharson and keeper Allan "Hedge" Shand. At an awards ceremony sponsored by Savills, Gannochy were revealed as "runners-up" and Finzean was presented with a beautiful golden plover print by the Scottish pin-feather artist Colin Woolf.

Now that the Golden Plover Award for Moorland Management is entering its third year, the judges are looking for a new list of nominees, and the Heather Trust welcomes applications from estates, farms, individuals or syndicates who have gone "beyond the call of duty" in their management of heather moorland. More information can be found at [www.heathertrust.co.uk](http://www.heathertrust.co.uk) ■



1: L-R: Simon Thorp, Heather Trust director; Adam Smith, GWCT Scotland director; Malcolm Hay, Heather Trust chairman; Andrew Farquharson, Finzean owner, and Allan Shand, Finzean keeper

2: Just over one third of Finzean land is heather moorland, and the estate's conservation plans cover populations of black and red grouse, golden eagles, merlin, curlew, golden plover and lapwings

3: Finzean estate has been working with the Heather Trust to trial cutting vegetation in forestry so the estate's capercaillie have a continuous spread of forage available

4: Across Scotland, capercaillie have declined 35 per cent since 2003, but Finzean is leading by example when it comes to taking care of the bird's habitat



become the peat ecologist's buzzword.

There are major benefits to re-wetting and grip-blocking, and while Edinglassie continues to work on its degraded drainage system, the work was first instigated as a means of improving the horribly eroded ditches so that they would be less of a hazard to grouse chicks. Much of the early work was supervised and overseen by SNH, and it is always worth remembering that the technique, now so popular, had some of its roots in a grouse moor.

Edinglassie was also involved in some of the GWCT's trials on tick mops, and the estate led the way on studies into medicated grouse grit which are now taken as the benchmark for grouse production up and down the UK. In fact, the estate is one of the few that are now involved in trialling what are known as "grit holidays" in an attempt to gauge worm burdens in the absence of medication so as to prevent resistance. Fascinatingly, they have