



# Wildwood plan for Carrifran

This may look like a natural landscape – but it's not. These hills would once have been covered with a rich tapestry of native woodland. So, for the past 15 years, a dedicated group of volunteers has been trying to turn the clock back





In 1993 a group of friends came up with the idea of re-creating a fragment of the wildwood that originally covered the hills of southern Scotland.

They spent years searching for the right place, planning the project and negotiating over costs, before finally buying the dramatic hills around Carrifran in the northeast of Dumfries and Galloway in 2000. And, remarkably, the £400,000 costs were met without the use of any public funding – the money was raised entirely from like-minded supporters throughout Britain and overseas.

Carrifran is a magnificent ice-carved valley in the Southern Uplands between Moffat and Peebles. It covers more than 6 sq km (2.3 sq miles), rises to over 800 metres (2,625 feet) and takes several hours to walk round. Like much of upland Britain, it has lost its natural woodland cover, along with many of the wild creatures that depended on it. That loss came about through a long history of felling, burning and grazing by sheep, cattle and goats.

The large range of altitude at Carrifran offers a chance to re-create a variety of woodland, including treeline habitats around 700 metres (2,296 feet), which are rarely found in Britain today.

The friends who started the project came together as a Wildwood Group in 1995, and also helped to form the Borders Forest Trust. The trust is an environmental charity that seeks to conserve, restore and manage native woodlands for the benefit of people and wildlife.

“We were all sure that we should think big,” explained Philip Ashmole, one of the founding members of the Wildwood Group, “so we set out to create a 6,000-year-old natural environment in a single treeless valley.

“We hoped this would pay back some of our dues to the wild animals and plants that once lived there, as well as make an impact on the minds of those who came to know about it.”

**1**  
The bare hills of Carrifran photographed in 1997.

**2**  
Lonely rowan beside the Carrifran Burn. It now has some half a million trees for company!

**3**  
The hills around Carrifran lost their woodland cover over many centuries.

“The Lowlands of Scotland had once undoubtedly an equal portion of woods with others countries... But I believe few regions have been denuded like this, where many centuries must have passed in waste without the least thought of future supply.”

Samuel Johnson (1775) from  
*A Journey through the Western Isles*

3



## Planting begins

On Millennium Day, 1 January 2000, about 100 volunteers celebrated the purchase of Carrifran by planting the first trees. A complete plan for restoring the site had already been developed, and funding and advice from SNH allowed the steering group to appoint a project officer to take forward the work.

Since then, more than 450,000 native trees and shrubs have gone into the ground. About 10% of the trees have been planted by volunteers, who have contributed their time and enthusiasm to not only plant trees, but also bash bracken, repair paths, remove unnecessary fences and generally clear up.

The rest of the tree planting has been down to contractors who come back to work at Carrifran year after year, and are therefore a vital part of the Wildwood project. Both contractors and volunteers are prepared to work high up in the hills through the winter, probably meeting tougher conditions than just about any other tree planters in Britain.

Decisions about which trees to plant can be made with confidence because the Wildwood Group have identified the tree species that grew in the original wildwood at Carrifran. They have a complete pollen record taken from a peat bog on the site and they're familiar with the conditions that each species prefers. Moreover, they gathered and grew thousands of seeds and cuttings from the Southern Uplands, so they knew the trees being used were adapted to the local climate.





Visitors to Carrifran and those who drive past now can readily see the developing woodland near the mouth of the glen, where some trees are about five metres (16 feet) high. It takes more careful searching to spot the hundreds of thousands of trees and shrubs spread over the more remote parts of the site.

“We set up the Wildwood project to show that, in a world weighed down with environmental problems, we don’t have to just sit back and wring our hands,” added Philip. “We can take action and do something positive.”

“This project proves that people have the power to reverse environmental harm, and we hope it will inspire others to come up with even bolder schemes to restore areas that have been degraded down the centuries.”

4  
Carefully choosing a planting spot to provide some protection for a young tree.

5  
Woodland spreading up the glen in May 2009.

## New project

Given that over 95% of native woodlands have been lost in the south of Scotland, BFT have also been looking for other opportunities to support the public’s enthusiasm for restoring woodlands.

And they’ve just announced that £700,000 has been raised to buy 640 hectares (1,580 acres) of land at Corehead, north of Moffat, which lies just over the hills from Carrifran. The hills and valleys of Corehead were historically part of the wild Ettrick Forest, and BFT plan to restore the heather moorland and native woodland that once thrived there.

The famous Devil’s Beef Tub also forms part of Corehead. This is one of the most iconic landmarks in the south of Scotland, taking the form of a cavernous hollow in the hills where the notorious Border Reivers once hid their stolen cattle.

Corehead extends to within three kilometres (1.8 miles) from Carrifran, offering the possibility of making a connection. The surrounding hills form the watershed between the Tweed and Annan river systems, so there’s potential to create links across the hills and rivers.

If you’d like to read more about Carrifran, then why not buy a copy of the recently published book *The Carrifran Wildwood Story: ecological restoration from the grass roots*, which was also supported by SNH. All the money raised through sales goes to support the project. To find out more about the book, you can download a preview and print off an order form at [www.carrifran.org.uk](http://www.carrifran.org.uk) or buy online at [www.bordersforesttrust.org](http://www.bordersforesttrust.org)