

# Claish Moss

'A Patterned Blanket'

**Between the south-west shore of Loch Shiel and Ben Resipol sits one of Scotland's finest and most unusual bogs. Burns running from the hill to the loch divide Claish Moss into large sections. Each of these rises to a shallow dome, around which is a beautifully patterned blend of ridges and watery hollows.**

**Close-up, this surface texture gives scope for a wide variety of plants to thrive. These include a huge range of bog mosses, which have grown and built up over thousands of years to produce the present-day bog. The domes are so saturated that each is shaped like a huge water droplet.**

## **Moss builders**

A medley of mosses, both living and dead, gives Claish Moss its bulk and growth. Bog mosses of the Sphagnum type are the most important parts of this soggy blend.

Fourteen different Sphagnum species grow here, making it one of the best places in Britain and Ireland for bog moss variety. Many large hummocks of woolly hair moss, some a metre high, are another feature of Claish.

Living moss covers the bog surface. Beneath this cool, sodden skin, layers of dead moss and other plantlife, such as sedges, are squeezed together. Clamped in waterlogged conditions, they darken but don't rot, forming peat.

Year after year, the peat builds up, swelling the bog. It's a slow process, typically between one and four millimetres a year. Thousands of years of growth and pile-up have produced the 3.5-metre-deep peat at the heart of the Claish

domes.

## **A patterned blanket**

Scotland does bogs better than almost anywhere else in the world. Blanket bog - the kind that forms from moss growth in gently sloping places with high rainfall, like here - is the country's major type. But Claish Moss has some features that make it special.

The main burns that flow northward into the loch divide the Moss into four large sections, the largest of which is Tom Liath (or 'grey hill'). Each of these sections operates separately from the others.

But it's the wonderful patterning across the surface of these different moss areas that's breathtaking. Line after curving line of hummocks and hollows fans lochward. The effect is to make each unit look like a giant fingerprint, distinct and complex.

## **Here be dragons**

Water-filled hollows and bog pools brim with life, such as eye-catching dragonflies. Claish is among the best places in Scotland for them, with nine different kinds recorded here. These include the azure hawk and northern emerald - both uncommon elsewhere in Britain. Hawkets are aerial attack specialists, able to catch and eat prey on the wing.

Other notable insects include moths, such as silver and sable; and butterflies, like the chequered skipper, Scotch argus, green hairstreak and small pearl-bordered fritillary.

## **Flower arrangement, wet and dry**

The patterned series of low ridges and flanking pools within bog sections don't simply look good from a distance. Close-up, small changes in wetness at different heights, from hummock-top to hollow-dip, alter the mix of plants here.

Heather, cross-leaved heath, cottongrass and deergrass prefer the drier conditions on ridges. Bogbean grows in pools, where its creamy froth of summer flowers contrasts with the dark brown of the peaty water.

Sundews and butterwort tend to grow along burn-sides and at the fringes of pools. They boost the scarce rations of plant food they get from the acid surroundings by using sticky traps to catch and digest insects.

## **Matters of life and death**

A huge bog might not look like an ideal home for humans. But some folk did once live at the fringes of the mossland.

In 1723, a survey recorded that 13 people from two families lived here and kept a small number of cows, horses and sheep. A map drawn in 1806 shows six houses at Clash and six at Torran (where there are still some ruins), at the south-east edge of the moss. Peat banks close to Torran are one of the few surviving signs of past human use of the bog.

There was also a 'coffin road' through the bog, part of a route to a burial ground on Eilean Fhianan, about a mile (1.5km) farther east up Loch Shiel from Claish Moss. This old route was so important locally that it's still classed as a right of way (though the spread of moss and wetness makes it tricky for anyone to apply that right).

## **Let it be**

Many of the special features of Claish Moss have developed without human meddling. It's the lack of signs of use by people that is one of the unusual features of the place.

So a priority for reserve managers is to allow the Moss to continue to set its own patterns and rates of growth, with little interference. SNH staff check on the bog's condition every few years and control red deer numbers to make sure their grazing and trampling is in balance with the bog

plantlife.

Managers also keep an eye on tree growth at the fringes of the area, to stop it advancing into the bog. Otherwise, it's a matter of leaving Claish to do what it has done superbly well for thousands of years - be big, boggy and brimful of bryophytes (as mosses and some other simple plants are known).

## **Wild waders**

It's perhaps not too surprising that wading birds are to the fore among the birds of such a soggy place. Greenshank, dunlin and curlew all breed and feed here. Some greylag geese also make year-round use of the bog, including as a nesting place.

Two very scarce birds use contrasting parts of the edge of the reserve. In summer, there are black-throated divers at the Loch Shiel edge (the reason why that part is specially protected by European law). On the hill ground to the south, hen harriers sometimes hunt over the heather, seeking one of the numerous meadow pipits or other small prey. Hummocks can be good places for waders and pipits to keep watch for predators. But they can also be good dining tables where hawks or falcons can pluck and eat their kills.

## **Access**

This is a tricky place to reach. You're best to approach and explore it as part of an organised group, perhaps on one of the guided walks that SNH sometimes organises. There's a viewpoint from the forestry track at Sròn na Gaoithe, south-east of Ardshealach, and a path leads out onto the bog from a little farther down the track. If you do venture onto the Moss, please take great care. Some bog pools can be very deep. The flatness of the Moss can also make it difficult to map read in low cloud, mist or heavy rain.

Otherwise, you can get a general impression of the scale of Claish Moss from the viewpoint at Langal, beside the

A861 near the north shore of Loch Shiel, roughly 1.5 miles (3km) east of Blain.