



the National Trust
for Scotland
a place for everyone

Balmacara Estate Newsletter

Issue 27 – July 2009

New Houses for Let at Balmacara Square

Many of our readers will have been very aware of the building work that has been undertaken at Balmacara Square over the past few months. The project has renovated two old houses converting them to three properties. Two will be let on short assured tenancies with the third being used directly by the Trust for key workers, volunteers, students, etc. The work was carried out by William Gray Construction with Project Management being provided for the Trust by Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association. The project included the installation of sustainable heating systems, air-sourced heat pumps, also to be installed in the five existing flats in the next few weeks. It is hoped that this will significantly reduce the consumption of energy required to heat these houses. The project was funded by the Scottish Government Housing Department, the Highland Council and Community Energy Scotland with the balance coming from the NTS. The two letting properties have now been allocated to tenants, along with two other vacancies in the Square.

Possible Partnership with Housing Association

Following on from the Balmacara Square Housing Project, the Trust is investigating the possibility of entering a partnership with Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association for the housing properties it lets on the estate. Under the agreement the Association will adopt responsibility for all administration and day-to-day maintenance of the properties. The tenants will remain tenants of the NTS but their main point of contact will be the Association. There will be a significant benefit to the Trust in terms of reducing the administration burden at the property and budgeting for maintenance should be simpler and more predictable. The tenants should benefit from improved support and better response times to any problems given the scale of the Association's operations in this area. Negotiations are well underway and it is hoped that this agreement will be in place by the end of the summer.

Traditional Croft Management Scheme

Once again the Traditional Croft Management Scheme is in operation this year. The response from crofters in Drumbuie, Duirinish and Plockton has been very strong once more with all the crofters who participated last year entering again this year. The meadows at Drumbuie and Duirinish have been particularly resplendent this summer, perhaps due to the excellent growing weather but also maybe the result of the ongoing benefit of some late cutting of hay and silage supported directly through the scheme. The scheme is funded by NTS with assistance from SNH through our National Countryside Management Agreement. This funding is secure for another season, thereafter things are less certain. This year participants in the scheme will be asked to complete a questionnaire about the benefits and issues associated with the scheme, the feedback from which will hopefully assist in development of a replacement scheme and funding package for the future.

Changes at Lochalsh Woodland Garden

As part of the National Trust for Scotland's ongoing action to reduce costs, it has been decided that Lochalsh Woodland Garden will no longer operate as a garden. Instead, the site will be maintained as a woodland area. Visitors will still be welcome to enjoy its woodland walks. The Trust is currently making plans to protect and preserve important plants from the existing collection, most likely through relocating plants to other Trust gardens. As a result of this change it is with great sadness that Margaret Macleod, First Gardener, is leaving the Trust's employment by reason of redundancy with effect from 23rd July.

Access & Visitor Management Strategy

Starting in August, the Trust has engaged the independent consultants Alba Interpretation to develop an integrated Access and Visitor Management Strategy for the Balmacara Estate. The work will take about 6-8 weeks and it is anticipated that various local groups and individuals involved in outdoor activities, access management, tourism and education will be consulted in the process. The output from the project will be used to plan the development of some new estate walks leaflets and other interpretation, prioritise future access management and footpath work, provide focus for our education programmes and direction of the management of the woodland walks around Lochalsh House following the change of direction in the garden.

Garages at Plockton Car Park

After a long period of no activity, the two garages at Plockton Car park have at last been repaired and are now wind and watertight. At present the Trust has no clear plans for the future use of these buildings, and to some extent that future may depend on current plans within the village to develop a shore-head facility at the south end of the car park. The Access & Visitor Management Strategy will obviously look at the future use of these important buildings but meanwhile the Trust is keen to speak with any interested parties to ensure we take into account all options and opportunities. Enquiries should be directed to Iain Turnbull at the Balmacara Estate Office.

Further Footpath Improvements at Coille Mhór

At the time of writing the Trust has gone out to tender for further footpath improvement works to the path between Loch Achaidh na h-Inich and Balmacara Square. The work will complete the improvements started two years ago and bring the whole route up to an excellent standard, suitable for both walkers and mountain bikers. It is hoped that the work, part funded by SNH, will be completed during the Autumn. Once this work has been completed the Trust will be considering where its next priority should lie for more footpath improvements on the estate. Some funding is secure for ongoing work between now and February 2011 and the next phase will be determined by the Access & Visitor Management Strategy and the available funds. It is also hoped that future access improvements can be brought forward in partnership with crofting townships through the Scottish Rural Development Programme for 2011 onwards.

Progress with Orienteering

The Lochalsh Woodland Park/NTS Orienteering Project is progressing well with over 20 individuals now trained to teach the sport throughout Skye & Lochalsh, more survey work being carried out this summer to extend the area around Balmacara Square that can be used for events, and we now have software to create our own courses. Work is underway to create mobile waypoints that will be put out as a course later this summer. It is also hoped to hold an event sometime in the Autumn.

Tipping of Garden Waste – An Invasive Issue!

Invasive species is a topic that appears in this newsletter frequently, it forms a substantial part of the work that Barbara, the Estate Conservation Officer does throughout the year. The route by which plants get out of gardens and into the countryside is usually through the disposal of garden waste “over the hedge” or in a convenient area outside the garden. This is a very frequent occurrence and has been observed in areas across the estate. This practice is unacceptable, and may be illegal, as it leads to seeds being dispersed, plant clippings can act as cuttings and take root and create problems that can take a great deal of time and cost to control. Japanese knotweed, for example, routinely takes up to five years to eradicate and there are twenty five sites on or around the estate. These dumped sites are also unsightly, can be unsafe to access and the burning of waste can cause a danger of wild fire.

We understand that gardens may not be large enough to accommodate garden waste or that it may seem harmless and more convenient to dump it outside the garden locally but it is not harmless. The effects may not be noticeable to everyone but there are very real environmental effects which the landowner or other agencies often have to expend large amounts of time and resources to mitigate so please do treat your garden waste responsibly.

Rhododendron Control Project

The estate started work on a new programme of control of *Rhododendron ponticum*. The initial work was undertaken at Badicaul and Erbusaig and has generally involved the use of the chemical Glyphosate or “Round-up” as it is more commonly known. Concerns had been expressed about the impact of such chemicals on the environment and the timing of the work which may have caused issues for breeding birds. As a general rule we have adopted a policy of using stem injection with the chemical to kill the rhododendron plants. This minimises the risk of contamination of neighbouring land and produces a more gradual change in the landscape as there is no wholesale clearing of large areas of mature bushes. However, in some cases it is simply not possible to use this technique and other methods have been employed. Suffice to say that in all cases contractors are fully briefed on the preferred methods of control and it is only where these are genuinely not appropriate that we will resort to clearing of sites by the old method of “slash and burn”. The project is funded to run until February 2011 and survey work is ongoing to develop a long-term plan of control. Priority will be given to protecting important and sensitive sites from invasion, e.g. the Coille Mhór woodland, and we will be seeking additional funding for the longer-term plan where we hope to work in partnership with some of our neighbouring landowners.

Volunteer Conservation Officer Starts at Balmacara

The Trust has just taken on a long-term volunteer who will be working as an assistant to our Estate Conservation Officer. The new volunteer, Rachel Tierney. Started work on 1st July and will be with us until Christmas. Rachel is a double graduate in Ecology and Conservation Management from Stirling University and is seeking work experience before going out into the job market. The new and exciting development for Balmacara Estate is a direct result of the accommodation that is now available at Balmacara Square and it is hoped and anticipated that Rachel will be the first of many long-term volunteers to help us with our work over the coming years.

Lesser Butterfly Orchids Galore

The lesser butterfly orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*) exists as a core population in the west of Scotland but has significantly declined to the point of rarity throughout the rest of the UK. SNH and its partner organisations Plantlife Scotland and the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) have worked together to launch the lesser Butterfly orchid survey and have been gathering information about its ecology and mapping the distribution of the orchid across Scotland. The species has been listed for conservation under Scotland's Species Action Framework and as a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species, the lesser butterfly orchid survey will help in the protection and conservation of this declining species.

Within the estate, the species has been recorded at six sites for the second year and one additional site this year, previously unrecorded in Drumbuie. The species is under recorded due to the similarity of the greater butterfly orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), nature and accessibility of the habitats and this year the early flowering of the plant. The orchid has a short flowering season and over the months June and July the lesser butterfly orchid can be spotted in a wide variety of habitats, with its distinctive bright white flowers. Our records will be passed on to SNH and Plantlife and the estate will become a “Flora Guardian” for this important species so monitoring will continue in future years. As always reports of any plants would be welcome.

Birds & Beasties – You Can Help!

In our last issue of the Newsletter Barbara made a plea for your assistance with biological recording. Since then we have developed a Biological Recorder's Pack with all the information anyone might need if they are interested in getting involved in this activity. The pack includes a map of the estate, guidelines on how to get a grid reference, various information leaflets and identification guides and contact addresses. We have also included a summary of our current survey and monitoring priorities so that you can focus on things that we are specifically interested in. If you are interested in helping with this important work the Recorder's Packs are available, free of charge, from the office, or if you email us at Balmacara@nts.org.uk with your name and address we will send you a pack in the post. Meanwhile, if anyone spots anything of interest please feel free to contact us and we can check it out.

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