



MSc Project

Closing date: 01-Feb-24

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## **Woodland expansion in the presence of deer**

Timescale: May - September 2024 (fieldwork June-August ideally)

Location: RSPB Abernethy, Scottish Highlands

Resources available: access to RSPB reserves, accommodation, equipment, data, training, Available for fieldwork for at least 6-8 weeks during June-August, in rough, remote, upland terrain

### **Background**

Scotland was once a largely forested country, but through centuries of human influence, a tiny fraction remains. With one of the lowest forest covers of any European country and the majority comprising non-native plantation, increasing the amount of native woodland is urgently needed.

At RSPB Abernethy in the Scottish Highlands, native woodland expansion is a core management target. Over recent decades, RSPB Abernethy have sought to enable woodlands to expand by reducing deer numbers, as well as small amounts of targeted tree planting and field layer management. Monitoring the success of this management relies on regular surveys to map the extent of regeneration for different tree species.

RSPB Abernethy is part of [Cairngorms Connect](#), a landscape-scale habitat restoration project that is working to restore ~60,000 ha in the Cairngorms National Park. As part of this, the intensity of deer control across Abernethy's open ground was increased in 2019. With the last tree regeneration survey conducted in 2019, there is an opportunity in 2024 to monitor the effect of recent deer control.

There is also an opportunity to compare two contrasting survey methods – plot-based and transect-based – as RSPB Abernethy seeks to align their methods with those used by other Cairngorms Connect partners in neighbouring estates.

### **Brief Aims and Methods**

This project would conduct tree regeneration surveys across the woodland expansion zone at RSPB Abernethy. This would involve several weeks lone-working in rough mountainous terrain in all weathers. The student would be trained in tree regeneration survey methods by a local ecologist, and would have support from the local team, but would need to have a high level of autonomy in completing the surveys and data entry.

The student would have access to historical survey data from 2010/11 and 2019, and could look at questions such as how regeneration is influenced by factors including deer numbers, distance from seed trees, soil, vegetation and aspect. The project could also assess two contrasting field survey methodologies.