
The Pinewoods

Before the British Isles were isles, crossing the would-be English Channel was a breeze. Although there were no swimming trunks back then, the sea was so low that you could walk across from Continental Europe without getting wet. As a tree, you would have still had trouble walking, but your seeds could have been blown by the wind at least some of the way. If they liked where they landed, and grew into trees themselves, then their seeds could have been blown onwards towards the would-be British Isles. So, the trees traveled across the would-be Channel, and not a trunk had to swim.

First came the birch, and second came the pine, but the pine would become more important. We call it the Scots pine. However, its range is larger than Scotland alone, and worldwide it is known by its scientific name, *Pinus sylvestris*. *Sylvestris* is latin for wild, and this wild pine was the dominant tree of the wildwood of Scotland.

What is a wildwood? And what is a woodland? And is a forest something different still?

Wildwood is a word extolled by Oliver Rackham, the woodland historian and disappointed critic of woodland photographs. As a photographer, I have a thing or two to point out about his criticisms (in the other article on this website). Not a historian, however, I have no criticisms of his field, or his woodland word-use, which I am using here. Wildwood, he wrote, was natural, primeval, unaltered by humans. There is no wildwood anymore in Scotland, and maybe not anywhere.

Forest is a word that formerly applied only to land that was designated for keeping deer. Forest was not necessarily woodland. Forest could be moorland or grassland or woodland, but where it was wooded, there too were the deer to devour the seedlings. Prevented from regenerating, woodland could actually become less wooded within a Forest.

Forest is a word whose usage has changed, however. Forest is now applied to any dense community of trees,

and in that sense the words woodland and forest are often interchanged. Nonetheless, forest is supposed to be more dense than woodland.

The Scots pine woodlands of the Highlands, descended from wildwood, are what we call Caledonian Pinewoods. Although their trees were not planted by humans, we call them only semi-natural woodlands, since we and our animals have altered their ecology.

So, how are the Caledonian Pinewoods of here and now different from those of the wildwood? The wildwood came about in the warmer, drier climate of 10,000 years ago. As Scotland got colder and wetter, some patches of wildwood changed into moorland. On moorland, where peat builds up on waterlogged, acidic soils, trees do not readily grow into woodland, if they grow at all. So, the wildwood began to lose ground.

Felling trees does not necessarily kill a woodland. Felling does, by definition, put and end to its being a wildwood. From 5,800 years ago, humans began to fell the woodlands of the British Isles in earnest. If that were all that we had done, the woods we felled would still be woods today. Instead, we let our livestock loose, and they, like the deer that we later would keep in our Forests, had a taste for seedlings. We cleared the woods and we planted the clearings with crops, and we burned other clearings to earn our herds an early bite, and we burned the moors to keep up habitat for game birds, and then we kept clearing and planting and burning. So, between the changing climate, human felling, human farming, and the animals we introduced, the wildwood was changed into moorland, woodland, wood-pasture, or farmland.

In 2008, as I am photographing them and writing this, some of the last substantial tracts of Caledonian Pinewoods are in and around the Cairngorm Mountains. Their names are magical, in Abernethy Forest, Glenmore, Rothiemurchus, Glen Feshie, the Forest of Mar, and Glen Tanar, and whimsical in Deeside and Donside.

The Pinewoods are not only pine, but birch (*Betula* species) and, in places, other broadleaves. They live with woody shrubs, such as juniper (*Juniperus*

communis), the only other native conifer, and subshrubs, such as the several species of heather (*Calluna vulgaris* and *Erica* species) and the berry bushes of the underbrush, bilberry and cowberry (*Vaccinium* species). One heather or another seems to be always in flower. In the summer, whole slopes go yellow with gorse and broom (*Ulex europaeus* and *Cytisus scoparius*), but the purples of heather and greens of the pines are a pleasant palette all year long. Pine, after all, is the draw of the pinewoods.

Scots pine is a tough tree, living on sandy soil with little to eat. The bark of its trunk is so thick that if it came to showing off in front of other trees, Scots pine could stick itself over a lighter and not even flinch: it is fire-adapted, cracked, and purple. The branches go orange with age, and the needles, blue-green, come in pairs. The male flowers are yellow with pollen that, blown by the wind, goes all over. Under ponds and in the peat, in layers, this pollen goes deep into the past, and forms the basis for our understanding of past Pinewoods. Above all that, the pollen, the pines, and the Pinewoods are pretty photogenic.