

## Reviresco

By Dr Peter Ewing

Rovaniemi is a town on the edge. It's where the electrified railway stops and Lapland begins. The Arctic Circle hovers above like a giant halo, as if the place had been somehow beatified. And to add to the frontier atmosphere, Rovaniemi also boasts the world's most northerly MacDonald's restaurant. For some people, civilization ends here.

I walked past the golden arches to the map section of the bookshop, where I spent fifteen euros on a blank sheet of paper. I exaggerate slightly. It had a spattered rash of blue, and whorls of contour lines like a giant's fingerprints. But the rest of the sheet was an intimidating white expanse. In any other country that would indicate moor, or desert, or nothingness. But Finnish cartographers show tree cover as white. In a country that is essentially a forest, it saves a lot of green ink.

Just about every tourist who makes it this far north buys a particular souvenir. A short walk across town took me to the Marttinni knife factory, where I bought the obligatory *puukko*. It was crafted from Arctic birch and forged carbon steel, both warm and cold to the touch. I thought about putting it on my belt, decided that Rovaniemi town centre was more Sauciehall Street than intrepid wilderness, and stuffed it in my rucksack.

An hour later the northbound bus crossed the Arctic Circle without ceremony and deposited me – and, I noticed, no-one else – at the trail-head. It was spring, and a winter's worth of snow was in the river, a horizontal waterfall hurtling to sea.

I walked alone in the woods for four days. Pine and birch, needle and leaf, rock and water. Once I climbed a fire tower and saw only sky and trees – a pinewood extending from horizon to horizon. The trees were what we parochially call Scots Pine, otherwise known as *Pinus sylvestris* or, in literal translation, pine of the woods. This was boreal forest, the great northern tree belt, stretching from here to Siberia, and back through Alaska and Canada. Gaia's emerald necklace, clasped with salt water.

On the last evening I sat whittling by the fire in the midnight sun, surrounded by wood shavings and thinking of my home in Scotland. There the maps are also mostly white, but the significance is different. It means, to quote the Ordnance Survey, scrub, bracken, heath or rough grassland. What used to be Caledonian forest is now bare hillside. A jewel missing from the boreal necklace.

Only traces of the ancient pinewoods remain now, and some of them are more a *memento mori* than living, regenerating wildwood. Throughout Scotland's moors and mountains you find the skeletal remains of trees, partly buried in the peat, bleached white as bone – the ossuary of a long dead forest. Sometimes I feel I am walking through a graveyard.

There are precious living remnants at Rothiemurchas and the Pass of Ryvoan, though many people hurry past them, oblivious, on their way to higher things. A few pines still thrive on loch islands, defended by their moat and uneconomical to harvest. Then there is the Black Wood of Rannoch, and of course Glen Affric. And hope, if there is hope, lies in Glen Affric.

Affric is reputed to be the most beautiful glen in Scotland, and it might be true. You can see it in the distance looking east from the mountains of Kintail, but it's worth a closer look. The two lochs – Loch Affric and Loch Beinn a Mheadhoin are part of a hydro-electric scheme, but the draw-down scars on the banks are less intrusive than is usually the case. Divers nest here, just as they do on Canada's lakes, where they are curiously known as loons. But best of all, Glen Affric is covered by pine forest.

Most of the woods in Scotland's mountain country are commercial plantations of Sitka spruce. Sitka is not native – it originates in the west of Canada where it rains a lot. Unsurprisingly it grows well in Scotland, where it is precision-planted in neat files, a kind of dendritic Trooping of the Colour.

There are a lot of problems with these sterile forests. They are too dense to walk through. The forest floor is as dark as a burial vault, with about as much life. In nature forests become stunted and straggly on the higher ground, forming a timberline, but the commercial plantation ends in a perfectly straight line, edged with a deer fence. Often they do not even make commercial sense, as the cost of extraction sometimes outweighs the timber value.

The forests of Glen Affric are different. The trees are native Scots pine, and you can see capercaillie, pine martens, wood ants, crossbills and red squirrels. Shafts of light penetrate the canopy, illuminating the morning mist. The air is suffused with pine resin, and underfoot the needle-strewn earth is yielding and silent to walk on. Not so long ago wolves walked here, and before that lynx and even bear. Close up, the forest seems vast, but this is an illusion, as you quickly find out if you walk on a bearing. All the remnants of Caledonian forest put together represent only one per cent of what we used to have.

Left to itself, it is a lost cause. Deer numbers are three times higher than they were forty years ago, and their browsing prevents regeneration. They can be fenced out, but then the low flying capercaillie collides with the mesh with bone-breaking force. Some of the trees were young at the time of Culloden, and are too old to seed.

As a doctor I'm familiar with the concept of intervening just enough to allow natural healing to take over. Glen Affric's physician is the conservation organisation Trees For Life. Working with the Forestry Commission and the Natural Trust for Scotland they have planted more than a million native trees. To the west in Kintail, where the enlightened laird is the NTS, pine seedlings are growing again on the mountain slopes. The Camban bothy has a notice asking visitors not to use them for firewood.

The hope that is Glen Affric reminds me of the Clan McEwen crest, which depicts green shoots growing from a tree stump, and the motto *Reviresco* – I will flourish again. It's a long term vision, but perhaps there will once again be a great Caledonian forest from the North Sea to the Atlantic. Maybe one day Scottish climbers will nod with satisfaction as they reach the natural timberline, as their compatriots in North America do. Perhaps the lynx, or even that ultimate symbol of wildness, the wolf, will be reintroduced, though I doubt it will happen in my lifetime.

In a clearing just north of the Arctic Circle I collected the wood shavings from the forest floor and cast them into the campfire. I gazed into the dancing flames, as people instinctively do – not for nothing is it called the 'bush television'. Then I wiped the blade of my *puukko*, cached it in its sheath, and pondered.

One day my great great grandson might inherit a Finnish knife. But a finer heirloom would be a Scottish forest that takes four days to walk through.