

Take in the history, the geology and the varied wildlife as you pass by the meandering river and through the oak and pine woodland of the old Strathrory – Scotsburn drove road.

On sunny summer days, look out for the fluttering jostle of butterflies, with pearl bordered fritillary amongst the orchids, marsh marigolds and other flowers of the grassy areas, and the speckled wood species found along the woodland tracks.

Throughout the year, the calls of the chaffinch, goldcrest, siskin and great tit, amongst the aspen and rowan, will attract your attention, along with the occasional crested tit feeding on insects in the pine trees, or crossbills with their distinctive bill prising open pine cones to feed on the seeds. By the river watch out for dippers bobbing on a rock and singing out loud over the sound of the rushing water or walking along under water searching for insect larvae under stones, or an occasional otter searching out an eddy for a juicy trout. The woodland edge is home to grazing roe deer, and also to the striking black grouse which can sometimes be seen feeding in the trees and, in the Spring around dawn, you might see the males gathering and displaying at their leks, trying to attract the attention of the females for breeding. Hen harriers can be seen quartering across the open ground searching for young meadow pipits for a tasty snack or to feed to their young. Mice and voles need to be careful of the hovering kestrels and sometimes the small merlin. Oncoming summer brings back wheatear, sand martin and common sandpiper from their migrant travels in Africa, and the ubiquitous “chat chat” call of the stonechat looking for a mate can be heard along the riverside whilst heron spear for fish in the shallows.

The valley is rich with the history of human habitation from hut circles, chambered cairns and lynchets (field systems) of the bronze age of 4000 years ago through to clearance settlements of old croft buildings and walled structures. At Coag these are more obvious with evidence of land use from the Bronze Age to recent years. Have a look around and see what you can identify; some of it probably has links with the droving period but which structures?

Overlooking the valley up from Coag is Cnoc an Duin, an unfinished hill-fort, partially built by Iron Age tribes people during a period of fighting about 2000 years ago but why was it never finished? It is worth remembering that, in those days, without the conifer forests which occurred within the last century, the landscape would have looked quite different.

The landforms of the Struie melt water channels were formed at the end of the Ice Age about 14,000 years ago. The channels formed underneath the retreating ice sheet as it melted. The Struie channels are of particular importance as they are one of few known examples of a system of melt water channels in Northern Scotland.

Droving, the overland movement of livestock to market on foot, became more prominent from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards as demand for Scottish beef and mutton from the increasing lowland populations grew and established trysts (markets) became a marked feature of Scotland's economy. The main drove way from Caithness and Sutherland crossed the Dornoch Firth continuing south over the Struie towards the first of the larger trysts at Muir of Ord and further south to the great trysts at Crieff and Falkirk where many thousands of animals were sold annually in October some thereafter continuing their journey as far south as London. As droving developed, smaller local markets were established and the Strathrory – Scotsburn drove road offered a link from the Struie towards Easter Ross and to trysts at Milton, Kildary, Rarichie, and New Tarbat.

Drovers often covered 10-12 miles each day and, to get their livestock to the tryst in good condition, they needed to know where to find the best grazing and resting stances. The drovers themselves often had little more than oatmeal, onions, bannocks and a ram's horn of whisky to sustain them between stances. They would often sleep out in the open in the heather, wrapped only in their plaids or, if lucky, might be invited into a remote croft house or be able to seek shelter in a rough inn. The Highland pony was useful as the carrier of the goods needed by the drover but also to carry the tired drover on his journey back home.

Imagine the steam rising off the cattle after a squall of rain, the smells of the crushed grass and cows, and the shouting of the drovers as they drove the herd forward through the valley that would have been filled with the sound of cattle and sheep.

Improved sea transport and the arrival of the Highland railway lines in 1860-90 provided a quicker means of transporting livestock to markets bringing about the decline of the droving tradition in Scotland. It is said that many drovers emigrated, some to become cowboys in the Americas and Australia.