Transcript
Wild for Scotland Podcast
Episode S5E3 (E51): ‘Vastness of Space’ - The Bogs of the Flow Country
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[main theme tune]

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of immersive travel stories from Scotland.

I’m your host and storyteller-in-chief, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland
Its people, wildlife landscapes and histories.

In every episode, I either whisk you away on a beautiful adventure,
Or introduce you to inspiring locals and their stories.

In between, I share my top tips for your own Scotland trip,
And how to follow in my footsteps.

So, lean back and enjoy -
Let’s travel to Scotland!

[main theme tune end]

Today, we are travelling to a place that is a little out of this world. If someone lifted you up while you're sleeping and plonked you down in this landscape, you'd be forgiven to think that you woke up on another planet.

Luckily, I didn't have to travel quite that far.

We're heading to the Flow Country, a vast expanse of blanket bog in the far north of Scotland. It's a short detour from the most popular road trip in Scotland, and yet totally off the beaten path.

Now, you might wonder how this part of the Highlands fits in with the theme of the season, which is after all Scottish waters. But as we'll hear later on in this episode, a happy bog is a wet bog.

Water is integral to what makes a bog a bog and if you've ever hiked through one, you know what I mean.

I had the opportunity to visit the Flow Country and the Forsinard Flows nature reserve at the start of the summer. I spent three nights in a small B&B and explored the bog on foot, by bike, by car and by train.

Trips like this help me to deep-dive into the places I want to share with you on this podcast, but as you can imagine, they also eat up a large part of our production budget. As a small independent podcast, it's not always easy to make these things happen, which is why I'd like to invite you to join our Patreon community.

Patreon allows you to support Wild for Scotland with a monthly contribution of just £3 or £6.

One of our current supporters is Alice. I asked her why she joined and here's what she said:

I signed up because I have enjoyed your talents in itinerary planning and storytelling for some time. As a new Patreon, I am catching up on all the wonderful bonus episodes. I listen when walking in Pennsylvania yet feel like I'm trekking the hills of Scotland. I pay to stream Netflix and Britbox yet I didn't support a platform that brought me more pleasure than either of those. I can't say enough about how your descriptive prose transports me to Scotland. So I am happy to contribute and support Wild for Scotland.

If this resonates with you and you can afford to spare a few pounds every month, follow the link in our show notes and sign up to our Patreon now.

This episode is split into two parts. First, I'll take you along on my journey through the Flow Country. Then, we'll hear from Milly Revill Hayward who works with the RSPB as a Communications and Engagement Officer and is positively obsessed with bogs. I was only meant to record a short conversation with her, but we ended up talking for almost an hour and I could have gone on listening to Milly's stories about bogs for hours.

I hope you enjoy travelling to the Flow Country together and finding out what makes the water of a Scottish bog so special.

This is ‘Vastness of Space’.

[jingle]

4:15
They say, that the vastness of space makes you feel tiny and insignificant in comparison to the endless expanse of the universe. And that’s probably true.

But you don’t have to go to space to feel like this. You just have to make your way to the northernmost regions of Scotland, and visit the Flow Country.

[Sound: car driving]

My first encounter with this area of Scotland came when I was driving up the A9 to reach the ferry from Scrabster to Orkney. Once you pass Helmsdale, Dunbeath and Latheron, most people remain on the coastal road towards Wick, driving the North Coast 500 to reach places like John O’Groats or the Castle of Mey. The northern end of the A9 in comparison feels almost deserted, and the landscape emphasises that even more.

There is nothing as far as as the eye can see. Some patches of forestry plantation, a handful of wind farms and on the horizon the distant peaks of the Northern Highlands.

The rest is empty and bleak - or so it seems to the naked eye. Zoom in a little, stop and learn about this place, you’ll find that you’re moving through one of the most significant landscapes in Scotland. The vast blanket bogs of the Flow Country.

Blanket bogs are a complex and fascinating landscape. They are a kind of peatland that you can find in places that are cool and wet. They began forming about 10,000 years ago when there was a big change in our global climate that created the perfect conditions for them. Ever since then, the blanket bogs of Northern Scotland have grown thicker, at a glacial pace of 1 mm per year.

Today, this bog covers a huge area of Sutherland and Caithness. In fact, it is the most intact and extensive blanket bog system in the world. And there’s a lot to see.

After spending a week on Orkney, I find myself back on a road through the Flow Country. This time, I’m heading north from Helmsdale to Forsinard, a tiny settlement in the heart of the blanket bog.

Not all of the Flow Country is currently protected, but here in Forsinard, there is a vast nature reserve owned by the RSPB. They make parts of the bog accessible to walkers, survey what birds and other species call it their home, and most importantly, work to restore parts of the bog that have been eroded or damaged by forestry plantations.

To learn more about their work, I follow the advice of Milly Revill Hayward. She’s the Peatland Engagement and Communications Officer of the nature reserve and recommended a number of trails and activities to immerse myself in the bog - figuratively only, I hope.

7:15 [Sound: walking on gravel]

My tour begins at the train station in Forsinard. I look around the visitor centre that was created in one of the low buildings on the platform. There are interactive displays, interpretation boards and screens to watch films about the peatlands, its animals, plant life and people.

Blanket bogs get most of their water from precipitation, but for the last few days, the sun has been beaming down, and today is no different. No rain means drier bogs.

Across the train station, I pick up a trail and follow a wooden boardwalk. Left and right I can see ditches and dams, put in to retain water and replenish the bog. But today, they look eerily dry.

The ground is covered in low vegetation. Yellow, brown, green and orange grasses. The fluffy balls of cottongrass sway in the wind. Fleshy green leaves force their way through the cracks of the boardwalk.

My steps carry into the distance, a silence that is only broken a handful of times, when a car drives over the cattle grid near the train tracks.

Ahead of me, I can see a towering structure. A lookout tower with a slanted roof. Its wooden batten walls look grey, all colour drained by the sunshine and washed out by the heavy rainfall that keeps this landscape alive.

This endless and flat-looking landscape.
8:52
[Sound: Skylark singing, footsteps on gravel]

I keep walking towards the tower and stir up a Skylark, a bird that is impossible to miss, once it hovers above your head, singing its wild song like a car alarm on steroids.

I wonder what the Skylark sees, what the blanket bog looks like from 50, 70 or a hundred metres up in the air.

[Sound: footsteps on the steps]

Lacking my own wings, I climb the Lookout Tower for a similar view. Up here, even though it's been dry for days, I can see what makes the bog so special.

[Kathi says: That's beautiful]

An endless system of interlinked pools. Dark blue, brown and black waters, framed by grass and heather.

Back on the path, I sit down on a flagstone. It's not high enough above the pool to dangle my feet above the water, and so I sit cross-legged on the warm rock, and lean forwards to get a glimpse below the surface. Hundreds of little plants are growing out of the water, a simple stem topped by either a few bright green leaves, or a cluster of white flowers. The stems continue below the surface for an inch or two, before they disappear into the murky depths.

It's here on ground level, that I start to appreciate the abundance of life in this landscape that seemed so empty just a few moments ago.

I let my gaze wander across the ground and spot a myriad of plants. There is heather and grasses, cottongrass and butterwort. I can see two types of sundew, so small, it's easy to miss when you're standing up.

But the star of the show is without a doubt the sphagnum moss. Or mosses, I should say, because there are various species carpeting the ground and lining the pools, building up the layers of peat below the surface. They, together with the water, make blanket bogs so special.
11:12
11:12
The next day, I find myself back at the train station, but this time, I've got my bike with me. I'm waiting for a train to arrive and take me to a remote part of the Flow Country, far away from paved roads.

[Sound: train rattling on the tracks]

The journey is magnificent. There's something about sitting on a train and moving through a landscape devoid of roads. That feeling of being in the vastness of space comes back into my mind.

I get off at Altnabreac station. It's a request stop and the platform is so low that the conductor brings a set of yellow steps to allow me to disembark.

[Sound: train gliding on tracks, door beeping, bird song]

I listen as the train engine revs up, the conductor blows his whistle and the doors beep shut. A few moments later, the train has disappeared around a bend and I'm alone.
12:20
There is a handful of houses near the station, but no one seems to be home. I get on my bike and start making my way down a forestry track.

[Sound: cycling on gravel]

In this part of the Flow Country, the conifer plantations are still standing. I cycle up and down the tracks, along the River Thurso and to the shores of Loch Dubh. Eventually, I spot a pond in the distance and ditch my bike at the edge of the road.

[Sound: Bike breaks squeaking, footsteps on wet ground and grass]

The ground beneath my feet is squishy and even though I know that I'm not walking on pristine peatland, it feels like a respite from the shaded forestry.

The pond lies in an open area. It's framed by an array of plants and it's hard to tell where exactly the ground ends and the water begins. I climb over a gentle knoll covered in dry heather and find a good spot overlooking the pond. High enough for a good view, but still close to the water to observe the details.

[Sound: birds singing in the background]

There are dead leaves and long strings of grass floating on the surface. I spot some movement among them and take a close look with my binoculars. A beetle is walking along the line of grass, its feet making dents on the water surface.

A little further away, tadpoles are swimming frantically back and forth, their bulging bodies almost reaching out of the water. But the same thin layer of water tension that allows the beetle to walk across the water, keeps them firmly below the surface.

Further away still, a patch of soft rush is poking out of the pond and from it, two blue dragonflies emerge and chase each other across the water. I try following them through my binoculars, to get a closer look, but they move so quickly in and out of the frame.

I lower my binoculars and just watch them mesmerised as they perform their dance through the air.

On my way back, I watch again as the seemingly lifeless landscape of the blanket bog rushes by the train window. Only that I know now, that in this vast space, there is plenty of life to discover, if you just look closely.

What fascinated me the most was the stark contrast between how the blanket bog looks like from afar - the road, the train or even the birds-eye view from the Lookout Tower that made me feel so small and as if I was looking at a lifeless desert. And then, there's what it feels like to immerse yourself in this landscape on the ground level. How rich and full of life it is when you crouch down to look, sit and listen.
15:23

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A few weeks later, I catch up with Milly from the RSPB. My trip to the Flow Country has left me with a lot of questions, and impressions I want to share with her.

[Sound: Ringing of an online phone call]

I ask Milly what it is for her, that makes bogs such a fascinating place to live and work in.

[Interview with Milly Revill-Hayward]

MRH: One of the things I really love about it is that you kind of have to work to get to know it and to really appreciate it. So like you say, when you're looking at it from afar, it's very, very different to when you get up close. Um, and you have to spend a bit of time there to really understand it and get to know it, I think. So whether that is walking along one of the smaller trails and just picking out wee pieces of area and seeing how many different species you can find, or even just the way the birds, you have to hang around quite a long time to see the birds.

Whereas sometimes if you go to the coast or the woodland, it's much easier, the nature's right there in front of you, whereas in the Flow Country you have to search for a little bit more. Um, and I think it's that bit more rewarding when you have to spend a bit of time and give a bit of effort, to really start to appreciate it.

And I think that makes it really special. Um, and yeah, I just think it's one of these landscapes that's wild and rugged and, I don't know, a bit scary to some people. You know, you think bog, I know some people think *Lord of the Rings* in the swamp, but actually it's not a scary place and you're not gonna, I mean, you might fall in, but you're not gonna fall in the way that a lot of people think you might.

Um, and it is, it's just this amazing place that is really underappreciated and not talked about enough. Um, and it's brilliant.

And it is amazing when you look out. Onto that open area and you can see the mountains so far away and it almost looks like there's nothing in between. Um, but I mean, there's so much, but it is, it's just flat and open and it's amazing. It kind of makes you feel really nice and small and tiny in the same way that space does. I think sometimes. So I really love it, but I think some people can look out and think, oh, there's nothing there. There's nothing to see. But there's, yeah, there's so much more than meets the eye.

KK: And with a site so big, is it of global importance as well? Is it something that is, you know, not just significant for the north of Scotland, but to the wider kind of global community as well?

MRH: Definitely. So the Flow Country, like I said, it's primarily blanket bog habitat and although blanket bog is the most common type of peatland in the UK, it's actually globally rare. So the Flow Country encompasses 5% of the global resource of blanket bog, and we actually have the best quality and largest expanse of blanket bog around the world. So it is really, really important. Um, it's important in its own integral right, I think, but also it's amazing for carbon storage and biodiversity, water regulation and just cultural and heritage reasons as well. So, I mean, it's an amazing area. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world, so it's pretty incredible to see, especially when lots of people don't necessarily realise. What, what's there? And if you travel up to the north of Scotland, there is this brilliant place that's kind of right in front of you, but so many people just drive straight through it and don't quite take account of what's going on. Like when you say driving up the A9, they don't realize what they're driving alongside.

KK: Yeah, because I think, like you said, it does look empty - (**MRH:** Mm-hmm.) - or like there is nothing there. Whereas in fact, of course there is quite a bit. And having spent, you

know, multiple days in, in the Forsinard area, I have kind of dipped into many of these things. So both the kind of nature is one side. So, watching birds, watching insects, spotting plants, and trying to identify as many species as I can personally name, which isn't that many probably.

Um, but I also went up to Bettyhill, to the [Strathnaver] museum, also down in Helmsdale. Learned about the peat cutting and the kind of cultural heritage of the communities of those areas of Scotland. So yes, there is just so much to explore and see, and I think a lot of people make that mistake of just driving through. So I'm very glad I finally corrected that (**MRH:** Yeah, definitely) for myself.

KK: What can visitors expect when they come to Forsinard and the Nature Reserve?

MRH: So visitors to Forsinard, we've got two main trails at Forsinard Flows. We have our Dubh Lochan Trail, which leads out to our Flows Lookout Tower, Um, and that's really, um, an appreciation of the, the pool systems that we get out in the Flow Country. So it takes you to a bird's eye view of what the pool systems look like. A lot of the time you don't - you can see a couple of them out in front of you, but because it's so flat, you don't realise actually what an intricate system it is. And so you really need to get that height in order to see quite how many they are. And they're amazing. They're beautiful reflecting dark pools.
And that's actually, that's what Dubh Lochan means. It's dark pools, dark water. And so it's brilliant to see those. And we've got loads of dragonflies and damsel flies on those pool systems, which is great to see, and also all the vegetation, so lots of Sphagnum mosses, which are the key peat forming species in the Flow Country.

But also carnivorous plants such as Sundew and Butterwort, all of your heathers and cotton grasses swaying in the wind, and bogbean, which comes, it comes straight out of the pools themselves. So that's a really amazing thing to see.

And then we also have our Forsinain Trail, which is slightly longer and that takes you up and it gives you a really diverse view of the Flow Country as a whole. So you walk up through farmland and then out onto the blanket bog, you get to see some of the restored areas which have been felled, and then back down along the riverside, down in the strath.

So that gives you a really nice whole picture of what all the different habitats in the Flow Country can look like. And I think that's really important because although the Flow Country is known for blanket bog it's actually so special because it has these pockets of different habitats and ecosystems as well.

Um, so a lot of our breeding wader birds, so our big three species, our Dunlin, Greenshank, and Golden Plover, and they like to breed out on the blanket bog. But they will come and feed on the farmland. And so that relationship is actually really important that they have somewhere to come and feed, and then go back to their nesting site on the blanket bog.

But other bird species we get is - we have loads and loads of Meadow Pipits and Skylarks. Those are the kinda big ones that you're almost guaranteed to see if you go for a walk. Um, and then we've got, um, divers and ducks. So Black-throated and Red-throated Diver, Scoter, Teal, Mallard, and then lots of raptor species as well.

So if you're lucky, you might see a Hen Harrier, which - I don't know if you managed to see one when you were out, but they're amazing. The males are white, grayish, ghosty kind of color, and they've got black wing tips. They're amazing and they breed in the area and, um, If you've seen the Hen Harrier, you might also have seen it doing it sky dancing.

Um, so they do a beautiful sky dancing display and they also have a behaviour called food passing where when the female is on her nest, in order to not give away the location of the nest, instead of the male coming down with the food and going directly to the nest, they will pass food mid-air. So as he comes along, he will drop the food and the female will come up to grab the food mid-air. And so that's a pretty amazing thing to see.

But other raptors, there's buzzards and golden eagles. We are getting some white-tailed eagles in the area now as well, and short-eared owls. So there's so much to see. But it is, you do have to bide your time a bit when you're trying to find something. Um, but it's really special when you do see it.

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KK: So it sounds like the biodiversity is of course one of the big benefits of the Flow Country and and Forsinard and having a nature reserve there. Is there anything else that you would say that's why this place is so important and why it's so important to restore it as well and, and recreate more of it again.

MRH: Definitely. One of the things that has been publicised quite a lot recently is a peatland's ability to store carbon. So as peatlands form, they trap carbon in the layers of peat and that means that we're sequestering carbon within peatlands. This happens at a very slow rate, but the peatlands in the Flow Country store a huge amount of carbon. It's about 400 million tons, which that number doesn't mean a lot to me either, if it doesn't mean much to you. But it's about three times the amount of carbon that is stored in all of the UK's woodlands.

So although we talk about woodlands and trees being an amazing source of carbon storage, they are, but peatlands are so efficient and they are the most efficient land-based carbon storage. And so because it's a very slow process, we're also, when we talk about them storing carbon, we don't necessarily mean that they're really good at taking it quickly out of the atmosphere - becasue they're not.

But when you have damaged peatlands, they are actively emitting carbon. And so it's really important that we keep them healthy because otherwise they are gonna be leaking carbon out [into] the atmosphere. And if they're good, they're helping us with climate change. And that's brilliant, but bad condition, not so much and they're actually contributing to carbon, to climate change instead.

So they're really important for carbon storage. And that is one of the big things at the moment, you can get funding for peatland restoration through their ability to store carbon, which is great because anything we could use to restore some peatlands is amazing.

But one of the other things they're really good at doing is regulating water flow and maintaining water quality. So in Scotland, about 80% of our drinking water comes from upland habitats such as the peatlands in the Flow Country. It's why people say that Scottish water tastes so good, and it's because they're filtered through upland ecosystems.

And so as the water flows through the peatlands, a lot of the bad contaminants are taken out and you're left with really high quality drinking water. And water companies do realize the value of that as well.

But the other thing they do, so a lot of the water in peatlands, it all comes from rain in blanket bogs. It's all precipitation. And in a healthy peatland that surface will absorb rain as it falls down and can it slow any water flow down. Whereas if again, you have bad quality peatlands, the rain instead isn't absorbed but can flow over the top, and so good quality peatlands act as a buffer against floods and fast-flowing water. So that's really important as well.

KK: It's almost like a sponge, isn't it?

MRH: It is. That's, yeah, that's it. Just absorbs it and, yeah.

KK: Yeah. Obviously a lot of the area has been and still is covered by forestry, and I know there's new legislation about not being allowed to plant trees when there's a certain amount of peat depth (**MRH:** Yeah.) So I'm wondering what that relationship, I guess is like now with the forestry, I guess it's forestry commission, right? Or private land owners who, who have forestry land and what effect that has on the work that you do.

MRH: In the Flow Country, there's quite a unique problem which is really negatively affecting our peatlands, and that's the planting of non-native forestry. So in mostly the seventies and eighties, there was a big drive for timber production, which meant that the UK government, um, gave a tax break to landowners who wanted to plant forestry on their land. Peatlands have been seen in the past is not the most productive of land areas. They're not very good for agriculture, they're not very good for having livestock on, not very good for developing on. So when this tax break came into place, landowners were like, great, we can earn some money from our land. And so huge areas of the Flow Country were planted up with non-native forestry.

So the trees they mostly planted were Sitka Spruce and Lodgepole Pine, which are two non-native conifer species, but they grow pretty much anywhere, which is why they were planted in these massive monocultures. This, the issue is, is that one, they're non-native, so they would've never been here and they're planted in monocultures, so there's really virtually no diversity there whatsoever. And a lot of the peatland species can’t live in or nearby that. So that really pushed a lot of the quite rare plant and animal species away, from huge areas of the Flow Country, but also it, it integrally damages the wet nature of the bog. So in order to plant these trees, drainage ditches are put in and furrows are put in for the trees to really reduce the water levels as much as they can. So it's not boggy, but the boggyness is what makes a bog a bog. So taking away that water means it's completely unhealthy and dry and no good for anything and as to how it functions normally.

So it can't be forming new peat or new carbon or storing new carbon. Any [of the] waters flowing through there is going straight through. It's not stopping that water flow, it's just passing straight through the drainage channels, not being filtered at all. And actually there's something that happens as well in degraded peatlands, like those that have been planted with forestry is that you get loads and loads of leaching from the soil with that fast-flowing water.

So it's just really not good quality water, not storing carbon, no wildlife that is meant to be there can live there, and it's no good for the peatlands whatsoever. And so a lot of our work at Forsinard has focused on felling those areas of non-native forestry, and trying to restore them to near natural peatlands.

But it is a process that takes a very long time. So we started working in the Flow Country in the nineties with a few different partnerships. And we are seeing improvements now, but the research suggests that you do have about 25 to 30 years before you start seeing the peatland function in the same way, as if it had never been planted, but obviously you're never gonna get up to that same level of functioning no matter what you do. So it is, it's a very long process. It looks like quite a destructive process. So as you'll have seen when you walked through the restored areas, felling the trees and leaving them there, it doesn't look very pretty.

But that is the best way to do the restoration. And over a period of time you will get that vegetation layer of Sphagnum mosses coming back and the water levels will rise again and it will start to look like blanket bog again. But it is, it's a very long process after what was essentially kind of five, 10 years of massive peatland destruction really. And it's something that we are still seeing - areas that are being felled and then re-forested, which is really quite a, it's quite a punch in the gut really when there's so much hard work going on to try and stop this. And we also have an effect where if there is still standing forestry near areas that are either pristine peatlands, so never planted, or areas that have been restored, you still get the non-native conifers seeding onto the bog. So a lot of our work during the winter season is actually about going and removing these conifer saplings from areas where they are gonna grow into full-grown trees if we don't do anything about it. So it's quite frustrating cause it seems like quite an uphill battle, but it is something that is fairly unique to the Flow Country as an issue.

KK: Yeah, it's incredible to think the amount of damage that can be done so quickly. (**MRH:** That's it). And then how long it takes to even marginally try and undo it again or, or restore what has been damaged. That's, yeah, that's crazy.

MRH: And I think it's quite tricky because some people see the forestry and you think, oh, forests - great. Uh, but it's all about. Right tree, right place. These are conifers, non-native, (**KK:** Yeah) we don't want them in the Flow Country. They wouldn't have been here. Along areas like along the straths and the rivers, you would've actually found native woodlands. And we do actually have areas of native woodlands that have been purposefully planted in areas where they would've been found historically. But it's just this monoculture, huge areas. It doesn't work like that. (**KK:** Yeah.) in nature.

KK: I think it's also good to keep in mind that when you walk through it, or you're on the road through a forestry plantation, you see the edges. (**MRH:** Yeah). And the edges are gonna be much more diverse than anything inside. So, uh, yeah, absolutely.

So this season is obviously about water, and we've talked a lot about water and you mentioned many different things in relationship to water (**MRH:** Mm-hmm.) on the peat bogs. Can you tell me what makes the waters of a blanket bog - that ecosystem - what makes that water different from the water we may find in a loch or in an estuary or in a river?

MRH: So peatlands are categorically wet places. That is what makes them a peatland. Um, the way peatlands form is with waterlogged conditions, which make it anaerobic. So that means that the vegetation on the surface, so mostly Sphagnum mosses, but also grasses and sedges, um, they cannot fully decompose. And then that is what forms the peat over a long, long time. Um, it's a rate of about one millimeter per year. So the water and having waterlogged areas is the most important thing about a peatland. And in a healthy peatland you will find, that it's about 90% water in the ground and 10% peat. So that is a huge amount. All of the water from a blanket bog, it depends on your different peatlands, so some of the water in things like fens, it will come from rivers as well, but on blanket bog, the water just comes from rain. You find blanket bogs in these big open areas where the rain falls and stays. So it is staying there, making everything nice and wet and boggy. And in Blanket Bog you also get these amazing pool systems forming, um, where they're super deep pools.

Um, but it's pretty amazing. So the, I guess the water of the blanket bog, is different in that it is staying there, it's in the ground, it's integral to the blanket bog habitat, and you get species there like the Sphagnum mosses are amazing at holding water and they love to live in boggy places. And so they're really characteristic of the watery nature of the bog as well.

KK: And one of the things I noticed was that, and I guess that has to do with that sponge effect of the bog, is that the, the levels of the peat pools can actually be different even though they're right next to each other, which I thought was just mind-boggling to see and actually really see - it’s not just something you read about and then kind of think that that's there - but you can actually see there's a big difference between some of the pools.

MRH: Yeah, definitely, and it fluctuates. I mean, I don't know. I can't remember quite when you were around, but it was really dry, I think, when you were there. (**KK:** Mm-hmm. Yeah it was) And so the levels it was of the pools were really quite low compared to how you would usually see. But something to bear in mind, I guess, when it's, when it is as dry as that, because the bog is so wet underneath, you get this drier or crispier layer. But as long as that layer remains, you should have wet underneath. So although it looks really dry and the pools are looking a bit sad and sometimes just a bit muddy as opposed to actually watery, um, It should still be nice and wet underneath. And that's where having good quality peatlands really matters.

If it's good quality, it's wet. I watched a video recently, um, from a co-design project about peatlands in Aberdeen. Um, and the school children, their phrase was “a wet bog is a happy bog”. And that's exactly it it just encapsulates it. So yeah, good bogs are wet.

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KK: Is there anything else that you wish people knew about blanket bogs or the Flow Country or Forsinard itself?

MRH: I just wish more people came and stopped by and had a look around. I think it's very easy. There's so many people doing the North Coast 500 now and they travel around the outside, typically pretty quickly and don't necessarily take the time to come inland as well. I mean, the coast around the north coast is, I mean, it's amazing as well, there's no doubt about that, but - do a 180 and turn inland, and have a, we look around because - I mean, it's such a massive area.

There's so many different things to see. It's a totally different landscape to what a lot of people would've seen before. Because of that vastness and openness and how it makes you feel. It really is quite wild as well. I mean, I look out on it and I have to tell myself, oh, this has been managed by people for a very long time, even though it looks rugged and untouched - that's not necessarily the case. But I just think it's somewhere that isn't visited enough, isn't understood enough. And we're getting there - people are talking about peatlands more and more. I mean, this podcast is proof of that. But I still wish more people understood how special it was. I still get lots of people who say, “I don't - Why, why do you work up there? I don't understand.” But I just absolutely love it. I couldn't imagine not so - come to blank et bogs. Find one near you.

(**KK:** laughs)

One of the big things that has actually been in the works for quite a long time, since the eighties really, is the Flow Country World Heritage Site bid. This was way back when in the eighties, it was mentioned that the Flow Country would make an incredible World Heritage Site because of how good the blanket bog habitat is. And so since then there have been people that have been working behind the scenes to make that happen. Applying for World Heritage Site, there's a two step process really. So you have to convince the UK government and then the UK government will put forward to the site, to UNESCO. So we have been on the UK government's shortlist or tentative list for about 10, 11 years. But this year they proposed us to UNESCO as a new World Heritage Site. So that is really, really exciting. There's lots, lots of different partnerships have been working on it.

The two main reasons that we want the Flow Country to be a World Heritage Site is one, because of the brilliant quality and expansive blanket bog. So it's a globally rare resource and we have the best example of it anywhere in the world. And secondly is because of our really quite unique bird assemblages. So we have birds really at the extremes of their ranges in the Flow Country, and they, are brilliant to see. And also quite a few of them are rare as well. So it's, because of the good quality of our blanket bog and because of the wildlife we have here as well. And so it's really exciting that this is happening now. I get to be a part of it, which is an amazing thing to be a part of, and if we're successful, it'll mean we'll join the likes of the Great Barrier Reef, Skara Brae, Grand Canyon, and that would, that would be amazing for the Flow Country. So fingers crossed.

KK: And of course places like St. Kilda, and other UNESCO World Heritage sites in Scotland as well. (**MRH:** That’s it.) So, yeah, fingers crossed for that. Maybe last question. What is a

way that people can, um, kind of follow the work of the RSPB in Forsinard and get in touch, maybe join you for a walk out and about. What is the best way for them to do that?

MRH: So the best way to keep updated is to have a look at the Facebook page - it's RSPB Highlands and Islands. Um, and so that covers not just Forsinard Flows Reserve, but our ones out on the Outer Hebrides and the Central Highland Reserves as well around Inverness. But otherwise you can just send an email to the reserve, which is forsinard@rspb.org.uk and they can send you in the right direction.

KK: Fantastic. And we'll put those links and contact details in the show notes as well. Um, thank you so much Millie, uh, for taking the time and for speaking to me about bogs.

It's a fascinating topic and I've learned so much even from our conversation today and from my visit to the Flow Country, and I hope people find this episode just as inspiring to come and visit as well.

MRH: Brilliant. Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's been brilliant.

[jingle]

I hope you enjoyed this trip to the Flow Country of Sutherland and Caithness and my conversation with Milly Revill Hayward. I will add all the information about how to get in touch with Milly or keep up to date with the RSPB Forsinard Flows to the show notes.

If you enjoyed this episode about bogs, head back a little in our feed and listen to the episode ‘The Big Picture’, which features two stories of nature restoration including one about bogs.

Now, it’s time for the practical part of the show. Here are five travel tips to get the most out of a journey to the Flow Country.

Tip number 1) Spend a few days exploring the Flow Country

You can probably guess that it’s not enough to simply drive north on the A9. You really have to take the time to walk some of the trails and I highly recommend visiting the bog at different times of the day.

I spent three nights at Forsinard Lodge, a small B&B in walking distance to the train station, the RSPB visitor centre and the trail to the Lookout Tower. It was a great homebase for my trip.

Tip number 2) Take binoculars

While much of the exciting plantlife I found was right beneath my feet, the Flow Country is also a great place for bird watching. And for that, you’ll want to bring binoculars - and maybe a bird ID book.

Tip number 3) Hike the Forsinain Trail

There are two trails at RSPB Forsinard Flows. In the story, I mention the shorter one along the boardwalk to the Lookout Tower. But there is also a longer trail that leads from the farmland in Forsinain up onto the blanket bog, through areas of ongoing peatland restoration and along one of the many rivers of the region.

The trail gives you a good introduction to different habitats in the nature reserve, and how they all work together to support an abundance of life. It takes about 2.5 hours but isn't too strenuous.

Tip number 4) Have a meal at the Crask Inn

While it isn't exactly around the corner from Forsinard, the Crask Inn near Lairg is a great place for a meal if you're exploring the Flow Country by car. It is easily one of the most isolated pubs in Scotland and offers great food in stunning surroundings.

Tip number 5) Remember the people

While this episode focuses primarily on the natural environment of the Flow Country, the area is of course also home to many people and has an interesting social history.

Historically, the glens and straths of Sutherland and Caithness would have supported thriving villages and settlements, but during the Highland Clearances, many people were forced off their land and moved to the coast or emigrated overseas. Two museums that tell the fascinating and often heart-breaking social history of the area are the Timespan Museum in Helmsdale and the Strathnaver Museum in Bettyhill.

In this week's newsletter, I'll tell you more about my trip to these museums and other historic sites, like brochs, heritage trails and clearance villages, I found on my journey.

I highly recommend you learn about this aspect of Northern Scotland as well.

You'll find the link to sign up in the show notes.

[main theme tune]

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to the Flow Country and the RSPB Forsinard Flows nature reserve.

Next week, we're heading back south and look at a landscape that is coastal and yet not quite the sea. I hope you'll tune in again.

Thank you so much for listening to Wild for Scotland! If you enjoyed this story, remember to take a screenshot of your podcast app right now and share it on your Instagram stories. And don't forget to tag us, so we can say thank you.

Wild for Scotland is part of the Tremula Network - adventure and outdoor podcasts off the beaten path. The show is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Thanks to Fran Turauskis who is the co-producer and editor, and does the sound design. Michelle Payne and Anesu Matanda-Mambingo are supporting us with social media and transcripts. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next time, when we travel to a different watery place in Scotland.

[main theme tune end]

[post roll ads]