Holyrood Park

Marlene:

Hi, welcome to Walking Woods. I'm Marlene Cramer and I'm taking you for a walk. Not in the woods, but in Edinburgh.

You should now have a good view over Holyrood Park. I'm sure you can see Arthur’s seat, the park's highest point. You'll also see the Salisbury Crags, the impressive series of cliffs that are up to 46 metres high. Something that you might not immediately see are trees. This is why, even though you might be most interested in trees in the Scottish landscape, I am not here with a tree expert but with a park Ranger, Matt McCabe.

Matt:

My name is Matt. As you know, I'm conservation Ranger here in Holyrood Park and, kind of like most Rangers, I’m kind of like a Jack of all trades. So, you know, and I know a bit about flowers, a bit about bumblebees and so on, without actually being an expert in in any one taxa. Trees, obviously, I know a fair bit about trees, but Holyrood park is not really famous for its trees. There are some special trees in the park, but it's much more important as a grassland.

Marlene:

How come we see so few trees in Holyrood Park?

Matt:

I mean, it was covered in trees, to varying degrees, until people started chopping them down.

Marlene:

And in that, Holyrood Park is very similar to the rest of Scotland and Great Britain. After the latest Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago, virtually all of Britain was covered in trees. But our tree cover started to decline as early as 4000 before Christ, when people started to clear the land for agricultural uses. By the mid-14th century, England had a woodland cover of 10% and Scotland only 4%. By the early 20th century, woodland cover in England had also reduced to just 5%. The story of Holyrood Park is similar.

Matt:

I mean, there's some evidence that trees sort of came and went, but certainly since the beginning of the industrial revolution, kind of like everywhere in in Scotland, trees were cut down to initially fuel the… fuel industry and then the British Empire, of course.

Marlene:

And trees that were only used as fuel were, sadly, often not valuable enough to replace. And since most of the other timber industries had disappeared in favour of cheap imports by the 20th century, people were not really planting trees. This has, of course, since changed. The Forestry Commission was founded in 1919 and this institution supported the planting of trees and so the homegrown timber industry. We have come a long way since then and the way in which we treat forests has changed a few times in the last century. Nowadays Scotland boasts a 19% forest cover and it's going on 14% in the UK. One of the things we are thinking about more and more is how forests can support different functions and be valuable for timber production and society and biodiversity at the same time. Of course, Holyrood Park as one of the most well-known parks in Edinburgh, is mostly useful as a recreation space and urban wildlife habitat. And so the non-existent forest in the park does exactly what we want it to do…

Matt:

People are aware that trees are good for drawing down carbon from the atmosphere. So yeah, planting trees is absolutely vital, you know, for addressing climate change. But people ask, why don't we plant them in Holyrood Park? And it's simply because it is a grassland. You know, we could plant 10,000 trees in Holyrood Park. But we won't have a woodland. Then we'd just have a grassland with trees in it. Because you know, woodlands are everything from the soil chemistry and the fungus that supports to the ground flora to the insects, you know, it's not just about trees. So, you know, we could plant trees here, but all we'd end up with is a very, very denuded grassland, a degraded grassland. And a lot of the species, which are pretty rare in Holyrood Park, are grassland specialists. So we would lose all those species without really getting much benefit from the trees. So yeah, trees should be planted, definitely, but not in Holyrood park.

Marlene:

With no trees in the way, you also get spectacular views from the top of Arthur’s Seat, so do go on a hill walk if you have the chance. Plus, you might have the chance to spot a few special trees on the way.

Matt:

There are some special trees. There's rock white beam, which is nationally scarce. It's *Aria rupicola*, which is, yeah, it's very similar to the common or Swedish whitebeam you'll see all around Edinburgh, but it's specialised for rock faces. It's actually quite interesting because. It does produce berries, kind of like the other, like rowan and whatnot, and it can take pollen from other species. So, for example, if things like rowan is around growing nearby pollen is carried from rowan to the rock white beam that will stimulate growth of the berries and the seeds. But it won't actually take any genetic material from the other *Sorbus* species. So, it can actually produce clones of itself, so it's quite interesting in that way. We've got about 22 individual rock white beam in here. So part of the job is to protect them.

Marlene:

If you want to see these trees for yourself, you can spot them along the path to the summit.

Matt:

So if you're coming in from the Commonwealth pool, then follow the path that splits in two. So, if you're following the left hand path, you'll pass four rock white beam.

There's one other quite special tree which, unfortunately, nobody will be able to see. Because it's right in the radical road. But it's a genetic variant of the common ash. It’s a unifoliate ash. So normally ash, the leaves are pinnately divided, so it looks kind of like a feather. You know the central vein and the leaflets coming off it. But this one it it's not divided at all. It's just each leaf appears as just one large leaf. So, unless you do genetic studies you probably wouldn't recognise it as ash. And there's not many of them in the country, but there is one in Holyrood Park, but it's unfortunately… you won't be able to walk anywhere near it because the path is closed for rockfall safety concerns. But it exists, you know it's there.

Marlene:

There is another very special area that is also hidden from view.

Matt:

Just thinking about Bawsinch. It's, technically, it is part of Holyrood park and, again, people wouldn't be able to access it, as managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and you need to be a member. The most recent use was as a kind of, sort of, scrap yard in the 1970s. The Council we're going to build on it, but Scottish Wildlife Trust raise enough money to buy it and protect it as a reserve. And they've planted trees there since the 1970s and there's at least one example in there of every tree which is native to the British Isles. So, it's a really good place for doing tree identification courses.

Marlene:

Well, why don't you do your own tree spotting on a nice stroll around Holyrood Park and Duddingston Loch. But before you go, don't miss out on the last stop of the tour. The map takes you just around the corner to the new parliament building.