

Forest Lab* is an innovative new initiative from Sylva Foundation and Forest Research. It enables UK woodland owners and managers to become volunteer ‘stewardship scientists’ by joining science projects, collaborating with researchers and sharing data to support woodland resilience.

Justin Thomas, an owner of small woodland in Aberdeenshire, shares his experience of participating in the Forest Lab ‘Tree Growth’ project, which aims to improve understanding of the response of trees to woodland management and climate change.

Forest Lab Case Study

Tree Growth ‘Stewardship Scientist’ Justin Thomas



What is your background?

I worked in the oil industry for 30 years as a geologist and petroleum engineer and then became interested in forestry. I studied environmental and forestry management at Aberdeen University to learn more and decided to purchase a small woodland just outside Aberdeen.

What type of woodland do you own and manage?

Plyfold Wood is 6.3 ha and made up of mainly Scots pine and larch together with Norway spruce and some Sitka spruce. There is also some dense regeneration of birch trees. I believe the woodland

was planted in the mid-1960s and there has been little active management for at least 20 years. I bought it 18 months ago and my plan is to thin out some of the trees, and increase the diversity of the woodland, both in terms of age and species. There is public access and it is used by local dog walkers.



Justin's 6.3 ha private woodland in Aberdeenshire, Scotland

Longer term, I'll be looking at felling some trees for firewood and timber, but I'm keen to follow the principles of continuous cover and I'd like to maintain and increase the wildlife, so biodiversity is an important factor too. Woodland craft is also something I might consider as a retirement hobby. I've started a PhD so don't have as much free time as I'd like to spend in my woodland, for now anyway!

Are there any particular challenges you have identified in your woodland?

As some of the trees are quite large and the woodland hasn't been

thinned for a long time, firstly I want to ensure the woodland is safe. Some of the trees are leaning on each other and may be at risk of windthrow. For example, I'm looking to replace the line of mature trees that border neighbours' properties with smaller deciduous trees like hazel or rowan.

What do you use the myForest platform for?

I've used the Sylva Foundation myForest platform to create a map of my woodland and so far, I've marked on the map where I've taken mensuration surveys. My aim is to create a more formal plan for the woodland that I'll share with my neighbours, who are quite interested in what's going to happen to it.

Why did you sign up to the Tree Growth Forest Lab project?

It was a combination of factors. I'm undertaking my own forestry research and I wanted to support other researchers, so there was a feel-good factor for me. I was interested to get information on my own trees, to understand if they are still growing and at what rate, and I'm also hoping to make some connections with other woodland owners and researchers and gain tips and advice on how best to manage my woodland.

How have you found the process so far?

It's been quite straight forward since signing up

via the myForest platform. I received five girth bands in the mail, along with a clear explanation on how to use them. Three had short springs and two had long springs, so I needed to identify which five trees would be best suited, based on the list of species types that were specified in the instructions. I selected Scots pine, as this was the only species I had in my woodland that was on the list, and I wanted

“Apart from learning more about your own woodland, you'll hopefully get more out of it than you contribute in terms of feedback on your data, contact with others and gaining practical knowledge.”

to get a good spread across my woodland. The girth bands were easy to attach, and I used a GPS device to record where they were located. I take measurements each month and upload the data via Forest Lab which is now live within the myForest platform.

I've not yet started any other of the projects in Forest Lab but the 'Resilience' project interests me. First, I'd like to boost my plant recognition skills, and I know that digging a soil pit won't be easy as there are lots of stones and boulders on the site, but it's on my list of things to do! I'm also looking forward to receiving feedback on the data I'm providing and hearing how it's being used.



Is there anything you found tricky?

Even with a GPS tracker, it wasn't easy to locate the trees as the girth bands are

Justin takes monthly readings from the girth bands and uploads the data via Forest Lab

quite well camouflaged. I have now put bright yellow ribbons around my five trees so they stand out more!

What would you say to other woodland owners who are considering taking part in a Forest Lab project?

I'd encourage it! Apart from learning more about your own woodland, you'll hopefully get more out of it than you contribute in terms of feedback on your data, contact with others and gaining practical knowledge.



Local wildlife includes red squirrels, pine martens, deer, foxes and badgers



Justin's mature woodland includes Scots pine, larch, Norway spruce and Sitka spruce

*The Forest Lab initiative is delivered by Forest Research and Sylva Foundation, and funded by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra). Forest Lab uses the latest online technology, hosted on the myForest platform designed and run by Sylva Foundation, to advance knowledge exchange between landowners and scientists and increase forest resilience.

Find out more about Forest Lab:
myforest.sylva.org.uk/lab