

A Guide to Cornwall's Temperate Rainforests

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Temperate rainforests are some of the most biodiverse habitats in the UK and some of the rarest habitats in the world.





These magical places require conditions occurring in less than 1% of the planet, with high oceanicity, high rainfall, and low annual variation in temperature. Parts of the west of Britain, including Cornwall, have just the right conditions to support these rare habitats. Epiphytes – plants that grow on other plants – and bryophytes (mosses and liverworts), and lichens can flourish in them. Hazel glove fungus, string-of-sausage lichens, and tree lungwort, these bizarre organisms with strange names are some of the best natural indicators of temperate rainforests. The insect-rich conditions also attract a host of migratory bird species. These habitats could even provide a vital tool in fighting climate change, with their great potential to absorb carbon from the atmosphere.

Temperate Rainforest Indicators



Polypody Ferns
Polypodium vulgare



String of Sausage lichen
Usnea articulata



Hazel Glove fungus
Hypocreopsis rhododendri



Tree Lungwort
Lobaria Pulmonaria



Filmy Fern
Hymenophyllaceae



Temperate rainforests are known for oak, birch, ash, pine and hazel. But here in Cornwall, the Cornish – or sessile oak – dominates. Pay a visit to the wooded valleys around Bodmin Moor and see these wisened old oaks twisting skywards, bracing in the prevailing wind, festooned in lichen and donned in thick pelts of moss, polypody ferns curling out from their branches. Although most broadleaf woodland in Cornwall is on some kind of temperate rainforest landscape scale, these more extensive, older woodlands are the finer, more definitive examples.

As rare as these places are, they give us a glimpse of our native woodlands as they once were when they covered much of the west of the British Isles. From the west of Scotland, Cumbria, Wales, down to Devon and Cornwall would once have been a large swathe of temperate rainforest – before our need for wood and pasture outgrew our want for woodland.

The places that remain are fragmented and in decline. They are under threat from overgrazing, invasive species, and climate change. One of the biggest threats comes from the *Rhododendron ponticum*; a plant first brought to Britain in the 18th Century and then planted extensively to provide cover for game birds on Victorian hunting estates. This purple-flowered shrub thrives in the same Atlantic woodland conditions that temperate rainforests do. Unfortunately, the *Rhododendron ponticum* is aggressively invasive and will rapidly colonise and take over woodland, outcompeting plants and shading saplings. Yet, to date, you can still buy it in garden centres across the country.

A tiny oak sapling is a tasty morsel to a deer or sheep and a flock will soon chew through a woodland's hope of producing young trees. While overgrazing also creates conditions for invasive plant species to take a foothold. So until we have better regulation to control the sale of invasive species, investment to act on the removal of *Rhododendron ponticum*, and a sensible solution can be found to maintain safe exclusion zones to keep grazing animals away from existing temperate rainforests, these habitats will be in a constant state of decline.



Rhododendron ponticum

20% of Britain's land could accommodate the conditions for temperate rainforests. And thanks to campaigns such as the Lost Rainforests of Britain, media focus from the BBC's Wild Isles series, and organisations such as the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust, awareness of these precious places is growing. Across the country, rainforest projects are sprouting up like saplings. Organisations and landowners are starting to take action.

In Cornwall, the Thousand Year Trust, has ambitions to expand its work preserving and restoring the land at Cabilla near Bodmin Moor to sites across the county and beyond. And with the continued investment of businesses such as Aviva, which in February 2023 announced a £38m donation to restore Britain's lost temperate rainforest, there's hope for the temperate rainforests of Cornwall.

Kernow Conservation is seeking to help rainforest regeneration across Cornwall. We are currently in the process of forming partnerships and gathering funding for potential rainforest restoration projects.



Temperate Rainforest in Cornwall you can visit

The map shows a few sites in Cornwall where there is accessible temperate rainforest.

It's important to remember to treat our remaining rainforests with care. Never take anything away aside from litter. Be mindful of the lichens, plants, ferns and trees so not to damage them. Close farm gates and keep dogs on leads. Over-visiting of sites can be detrimental if care isn't taken.

You can also visit lostrainforestsofbritain.org where members of the public have submitted a number of example sites to an online map. Or explore your local area and find some undiscovered rainforest fragments close to home.



A close-up photograph of a tree trunk in a forest, heavily covered in bright green moss. Several ferns with delicate, feathery fronds are growing from the mossy surface. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a dense forest environment.

“The next phase is to attempt
to restore our lost rainforests
to something approaching
their former glory.”

Guy Shrubsole

Further Reading

The Lost Rainforests of Britain
by Guy Shrubsole (2022)

The Rainforests of Britain and Ireland
by Clifton Bain (2015)

The Ancient Woods of The Helford River
By Oliver Rackham (2019)

Useful links

[Lost Rainforests of Britain](#)

[Thousand Year Trust](#)

[The Woodland Trust](#)

AUTHOR BIO



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