

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

Welcome back – busy beavers are lodged in law as a protected species

This is a historic day for Scotland, with the Eurasian beaver being granted full citizenship having been hunted to extinction in the UK in the 16th century, principally for the fur trade.

The beaver is now a protected species, reinstated after years of being absent from our roll-call of native fauna and no longer annexed culturally to a passing mention of fur hats or alluded to within place names.

Significantly, this is the first time that an extinct mammal has been returned officially to our shores, with the milestone following a decade of work.

The very first beavers to set their webbed paws down in Knapdale in 2009, deep in the heart of Argyll, were from Telemark in Norway, where populations once numbering only 30 have now expanded across the whole country.

This reintroduction was carried out under the banner of the Scottish Beaver Trial, a ground-breaking five-year partnership led by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, hosted on land managed by Forestry Commission Scotland, now known as Forestry and Land Scotland.

From a global perspective, the trial joined a growing list of projects working to standards set by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to attempt the reintroduction of lost species. Examples range from the return of the Iberian lynx to Andalucía and scimitar-horned oryx to the Sahara.



Helen Senn and Gill Dowse report on developments since the once-native animal was reintroduced to Scotland

In a small corner of Scotland, the trial beaver population settled into their new home. Many partners and colleagues collaborated, with present day reintroductions drawing on the tools of veterinary science, ecology, sociology, genetics and a host of other disciplines.

Scottish Natural Heritage led independent scientific monitoring to assess the effect that beavers were having on local environments and people. Tourists gathered to try to catch a glimpse of this new and elusive beast in the flesh.

It was soon clear that the beavers were having a marked effect on their environment, as indeed they do across the rest of their range. They are foresters, builders and hydraulic engineers rolled into one, their actions to dam watercourses and change waterflows in turn increasing biodiversity, enabling invertebrates and amphibians to flourish.

Any situation where a species is busily improving its environment has the potential to produce conflict with neighbours, especially those working the same land. Understandably, many in the farming community had reservations. Weighing up the impacts of a species reintroduction,

measuring its effects, learning from the small scale and replicating to the large are central to modern conservation practice. This is important, both to understand how humans and the species in question can come to a point of coexistence, and for the welfare of the released animals.

Following detailed reporting of the outcomes of the trial, the Scottish Government announced in 2016 that it was minded to allow beavers to remain in Scotland.

After much discussion between conservationists, farmers and land managers through the Scottish Beaver Forum, a consensus was reached that their return would require European Protected Species status alongside an effective management framework.

Reaching this point was difficult, with a second population of beavers having unexpectedly appeared in Tayside, causing anger and delight in different quarters.

This population today numbers around 450 animals, with some making their homes in areas of prime agricultural land. Lessons on impact mitigation needed to be transferred quickly from other parts of the world where people and beavers are living



↑ Beavers have been reintroduced to Scotland, almost four centuries after they

were hunted to extinction in Britain for their fur, with an official population in Argyll and an unofficial one in Tayside

in close proximity. Scottish Natural Heritage now provides practical advice and assistance to farmers where required.

At that stage, beavers were still unprotected by law and concerns surfaced that unregulated culling was occurring in ways which were compromising their welfare. Meanwhile, the Scottish Beavers reinforcement project began, a further partnership between RZSS and the Scottish Wildlife Trust to release and monitor beavers in Knapdale, supported by players of the People's Postcode Lottery.

Today, ten years down the line, legal protection comes into force and we welcome beavers back into our natural and cultural heritage. A framework to manage their return has been published, which we hope will allow

an economically harmful effects to be mitigated, while enabling populations to expand and the ecological advantages to be gained. In doing so, it is vital that the highest regard for animal welfare is maintained and unregulated culling is prevented.

Conservation is essentially about people learning to live more closely with nature, which needs to be consistently emphasised through

environmental education. We face a stark choice – to accept the continued erosion of our natural heritage, or row against the tide to ensure our wildlife is not consigned to the history books.

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Watch the birdies! Farm count delivers best ever results

Spotters tally 93 species over 60,000 acres of Scottish land

A fantastic effort from farmers across the UK has helped secure a best-ever year for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's (GWCT) Big Farmland Bird Count (BFBC).

Results show that 1,400 people – 40 per cent up on last year – recorded 140 species over one million acres in the GWCT initiative, which took place between 8 and 17 February.

Encouragingly, 30 red-listed species were recorded, with five appearing in the most-commonly seen species list.

These included fieldfares, starlings, house sparrows, yellowhammers and song thrushes, with the first four seen by more than 30 per

cent of the farms taking part. The five most abundant birds in the UK count overall were wood pigeons, starlings, lapwings, black-headed gulls and rooks. A total of 148,661 were spotted, making up nearly half of the total number of birds recorded.

In Scotland, 61 farmers took part, recording 93 species across 57,881 acres. The most-commonly seen species were blackbird, blue tit, chaffinch, pheasant and robin and a total of 18 red-listed species were recorded. Last year in Scotland 43 farmers took part, recording 79 species across 32,424 acres.

Jim Egan of GWCT, who has coordinated the count for the past six years



said: "It's brilliant to see an increase in the number of participants. The fact that, in many cases farmers and bird-watchers have worked together and inspired each other shows the power of sharing our skills and knowledge."

The average farm size of those taking part across the UK was 739 acres, with 66 per cent growing arable crops, 52 per cent having beef or sheep, and 13 per cent growing field vegetables. Dairy farms, horticulture units, poultry producers and pig producers also submitted counts.

Survey areas included important environmental features such as hedges, woodland ponds, grass margins, ditches and trees. The BFBC

was launched in 2014 to highlight the positive work done by farmers and gamekeepers in helping to reverse the decline in farmland birds. The count offers a simple means of recording the effect of any conservation work currently being instigated by farmers and gamekeepers, such as scatter feeding birds through the winter or growing crops specifically to provide seed for birds.

Dr Dave Parish, head of lowland research, GWCT Scotland, said: "We are encouraged that more farms took part this year than last, not just in Scotland but over the UK as a whole."

"The more participants there are

then clearly the better we can determine the health of our on-farm wild bird species."

The GWCT is grateful to NFU for sponsoring the BFBC, which was delivered in partnership with FWAG Association, LEAF, CLA, Kings and NFU Scotland.

To see the UK results in full, visit www.bfbc.org.uk/2019/results



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