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Landowner flies in elk to get a really wild show off the ground



David Lister, Scotland Correspondent

For a “lost” species that has not lived in the wild in Britain for 3,000 years, Hercules and Hulda were doing pretty well yesterday.

With the exception of the mud, and the interminable Scottish rain, they appeared to be adjusting quickly to their new home on a boggy hillside in the Highlands. “They’re already using the shelter we built for them,” said Hugh Fullerton-Smith, general manager of Alladale Estate and Wildlife Reserve in Sutherland, who flew them over from Sweden a week ago. “We think they’re going to do just fine.”

The two European elk – known as moose in North America – may look comical but they are part of a deeply serious project to build the first wilderness reserve in Northern Europe. Paul “the Wolfman” Lister, multimillionaire son of a retail entrepreneur, also hopes to bring back wolves to Britain along with other long-lost carnivores, including brown bear and lynx.

The wild animals would ultimately take over 50,000 acres of restored pine and birch forests. Scotland. Initially, the elk will be let loose in a 450-acre (180ha) enclosure. Their interaction with 15 wild boar and about a dozen roe and red deer will be closely monitored by zoologists from the University of Oxford.

During the flight, the two elk – one bull and one cow – were kept in the hold section at the back of the 18-seater aircraft, but occasionally poked their heads into the cabin to see what was going on. They were born within weeks of each other in May, and are expected to mate within two years. By the time they are fully grown they will be 8ft (2.5m) tall and weigh up to three quarters of a tonne.

“Every animal we bring back is a piece of the jigsaw – the bigger picture is the carnivores and that takes time,” Mr Lister, 48, said yesterday.

“I’d like to think that we could have the wolves within the next five years. These carnivores don’t need the vegetation and the tree cover that takes so long to grow. If we were to have a 250sq km area now, the wolves would survive in there beautifully.”

Although his estate already has 23,000 acres, Mr Lister needs an area more than double that to sustain two packs of wolves – up to 15 animals – three pairs of lynx and up to 30 brown bears.

He hopes to enlist the support of some of his neighbours, who include farmers worried that wolves will devour their livestock. The reserve is to be enclosed by the longest electrified fence in Britain, measuring 3m (9ft) high. He hopes to attract up to 30,000 visitors a year, who would tour the park in Land Rovers or on horseback.

Rather than buying the surrounding land, Mr Lister’s preferred option is to find neighbours willing to go into partnership with him. He said: “It’s really going to be in the hands of the community as to whether or not this is going to happen.”

Although a dangerous wild animals licence is needed for the wolves, one of the biggest obstacles is likely to be winning over his critics, including the Ramblers’ Association, who would have to agree to a change in their access rights to the land.

The lost species

Wolf Last in Britain shot in 1743

Lynx Remains, dating from 7th century, found in Yorkshire

Brown bear Survived in Britain until Roman times

Wild boar Disappeared in the 18th century but already reestablished in some parts of the country after escapes from captivity

Beaver Thought to have survived in wild until about the 13th century. Some live on private estates