

# THE INDEPENDENT

## Back from the dead: Could wolves and wild boar roam Britain again?

**Sanjida O'Connell reports on the lost species now set to make a return**

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'It's about time that stories such as Little Red Riding Hood were put into context and people understood that wolves are absolutely terrified of man.' Paul Lister is a man who plans to put such fairy stories to bed. The owner of an estate in Scotland, Alladale, he's hoping to reintroduce wolves, among other predators, back into their natural habitat – albeit into an enclosed bit of wilderness.

The number of species in the world that are critically endangered has risen to 16,306. This means that one in four of the world's mammals, one in eight birds, one third of all amphibians and 70 per cent of the world's assessed plants are in now in jeopardy. Fortunately, a few UK species have been successfully brought back from the brink by being reintroduced, either through captive breeding or by transporting animals from other countries. Grahame Madge, a spokesman for the RSPB, says: "We have obligations to restore wildlife that's lost from Europe, both due to legislation – the Birds and Habitats Directives – and a moral imperative. Since our landscape has been completely and utterly altered by man, we have to take the moral responsibility to bring these lost species back."

The trouble is, reintroducing species is not simply about releasing them into the wild. Ecological consultant Derek Gow has had to become involved in extensive work to safeguard and restore parts of the River Dore before water voles could be reintroduced, as well as finding ways to remove mink. "Like it or lump it, the future for us with nature and wild animals is going to mean some methods of constraint," he says.

At Alladale, Lister is creating a nature reserve, into which he hopes eventually to release extinct predators. As well as the wolves, he has plans for bears and lynx. Professor David Macdonald from Oxford University says: "At Alladale there is the potential to do something radical, useful, important and well-founded." Gow says: "Alladale is not perfect. It's essentially about keeping a lot of wolves in a cage. But it's still a remarkable project."

Whether Lister succeeds or not, a number of animals in the rest of the UK have already been restored to their natural habitat.

*Sanjida O'Connell will be presenting Nature's Top 40, a guide to our best British wildlife*

*spectacles, on BBC2. She's the co-author of Nature's Calendar, a guide to British wildlife published by Collins. 'Moose in the Glen' will be shown on BBC2, 8pm, 16 April*

### **Beavers**

Beavers should finally be reintroduced to the UK this year. In Scotland, the Minister for Environment, Michael Russell, looks as if he will back a release into Knapdale. South of the border, Natural England (NE) is running a feasibility study, which is due to be completed in June. "It's highly unlikely that NE will conclude it can't be done, since beavers have been reintroduced to every other major European country," says ecologist Derek Gow. There are between 60 and 100 beavers in the UK, but in private enclosures, such as the Cotswold Water Park. The reintroduced beavers are likely to come from Norway.

### **Elk**

Last year, two elk were flown to Alladale in Scotland from Sweden. The second-largest species of deer, they are closely related to Scotland's red deer, and became extinct in Britain 3,600 years ago. Initially, the elk will be in a 450-acre enclosure, monitored by biologists from Oxford University. They are expected to mate within two years.

### **Corncrake**

Once, the British countryside echoed with the peculiar call of the corncrake. Its throaty rasp is a little bit like strumming on the teeth of a comb with your credit card. They are rarely seen, though, since they skulk in the grass; they also migrate annually to Africa. The bird started to disappear from England more than 100 years ago; it has a toehold in Scotland thanks to a collaboration between the RSPB and local farmers in the Hebrides. On Coll Island, for instance, farmers harvest hay from the middle of the field towards the edge, which prevents the birds from being minced by the mowing machines. Over the past few years, the Zoological Society of London has been breeding corncrakes at Whipsnade Zoo and releasing them into the Nene Washes. Last September, more than 100 birds were successfully bred.

### **Wild boar**

Wild boar are thought to have died out in Britain in the 13th century. In Norman England, they were a major game species and kept in enclosed parks. The last wild boar is thought to have lived in the Forest of Dean, where some escapees are still found today. Ten wild boar are being kept in a 500-acre (200-hectare) enclosure at Alladale and are being studied by PhD student Chris Sandom. Scotland has lost 99 per cent of its Caledonian pine forest, which has had a disastrous impact on Scottish wildlife. One suggestion is that wild boar could provide a new ground preparation method for the regeneration of forests. Sandom's subjects all have GPS devices and will be monitored to see what effect they'll have on the habitat, as well as investigating the wider environmental, social and economic impacts the reintroduction of boar to the Highlands would have. Because wild boar need more woodland than Alladale possesses, there are no plans to release them. "Down the road from us there are some woods that would be perfect, but it would be up to the neighbours to join us in our vision," says Lister.

### **Common crane**

This is a bird of superlatives: it is our tallest breeding species and has the longest wingspan, at almost 2.5 metres. It's an elegant grey with a bundle of tail feathers like a Victorian bustle, and its sonorous bugling calls can be heard up to six kilometres away. The first cranes to breed in this country for 400 years were at Hickling Broad in 1979. Their location was kept a secret and over the next two decades their numbers rose to about 40, with four pairs of breeding birds. "There's an aspiration to bring cranes back to another part of the UK apart from Norfolk as they haven't thrived there," says RSPB spokesman Grahame Madge. The organisation is carrying out a feasibility study at present to determine which areas would suit the cranes best. The birds will eventually come from east Germany, which has more cranes than the habitat can support and will be brought over as eggs and reared here until their release.

## **Wolves**

Wolves were hunted to extinction in Scotland in the late 1700s. Paul Lister, owner of the Alladale estate in Scotland, plans to reintroduce wolves on to his land, although they will be fenced in. He says: "I'm very aware that I'm not actually reintroducing species, because that means bringing them back and releasing them into the wild – it's a release into a controlled environment." Ramblers are concerned that having wolves in large enclosures would impede their right of way. Lister's response is: "It's time ramblers realised that we have to put aside parts of the landscape for wildness and animals, even if that involves changes to current legislation and our way of thinking."

Research published in Proceedings of the Royal Society indicates that reintroducing wolves could help the ecosystem by reducing their prey, red deer, which would then allow Scotland's forests to regenerate and encourage higher numbers of rare birds, such as the capercaillie.

## **Sea eagle**

These magnificent birds became extinct in 1916, but even by the mid-1800s they were confined to wild, remote areas of Scotland's west coast. The RSPB began reintroductions in the Seventies, and there are now 36 sea eagles or white-tailed eagles around Rum and Mull. The charity is in the third phase of its programme, breeding birds to reintroduce to the east coast of Scotland. "The population has continued to expand," says RSPB spokesperson, Grahame Madge, "but not really disperse. We are hoping to establish other centres for these birds, including reintroducing them to England."

A feasibility study to see how they would fare in East Anglia is being carried out. The chicks, which are from Norway, will be fitted with wing-tags and radio backpacks so they can be radio-tracked for up to five years. This has not been done before, and it is hoped that the technology will give researchers a unique insight into the birds' dispersal, survival and establishment of breeding territories.