

## Call Of The Wild

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### One Highlands estate is to become a wilderness reserve, writes Lisa Marie Johnson

I've recently found myself musing on why, in this age of luxury linens and 24-hour room service, an increasing number of lifestyle initiatives are so keen to reacquaint us with our wild side. There was Channel 4's *The Wild Gourmets*, which saw Guy Grieve and Thomasina Miers roasting venison in a force 12 gale; and Punk Publishing's *Wild Swimming*, for which photographer Daniel Start went skinny-dipping in icy lakes. And now *Wildfitness* is exhorting us to rediscover the beast within by running barefoot through the 'urban jungle' of Regent's Park. So I was intrigued to be invited to Alladale, where MFI heir Paul Lister wants to reintroduce wolves to Scotland.

Actually, what Lister wants to do is 'rewild' his 23,000 acres of the Highlands, regenerating the wilderness that was there before the trees were cut down to make way for sheep and the sheep were shooed out to create the hunting, shooting and fishing estates of today. In Lister's vision, a denuded landscape overpopulated by deer will be replaced by forests of Caledonian pine, birch, rowan, aspen, alder and holly, supporting a similarly diverse range of fauna from lynx, bears and wolves to moose, wild boar and red squirrels. A 'controlled release of wolves' is part of this vision.

Why Lister should want to rewild Alladale is easily explained. 'Stalking has turned deer into a dominant species that is detrimental to the landscape,' he says. 'And to cover your costs you have to diversify your activities. A wilderness reserve would be both sustainable and a huge attraction — there haven't been wolves in Scotland for 300 years. It would also get people to think about other species. It ticks all the boxes: economics, ecology, the environment, education and employment.'

The actual process of rewilding is more complicated. Lister's inspirations are the Carpathian mountains in Eastern Europe, which still have lynx, bears and wolves, and the Shamwari Game Reserve in South Africa, which sits on reclaimed farmland. He and his team have started by replanting trees (more than 100,000), culling a controversial number of deer (almost 500 last season), and reintroducing a handful of wild boar and a pair of rather sensitive European elk, which they are hoping will breed in the spring. The idea is that the wild boar will rootle around in the bracken, turning over the ground and helping the trees to self-seed.

For the full rewilding experiment to stand a chance of succeeding, however, it will need more space: an additional 37,000 acres at least and ideally much more than that. This means Lister will need to get his hands on adjacent land and/or persuade his neighbours to join in. He would then put up a large perimeter fence and pull down all the internal deer enclosures. But the fence is another headache. The Right to Roam brigade doesn't like the idea, for a start.

Lister believes he will get round these hurdles. Since deforestation has affected soil and seed quality, there's plenty to be getting on with in the meantime. But it's a beautiful vision for what is already a very beautiful place, offering epic views down Glens Mor and Alladale and the full Highland complement of crystal-clear rivers, black bogs, purple heather, velvety deer and golden eagles. Guests can go mountain biking and trekking on white, fairy-tale ponies, or clay-pigeon-shooting, trout-fishing and deer-stalking ('you beauty!'), with fantastically competent and likeable rangers. The seven-room lodge is an elegant home from home, with a well-stocked drinks cabinet, exceptional canapés and food, a parlour full of Hunter wellies, a gym and sauna, and attractive, cosy bedrooms, half of them refurbished by Laura Ashley. A hydroelectric turbine, providing 80 per cent of the lodge's energy requirements, and a vegetable greenhouse the size of two tennis courts are both imminent.

The lodge itself, which costs from £125 per person per night, is rented out for family and corporate weekends, photography and yoga breaks (the excellent Yogoloji runs a retreat here every May). But from next April, loved-up couples will be able to book two luxury eco-boothies at the head of Glen Alladale, and Lister hopes to redevelop a second lodge on the reserve as a six-suite hotel. He's also hatching a plan for a spa, with steps down to a natural, icy plunge pool. That would take care of the Wild Swim. All that would then be needed is a haunch of venison on a spit and a pair of wolves' eyes glinting in the firelight.

*Alladale Wilderness Lodge & Reserve* For more information and reservations call Cara Richardson 01863 7553338 or visit [www.alladale.com](http://www.alladale.com).