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The return of the Beaver

Michelle Dibb | 31st May 2019



A new residential course and practical guide will help those considering reintroducing beavers to their land.

There are now around 1000 beavers living in Great Britain. This is the beginning of a recovery story for a species that was believed to be forever lost from our shores.

How has this happened in the last decade, and is it good news?

Ecological benefits

The Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) was hunted to extinction in the UK around 300-400 years ago. They were hunted as vermin, for their fur, their meat and for their scent glands.

Beavers were last seen in the wild in the UK in the sixteenth century but now more and more landowners are reintroducing the beaver in an attempt to restore ecosystems, mitigate flooding and improve land and water quality.

The beaver was once an integral part of the UK's countryside, busily building dams and creating a mosaic of lakes, mires, tarns and boggy places.

Due to their natural behaviour beavers bring an array of benefits to the countryside. They are well-known for their habit of damming streams and by building new dams in different places, the beavers bring a changeable mixture of habitats into the landscape, with streams, pools and bare mud.

Beaver dams also hold water in dry periods, help to lessen flash-flooding downstream and reduce erosion, improve water quality by holding silt and catch acidic and agricultural run-off.

Beavers dams

The wetlands in which they live are valuable for many other species such as water voles, otters, teals, water shrews and also insects such as craneflies, water beetles and dragonflies, which in turn support fish and insect-eating birds like the spotted flycatcher.

Through their famous gnawing behavior beavers will naturally 'coppice' trees like willow, hazel, rowan and aspen and the regrowth of these trees provides homes for a variety of insects and birds.

Beavers homes are called lodges and they need water at least a metre deep outside so they can swim in easily and to give protection against predators. So they build dams over 1m high using tree trunks and other vegetation to create these pools.

Because they prefer to swim, rather than walk, and they like to transport the branches through the water, they create narrow waterways to help with the process. They also use the deep water as a refrigerator to store food over the winter. Beaver dams are temporary structures and generally quite leaky.

Beavers are herbivores. They eat aquatic plants, grasses, herbaceous plants and shrubs during the summer months and woody plants in winter. They will often store food underwater so that they can access it if the water freezes over in winter.

Reintroducing beavers

There is a legal requirement to consider restoring beavers to their former range under the EU Habitats Directive and to protect them under the Bern Convention.

There have been more than 200 formal beaver reintroduction projects (plus numerous unofficial releases) in more than 26 European countries and their ecology and management is well-studied.

Return of the Beaver will take place from 3 - 6 June with Ben Goldfarb, Derek Gow and Richard Brazier. It's a short **residential course** and a practical guide for those considering the reintroduction of beavers to their land.

The course will be hosted by University of Exeter, Embercombe and Devon Wildlife Trust

Join us as we delve into the science, the story and the practical implications that surround the reintroduction of this once extinct animal to Great Britain. What do we need to know, what can we learn from others and where do we start?

During the course we will:

- Look at the wider implications, the challenges, the specific ecosystem benefits and the practical considerations when introducing this species back into wilding or managed habitats.
- Explore the current situation in Great Britain as more and more landowners introduce this species in an attempt to restore ecosystems, mitigate flooding and improve land and water quality.
- Consider the lessons being learnt along the way, how we can share experience, logistics and spread positive impact. W
- Look at how to limit the negative impacts, and how to communicate and get involved in this important work.
- Consider what lessons can be learnt from the study of beavers in the United States, a country much wilder than ours, with wolves, bears, moose and many other species that have been eliminated from our native fauna. What can we learn about the role of beavers in relatively intact US ecosystems as we consider where they might fit in the restoration of ours?
- Reflect on the longer term benefits for ecosystems and landowners when working alongside this species for several generations - what have been the conflicts and what measures are conservationists in the US now taking to bring back beavers into areas they have yet to colonise?

This course includes a field trip to see Beavers at Derek Gow's farm.

This Author

Michelle Dibb lives on Dartmoor and is passionate about the natural world and how humans can live in harmony with nature and with themselves. She loves to put her experience of traditional marketing communications to use in creating national campaigns to awaken public debate and change opinions about the way we live.

Image: Ben Goldfarb.

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