



The R-Word

Apex predators;
the big, (not so) bad, beasts

Describing it as a 'stunningly beautiful, shy and elusive big cat', the lynx has been extinct in the UK for 1,300 years. **Dr Sam Rose** asks if there is an argument for its return.

Ever since I started this Rewilding journey, people have asked me "So what about reintroduction of wolves (or bears or lynx)?" It was, and probably still is, *the* hot rewilding topic, so much so that Jeremy Vine used it one lunchtime several years ago in an inane attempt to bait George Monbiot and polarise public opinion on Radio 2. Sadly, it seemed that he succeeded, on that day at least.

So having just read Derek Gow's new book *The hunt for the Shadow Wolf*, and interviewed him about it for BridLit 24, I felt inclined to make apex predators the subject of December's R-Word. Prepare for a beastly winter's tale of man-eating wolves, and the stealthy lynx, both 'once upon a time' part of our natural Dorset ecosystem...

Actually, it is nothing of the kind! No, you wouldn't want a Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*) for a pet... as Derek says, you would not expect your sofa to last long, but WWF show that there have been no fatal attacks on people by wolves in Europe in the 21st Century. Nil, nada, zero in nearly 25 years! This is in an area in which they have returned to a population size of at least 20,000, even including a presence in our heavily populated near neighbours Belgium and the Netherlands. This is especially pertinent when you consider how many people are killed by 'domesticated' pet dogs each year. For wolves, people are simply not their prey, unlike sheep, which is a whole different story that goes back to the middle ages, the role of the Church, the slave trade and our upland agropastoral system. More on sheep below.

But stepping back a second, why are apex predators important to rewilding and natural ecosystems? Apex

predators sit at the top of the ecosystem, the big girls and boys, with a key role in the 'trophic pyramid'. They do this by maintaining ecosystem balance and healthy biodiversity through predation and a climate of fear. For instance, in a natural system, they keep in check the numbers of 'ungulates'—hooved animals such as horses, cattle, sheep, pigs and deer. In the past that would be the Tarpan, Auroch, Wild Boar and various species of deer, whereas now it will depend on what prey species live where they do. In our nature depleted European landscape, that might be badgers, foxes and even beavers as well as the deer and boar, as the other big wild animals have been domesticated and put behind fences, and wolves will seek them out if there is not enough wild prey.

This predation benefits other animals, plants and whole ecosystems through reducing the over-grazing/browsing of these large herbivores, such as we see everyday here in Dorset due to the vast numbers of deer in our countryside. The climate of fear—through scent and other markers—keeps the deer constantly on the move, again reducing their destructive ability and breeding behaviour. The top predators also play a vital role in the health of wild animals by selecting, and removing the elderly or sick individuals, which, in the case of the latter, can also reduce the incidence of diseases like TB that are transmitted to livestock.

Without question, their role as a regulator in the ecosystem trickles down in what is known as a 'trophic cascade', where if you 'fix' that top level of the natural system, the levels below it start to improve and nature starts to take over as all of its component parts and processes are there and allowed to thrive. A superb

example of how reintroduction of wolves to a wild area can transform that space for nature can be seen at Yosemite National Park—worth a look on YouTube.

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So for more details on wolves, read Derek's book or others on the subject, as for the rest of this edition I want to focus on the lynx, the stunningly beautiful, shy and elusive big cat that was made extinct from the UK over 1,300 years ago. There are four species of lynx globally, two of which are found in Europe, although the Iberian Lynx is found only in Spain and Portugal. The Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) is our old country-mate and is a solitary animal, hunting mainly at night and focusing on Roe deer—of which we are not lacking in Dorset! If deer *are* in short supply, they will predate on other ungulates, mainly the sick, young and elderly, but like wolves they also have foxes, rabbits, hares, rodents, badgers, birds and the odd sheep for breakfast. In fact the number of loose pheasants and other game birds wild in Dorset would keep a good number of Lynx in tasty snacks for many years. The rotting carcasses left by lynx are also food for myriad other species, above and below ground.

I had the privilege to spend some time at (*not in*) a wild lynx enclosure in Devon a couple of years ago, and when I could actually find them—no easy task—I watched the young animals playfully 'hunt' each other, and me, when I was close to the fence. In the wild they would never get as close to me as they did, because they shy away from people and blend into the vegetation or darkness, but in captivity they seem to be inquisitive and playful. Their majestic size, ear tufts and 'stripey' spots mark them out as something so distinct from any wild animal in our countryside now. The Eurasian Lynx are now widespread in Northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia and the north-western Carpathians, Austria, Slovenia, Switzerland and Poland. Aside from the, in my opinion, unforgivable hunting of these animals which is allowed in some countries, they are thriving and retaking their role alongside wolves and bears as the top predators. So why not in the UK?

Well, the answer is about culture, politics and sheep (again). To have a viable population of lynx needs a good area, each needing plenty of sq km to thrive. We have the space in Scotland, and there is some fantastic feasibility work going on around this by Trees for Life and other organisations. The benefits could not

only be ecological, but economic with the significant tourist draw that they would bring. One problem is that we have lived without large predators for so long that people are scared of them, and no politician - and it is they who will have to make the final decision - wishes to scare people, even if that fear is scientifically unsupported. Moreover, they have no desire to be the politician that allows a lynx to predate on sheep, which the beautiful big cats invariably will to a small degree, even if sheep at unsustainable levels are acknowledged to be causing huge damage to our upland as it is... and that is a whole other story.

There are also possible unforeseen disadvantages, such as the potential for increasing intensification and/or housing of livestock farming to keep animals 'safe' from the perceived threat of predators, and which would result in negative consequences for animal welfare, emissions and pollution. At the moment we just don't know, which is why the feasibility work is so important. As ever, and as with all of my R-Word articles, this is a complex discussion, with nuance across the board, not helped by those in the media wishing to polarise people by demonising what they don't understand. For wolves and bears it will take a long long time to get past the cultural wall of folk-tales and Red Riding Hood, but for lynx, relatively unknown by most of the population, there is perhaps an education job needed and a fluffy white wall to climb. I personally hope that with evidence from our pals in Europe, this wall is one we can get over quickly and start to reinstate the natural balance in at least a small part of the UK, and learn from it. As for the lynx in the Marshwood Vale... who knows when, but I hope in my lifetime!

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