



A brown bear climbs a tree in Sweden, where numbers are plummeting

BROWN BEAR: IMAGEBROKER/MCPHOTO/HELMUT & EVA PUM/ALAMY

OPINION

“Europe seems hellbent on creating the most hostile environment for bears possible”

MARK CARWARDINE

WE EUROPEANS ARE INCAPABLE of living alongside predators. We blithely expect people in Africa and Asia to share their homes with lions, tigers, Komodo dragons and a host of other potentially dangerous animals without question. So why can't we be as sympathetic and enlightened about predator conservation as they are?

The latest guilty party is Sweden – which has unleashed another season of hunting hell on its brown bears (*see box*). Sweden's bears were hunted almost to extinction and, by 1930, there were just 130 of them left. Conservation efforts pushed numbers up to a peak of 3,300 in 2008, but then the authorities decided that bear numbers had to be reduced “to prevent conflict with people and their domestic animals”. Now there are 2,450, and Swedish conservation groups believe the aim is to reduce the population to just 1,400.

Is there a bear problem in Sweden? No, there is not. In 2022, 11 sheep were killed by bears, while 220,000 were killed by humans for food. Meanwhile, over the last century, only two people have been killed by bears, both in connection with hunting.

Wolves are in the crosshairs, too. Following reintroductions and careful protection, there are now 21,500 of these awesome animals across the continent. But as numbers increase, there is a rising tide of hostility. Even Switzerland is in the throes of a cull designed to kill 70 per cent of its wolf population (currently 300 animals in 32 packs). This is despite the fact that predation on livestock has plummeted while wolf

numbers have increased. The Norwegian government, meanwhile, seems determined to limit its wolf population to just a few breeding pairs – which it says is enough to keep them from extinction. More accurately, it will push them to the verge of extinction.

There's no denying that wolves occasionally predate livestock. But there are tried-and-tested ways of reducing the problem: boosting the availability of natural prey, electric fencing and the use of guard dogs among them. Many countries even have ‘wolf commissioners’, who help farmers to protect their stock, and there is generous compensation for any predation.

They're not dangerous to people, either. According to the European Commission's own 2023 investigative report on wolf attacks, “although wolves can attack humans, no fatal wolf attacks on people have been recorded in the past 40 years”.

Ironically, more people are killed by livestock (cows alone kill about four to five people per year in the UK).

The hunts seem to be politically motivated, under pressure from powerful farming and hunting lobbies. Europe seems hellbent on creating the most hostile environment for bears and wolves possible. We're just as bad in the UK. The mere mention of bringing back wolves is consistently met with howls of protest.

Now we're on the hunt for white-tailed sea eagles, which farmers in Scotland blame for killing lambs. They were extinct in the wild a century ago but, thanks to reintroductions, there are now an estimated 150 breeding pairs. Some farmers claim losses of more than 200 lambs in a single season. But the evidence is thin. Despite hundreds

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→ AT A GLANCE

- In 2024, the Swedish government issued 486 licences to shoot brown bears – about 20 per cent of the country's remaining brown bear population.
- A further 50-100 bears can be expected to be killed by so-called ‘protective hunting’ (when they are deemed a threat to life, livestock or property).
- In theory, Europe's 17,000 remaining brown bears are strictly protected. But Sweden is far from alone. Romania's MPs voted in July 2024 to double its hunting quota from 220 brown bears to 481, and several other European countries sell bear hunting licences to foreigners.
- In December, the status of wolves in Europe was downgraded from ‘strictly protected’ to ‘protected’, allowing farmers to kill wolves deemed a threat to livestock.

of hours of field studies, no one has ever seen a sea eagle attack a healthy lamb. A study published in 2023 revealed that lamb accounted for just 6 per cent of more than 11,000 bits of food found in sea eagle nests (and most of that is presumed to have been scavenged). Lambs die inexplicably all the time – thanks to the vagaries of the weather and fluctuating flock health – so it seems the eagles are being used as scapegoats.

There is a bigger picture here. Predators earn their keep through wildlife tourism (according to the RSPB, even the sea eagles earn millions of pounds for the local economy) and they are keystone species vital in maintaining the health and balance of ecosystems. It's not all about farmers and hunters. There has to be a compromise. **W**

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