



LYNX: PETER CAIRNS/NATUREPL.COM

The Scottish Highlands could support around 400 lynx



OPINION

“Why are we always so nervous? I can see no good reason not to reintroduce lynx to Scotland”

MARK CARWARDINE

THERE WAS QUITE A HULLABALOO when four lynx were spotted running wild in Cairngorms National Park. Even first minister John Swinney joined the fray, condemning whoever released them and declaring that he was “enormously grateful” to all those who helped capture the hapless animals in snowy woodland near Kingussie.

Despite some melodramatic claims to the contrary, they were not a threat to the public. Lynx are not considered dangerous to humans. In fact, they tend to avoid contact with people and, in areas where they are relatively common in mainland Europe, many people live alongside these elusive animals without even knowing they are there. But covertly and illegally releasing the four forest-dwelling cats was reckless and irresponsible. From a welfare point of view, one has already died and the other three would probably have succumbed in the sub-zero temperatures and without the regular supply of food they would have been used to in captivity.

From a conservation point of view, it was entirely counter-productive. The Lynx to Scotland partnership, which is working to restore lynx to the Scottish Highlands, is very unhappy about such rogue rewilders. They bypass all the established international best practices and give lynx reintroduction a bad press. Having said that, I do understand the frustration of those who released them. Many people have been campaigning to reintroduce lynx to Scotland for a long time. But the seemingly endless debate about the pros and cons, and the sluggish bureaucratic

process of the Scottish government and NatureScot, is, for many, excruciating. It’s not surprising that people are taking matters into their own hands. It’s reminiscent of ‘beaver bombing’ – covertly releasing beavers back into Britain’s rivers – which reflects a growing discontent with the government’s painstakingly slow reintroduction efforts.

The good news is that there is growing public and political support for a managed lynx reintroduction. But there are no shortcuts and, first, we need a trial reintroduction. This would take into account practical considerations such as the most suitable release sites, how many lynx would be needed and where the animals might come from, as well as addressing any public concerns. Research suggests that the Scottish Highlands have enough suitable habitat to support around 400 lynx.

Just imagine having a sustainable and healthy community of such a charismatic animal thriving in our impoverished countryside. How wonderful. There would be so many benefits, from controlling Scotland’s exploding deer population (enabling forests to regenerate naturally) to boosting local tourism and improving rural economies.

Needless to say, farmers don’t like the idea. NFU Scotland has voiced concerns about the impact the small ‘big cats’ could have on sheep. It’s true that lynx do sometimes kill sheep – but not in open fields (they are forest hunters and occasionally take free-ranging sheep among the trees). In mainland Europe, the average is fewer than two sheep killed per lynx per year. (Norwegian farmers report higher losses but recent evidence from Lynx to Scotland


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→ AT A GLANCE

- Four lynx illegally released in the Scottish Highlands were captured by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland earlier this year.
- The four cats were taken to Highland Wildlife Park (biosecurity laws meant they had to spend 30 days in suitable quarantine facilities) before being transferred to Edinburgh Zoo.
- One of the lynx died a few days later, due to the cold and lack of food in the wild.
- Eurasian lynx are native to Scotland, but were driven to extinction some 500-1,000 years ago, due to habitat loss, prey scarcity, direct persecution and hunting for their pelts.
- There is a longstanding campaign by wildlife charities to bring lynx back to Scotland – but in a measured way and under government licence.

suggests that numbers have been exaggerated in widespread misuse of a compensation scheme. For comparison, across the border in Sweden, an average of just 0.1 sheep are killed per lynx per year.) In Scotland, the abundance of their favourite prey, roe deer, makes predation of sheep even less likely.

The European lynx is staging a comeback in Switzerland, Germany and France, among other countries, while Britain is being left behind. We are among the few European countries still lacking a large terrestrial predator (many other European countries have even reintroduced bears and wolves).

Why are we always so cautious and nervous? Others have already led the way – we just need to follow. I can see no good reason not to reintroduce lynx to Scotland. 

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