Historic return of beavers to waters around Loch Ness

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A family of six beavers has been released into the Loch Ness catchment in the Scottish Highlands – 500 years since the species was last recorded beside the loch before being hunted to national extinction.

The beavers were reintroduced to a lochan on Trees for Life's 10,000-acre Dundreggan rewilding estate in Glenmoriston, having been relocated from elsewhere in Scotland under a NatureScot licence.

The release on 4 November is the first of the ambitious Ness Beaver Project, through which Trees for Life and Beaver Trust, with support from land-manager Forestry and Land Scotland, will reintroduce at least 15 beaver family groups into lochs, lochans and rivers around Loch Ness over the next three years.

Government agency NatureScot granted an official licence for the historic initiative on 30 October, following an application by Trees for Life during the summer.

The project is designed to allow beaver populations to connect up and grow in a vast landscape of suitable habitat, including extensive woodlands and hundreds of kilometres of river and loch banks.

"The Ness Beaver Project is now set to be a major milestone for nature recovery in Britain. Hunted to extinction centuries ago, beavers are reclaiming their place in our rivers and wetlands – breathing new life into precious landscapes, boosting biodiversity, and bringing eco-tourism opportunities," said Alan McDonnell, Trees for Life's head of nature restoration.

"Five hundred years since Loch Ness became the last recorded site of Scotland's beavers before they were eradicated, they are back with the space and habitat to flourish – bringing with them the potential for new wetlands, more wildlife, and healthier rivers. The return of these habitat-creating, biodiversity-boosting, flood-preventing animals is now one of Scotland's biggest rewilding success stories."

By digging channels, coppicing trees and building dams, beavers create pools, wetlands and light-filled woodland gaps. These habitats support frogs and dragonflies, and the abundance of insects provides food for birds and bats.

On smaller streams, beaver dams slow the flow of water and trap sediment, helping improve water quality. Their wetlands can reduce downstream flooding, hold water through dry spells, and provide damp refuges for wildlife during wildfires.

Dr Roisin Campbell-Palmer, head of restoration at Beaver Trust, said: "It has been profoundly rewarding to release the first beavers at Dundreggan, marking the start of their return to the Loch Ness catchment. The extensive woodland and suitable habitat here offer real opportunities for the animals to thrive and bring lasting biodiversity benefits.

"We look forward to seeing the changes the beavers bring and to working with Trees for Life, local communities and land managers over the next three years to support further releases and help people live alongside them. This project is an important step towards delivering Scotland's National Beaver Strategy by expanding the population into suitable areas, with monitoring and practical support to help address any challenges along the way."

The arrival of beavers at Dundreggan will create exciting new opportunities for people to experience rewilding first-hand. The Trees for Life estate is home to the world's first Rewilding Centre – a gateway to the wild outdoors where people can discover how rewilding can help nature recover, benefit people, and re-people the Highlands.

With beavers now living wild on the estate, visitors will have the chance to see one of Scotland's greatest rewilding stories unfolding. Once the animals have settled, Trees for Life plans to introduce guided tours at Dundreggan – offering opportunities to spot beavers, discover signs of their activity, and learn how the animals are positively transforming the landscape.

The Ness Beaver Project follows extensive discussions with local communities and land managers, and strong public support. Trees for Life's locally based beaver officer and Beaver Trust staff will provide ongoing support, with opportunities for research, citizen science, and educational events. A monitoring and mitigation group will be established.

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Future release sites will be announced once the beavers have been safely released, allowing them to settle into their new homes without disturbance. Before release, the animals undergo health checks at the specialist beaver holding facility at Five Sisters Zoo.

“Since Scotland’s first official reintroduction trial in 2009, growing wild populations of beavers have shown what is possible when people work together to restore a lost species. The return of beavers to Loch Ness, one of Scotland’s most iconic landscapes, marks a major turning point in this extraordinary national recovery, and we are delighted to be playing a role in this,” said Gary Curran, collection manager at Five Sisters Zoo.

The Ness Beaver Project is funded by Trees for Life’s supporters and Missing Species Appeal, Forest Peace Foundation, Fred Foundation, Rewilding Europe’s European Wildlife Comeback Fund, and Rewilding Britain’s Rewilding Innovation Fund. For more details, see treesforlife.org.uk/ness-beaver-project.

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