

Rewilding charity to launch Missing Species Programme for Scottish Highlands

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Trees for Life is to launch a pioneering Missing Species Programme to bring back four of Scotland's lost keystone animals – lynx, beavers, red squirrels, and modern-day aurochs – to the Scottish Highlands.

The plans aim to tackle the nature and climate emergencies while generating significant benefits for communities, including through nature tourism, says the rewilding charity.

This ambitious programme will require £3.6m to fund its first five years and achieve its aims, including for detailed habitat assessments and community engagement to meet Scotland's strict licensing requirements.

Alongside a supporter appeal launched this month to raise an initial £25,000 to kickstart the initiative, Trees for Life is reaching out to major funders – including individuals, businesses, foundations and grant-making bodies – to help resource the ambitious new programme.

Keystone species play a vital role in healthy living ecosystems. Many such species are now fully or mostly missing from Scotland, one of the world's most nature-depleted countries, where centuries of persecution and habitat destruction have caused localised extinctions or serious declines.

“By bringing back the forest-planting red squirrel, flood-preventing beaver, deer-managing lynx, and landscape-shaping aurochs through their modern-day descendant the tauros, we can restore nature at scale and breathe new life into the Highlands, so people and wildlife can thrive together,” said Trees for Life's chief executive Steve Micklewright.

“Returning these four important, carefully-chosen architects of the wild is about restarting the natural engines of Scotland's ecosystems – boosting biodiversity, climate action and local economies, and giving people the chance to discover the wonder of a wilder landscape. The Highlands can become a beacon of hope in the fight against extinction and wildlife loss.”

Ensuring successful coexistence between wildlife and people is crucial, says Trees for Life. This includes thorough community discussions, management measures, and ensuring local people can enjoy the social and economic benefits.

Successful species reintroductions in Scotland require extensive technical work, including habitat assessments and engagement with stakeholders, meeting the standards set by NatureScot, Scotland's nature agency. This allows nature to recover, while promoting coexistence between people and wildlife, and ensuring each species finds its rightful place.

Beavers create wetlands that support wildlife, purify water, and reduce flooding. Sometimes the species can cause issues for farmland, although these can usually be managed. Officially reintroduced to Scotland in 2009 after being hunted to extinction 400 years ago, beavers have only been restored to a few sites, and are missing from much suitable habitat.

A Trees for Life and Forestry and Land Scotland partnership project led to the historic reintroduction of beavers to Glen Affric in October. A community discussion by Trees for Life and Beaver Trust is looking at the potential for returning beavers to the Loch Ness area.

Elusive and no threat to humans, the forest-dwelling Eurasian lynx preys on deer, complementing other methods of managing deer numbers – enabling more young trees to survive and woodlands to regenerate. Scotland – where lynx were made extinct in the Middle Ages – is one of a few countries of the species' range from which it remains missing.

Research shows the Highlands has the habitat to support a breeding population of 250 lynx. Through the Lynx to Scotland partnership, Trees for Life has worked for five years with diverse stakeholders to assess what an official reintroduction might involve, from sheep predation to eco-tourism benefits, and is preparing for further local discussions in 2026.

Tauros are classified as domestic cattle, but have no equivalent breed. They have been 'back-bred' by scientists in the Netherlands to be as similar as possible to the ancient aurochs – the wild ancestor of all

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domestic cattle, which for millennia played a vital role in shaping landscapes and enhancing biodiversity across Europe, including Scotland.

Trees for Life is carrying out assessments at its 4,000-hectare Dundreggan estate near Loch Ness, for what would be the UK's first introduction of a herd of tauros – effectively reintroducing the aurochs, four centuries after its extinction.

European research shows that tauros, being bigger and more active than other cattle, help create richer habitats through their powerful grazing impacts, sheer size, and behaviour. Bulls can reach up to 180cm and cows 150cm at the shoulder. At Dundreggan, their role in ecological restoration would be scientifically studied.

Red squirrels were brought to the edge of extinction in the UK by historic habitat loss and human persecution, with estimates of numbers today ranging from 160,000 to 287,000. Their recovery is still at risk due to competition from, and a fatal virus spread by, non-native greys.

Reds remain missing from much of the Highlands, one of their last bastions. Trees for Life has relocated reds to woodlands in the northern Highlands which the animals can't reach on their own – establishing 13 new and flourishing populations so far.

The charity is investigating opportunities to create further new populations of reds, which in turn aid natural regeneration of woodlands by burying caches of tree seeds such as acorns and hazelnuts.

Visit treesforlife.org.uk/missing-species for more details.

Ends

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