UK ‘return’ for ancient aurochs 400 years after European extinction

Thursday 10 October, 2024

Trees for Life has launched a project which could see the first introduction to the UK of a breed of huge wild cattle called tauros – effectively reintroducing the aurochs, the wild ancestor of all domestic cattle, four centuries after its extinction.

The muscular, long-horned tauros have been bred to be as similar as possible to the ancient aurochs – a mega-herbivore which for millennia played a vital role in shaping landscapes and boosting biodiversity across Europe, including Scotland.

The rewilding charity aims to introduce a herd of up to 15 tauros from the Netherlands to its 4,000-hectare Dundreggan estate near Loch Ness in 2026, in a scientific research project to boost biodiversity and create opportunities for people, including education and eco-tourism.

“Introducing the aurochs-like tauros to the Highlands four centuries after their wild ancestors were driven to extinction will refill a vital but empty ecological niche – allowing us to study how these remarkable wild cattle can be a powerful ally for tackling the nature and climate emergencies,” said Steve Micklewright, Chief Executive of Trees for Life.

“Our Tauros Project is about looking forwards while learning from the past as we restore nature-rich landscapes that support wildlife and people, and are resilient to future environmental challenges. We also want to give people the chance to experience in a safe way the awe and wonder of getting close to an animal that feels really wild.”

Aurochs once roamed much of Europe as a keystone species, ensuring a rich mosaic of habitats including grasslands, forest, and wetlands. The animals are depicted in petroglyphs of the Côa Valley, dating back 30,000 years.

One of Europe’s largest land mammals – and the heaviest after the woolly mammoth and woolly rhinoceros – aurochs disappeared from Britain around 1300 BC. They later became globally extinct through habitat loss and hunting, when the last aurochs died in Poland in 1627. But aurochs DNA has survived in a number of ancient original cattle breeds.

Uniquely, tauros have been ‘back-bred’ to genetically replicate, resemble and behave like the aurochs as closely as possible.

Scientists in the Netherlands have sought to bring aurochs back to life since the early 2000s, by interbreeding ancient cattle breeds that are genetically and physically closest to the aurochs. This has been aided by the first sequencing of the aurochs’ complete genome, in 2011.

While classified as domestic cattle, tauros have no equivalent among other breeds. Bulls can reach up to 180cm and cows 150cm at the shoulder, similar in size to aurochs. They can live in a wide range of environmental conditions, with minimal human intervention.

Research in Europe shows these modern-day successors to the aurochs can help create exceptionally rich habitats for wildlife through their size and behaviour – being bigger and more active than other cattle, and interacting with their environment more dramatically.

Herds of tauros move across landscapes in social groups, naturally grazing some areas intensively while leaving others untouched. This creates a mosaic of habitats that benefit a wide range of plants and animals, boost species diversity, and soak up carbon dioxide.

One ecological game-changer is tauros’s creation of ‘bullpits’– bowls in the earth carved out by rutting bulls using their horns and hooves, or through strengthening their neck muscles by bashing their heads against one side of a pit. Bullpits form micro-habitats that support invertebrates, small mammals and birds, and allow pioneer plant species to establish.

Tauros dung helps ensure healthy soils, and supports invertebrates which in turn are eaten by birds, small mammals and reptiles. Seeds are dispersed via the cattle’s fur.

Media:



Related Sectors:

Environment & Nature :: Farming & Animals ::

Related Keywords:

Conservation :: Rewilding :: Biodiversity :: Scotland :: Highlands ::

Scan Me:

There are already several hundred tauros in mainland Europe, in The Netherlands, Czechia, Croatia, Spain and Portugal.

While no large animal – from deer to other cattle breeds – is entirely risk-free, people can coexist safely with tauros given appropriate precautions, public education about respecting their space, and good herd-management. Tauros are known to be placid, especially towards people, and have been bred from cattle breeds that are not unnaturally aggressive.

Being a cross-breed of cattle, tauros can be legally imported to Britain. Trees for Life intends to release the small herd in a way that lets the tauros behave as naturally as possible, and that balances rewilding benefits with conservation of recovering ecosystems.

The five-year project will strictly adhere to the legal and animal welfare requirements of keeping cattle. The tauros will be treated as farm animals but live as wild a life as possible. Signage and safety protocols will allow people to encounter them in a managed way.

The release will follow a further year of project development, including research, detailed habitat assessments, and securing full funding.

For more information, see treesforlife.org.uk/tauros.

Company Contact:

Trees for Life

T. 07753 488146
E. richardbunting@gmail.com
W. https://www.treesforlife.org.uk

View Online

Additional Assets:

Newsroom: Visit our Newsroom for all the latest stories:
https://www.treesforlife.pressat.co.uk