

Bringing back the lynx

Re-wilding groups are campaigning for the re-introduction of Europe's largest wildcat, the lynx after a 1300 year absence caused by habitat loss, hunting and persecution. Almost inevitably the National Farmers Union Scotland are opposed on the grounds that it will kill large numbers of sheep, citing experience in Norway where approximately 20,000 sheep have been lost to lynx. Other groups are concerned with possible danger to humans.

To deal with the more emotive issue first, it seems that there are no proven incidents of the essentially shy and secretive lynx attacking humans, although there have been a couple of alleged, unproven attacks due to rabid animals.

How does this compare with attacks by cows? In the UK there is little data available on attacks on the general public by cows, but between 2003 and 2008 there were 67 such incidents, 6 of which were fatalⁱ. When asked in 2017 about the risks to the public from cattle an NFU spokesman said "The countryside is a working environment where animals graze so it's important that people are mindful of this"ⁱⁱ. Presumably the same advice on mindfulness would be adequate concerning the lesser, almost non-existent risks posed by lynx.

There is clear evidence that Lynx do kill livestock. Unsurprisingly given that it is quoted by NFUS, the problem is far worse in Norway than anywhere else. Over a three year period ending in 1995 a Norwegian lynx population of 600 killed 18,924 sheep at a rate of 10.4/lynx/year. Much lower levels of sheep predation have been recorded elsewhere. For example in a 5 year period ending in 1995 Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Poland recorded no sheep losses despite having a combined lynx population of 1811.ⁱⁱⁱ

The lynx is a woodland species and it seems that the main reason for the Norwegian anomaly is the practice of open grazing of sheep in woodlands in spring. In the UK it is unusual to graze sheep in woodlands so there would probably be very few sheep losses if lynx were re-introduced. Moreover, because lynx predate foxes there may be fewer lamb losses to compensate for any loss of sheep.

Apart from the possible wildlife tourism spin-offs for the rural economy there could be other benefits arising from lynx re-introduction. Having eliminated bear, wolf and lynx our ecology lacks a large predator hence the massive problems posed by the size of the deer population and the extent of the damage it does to our natural habitats, particularly native woodlands.

In 1959 Sir Frank Fraser Darling, the official adviser to the Red Deer Commission said that 60,000 deer would be a sustainable population level.^{iv} At that time Scotland's Red deer population was 150,000. It is now 350- 400,000 and there are 200-350,000 Roe deer as well^v. Reintroducing the lynx would help to control deer numbers and discourage them from inhabiting our woodlands, greatly reducing levels of damage to our woodland ecosystems and allowing them to develop greater resilience. Lynx would not achieve the desired reduction in deer numbers on their own but they would be invaluable in maintaining the reduced population levels achieved through policy implementation.

In the Highlands forest clearance and the open range grazing of sheep have also contributed to the poor condition of natural habitats. In Fraser Darling's words:

"The bald unpalatable fact is emphasized that the Highlands and Islands are largely a devastated terrain, and that any policy which ignores this fact cannot hope to achieve rehabilitation..... Destruction was accelerated in the eighteenth century and was accompanied by an epic migration of Southern Upland flockmasters with their Blackface and Cheviot sheep".^{vi}

Sheep numbers in the Highlands are falling, most markedly in the areas most reliant on open range grazing. The re-introduction of Lynx is unlikely to have a significant impact on this trend but would, if anything, hasten it to the benefit of our natural habitats.

Declining sheep numbers and a longstanding policy objective to significantly reduce deer numbers in Scotland present an opportunity to expand the woodland resource. This would take up any shortfall in agricultural employment associated with a reduced flock, and also improve the resilience of all our natural habitats, and to close the circle, create suitable habitat for lynx.

So in many ways Lynx may be one of the missing links required to safeguard Scottish ecosystems in the medium to long term. Having said that any re-introduction should be approached with utmost caution as we only have a limited amount of suitable habitat at present, and history is littered with tales of unintended consequences arising from the species introductions and reintroductions. However there is a strong argument for a limited, strictly controlled trial.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jun/28/attacks-by-cattle-ramblers-blunkett>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-40638354>

ⁱⁱⁱ [White, C., Convery, I., Eagle, A., O'Donoghue, P., Piper, S., Rowcroft, P., Smith, D., & van Maanen, E. \(2015\), 'Cost-benefit analysis for the reintroduction of lynx to the UK: Main report', Application for the reintroduction of Lynx to the UK government, AECOM](#)

^{iv} Darling F.F, (1955)West Highland Survey

^v http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB_13-74.pdf

^{vi} Darling F.F, (1955)West Highland Survey