

## Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

### Annex UK.4. Examples of Pioneering Species Re-Introduction and Recovery Projects in the UK

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#### White-tailed Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)

A pioneering re-introduction was that of the White-tailed Sea-eagle in Scotland, which is described in personal accounts by Love (2013) and Dennis (2021). This was achieved through the release of 140 eaglets obtained from Norway on the Inner Hebridean island of Rum over 1975–1985, and in Wester Ross during 1993–1998 (Whitfield *et al.*, 2009). Initially substantial problems were encountered (such as persecution), but with time and support the population became established and spread, so that by 2017 it had reached at least 123 breeding pairs (Woodward *et al.*, 2020).

Initiatives to re-introduce the White-tailed Sea-eagle to England have mostly foundered so far. A project to re-introduce the species in Suffolk was abandoned after Natural England announced in 2010 that it could not continue as lead partner.<sup>1</sup> This was despite an extensive programme of work on the feasibility of re-introducing the eagle into Suffolk that suggested it would have a high chance of success. Whilst Natural England stated that the reason for the withdrawal was funding constraints, it seems likely that the decision was also influenced by campaigns by free-range pig farmers and some other landowners.<sup>2 3</sup> More recently, Natural England gave the go ahead to a re-introduction scheme on the Wild Ken Hill private estate in north Norfolk. However, even though crowd fundraising had taken place and there was clear public support, the plans were dropped by the estate in 2022, for uncertain reasons.<sup>4</sup>

More promisingly, following a feasibility study (Dennis *et al.*, 2019) and public consultation, a five-year re-introduction programme for the White-tailed Sea-eagle started in 2019 on the Isle of Wight in southern England. The project, led by Forestry England and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation<sup>5</sup>, is transferring young birds from Scotland, under licence from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).<sup>6</sup> Up to 60 birds may be transferred, with the aim of establishing six to eight breeding pairs. Up to the end of 2021 25 birds had been transferred and released.<sup>7</sup> No birds were transferred in 2022 due to the avian influenza outbreak in the UK, and because it was a poor breeding year for the eagle in Scotland.<sup>8</sup>

#### Beaver (*Castor fiber*)

Scotland was the first country in the UK to reintroduce a mammal into the wild – the [Eurasian] Beaver, although it took 23 years to achieve this goal. Initial preparatory work was led by SNH between 1995 and 2005 but their initial licence application for a trial was turned down by Scottish ministers. The Scottish Wildlife Trust and Royal Zoological Society for Scotland took over the project lead, and in 2008 Scottish ministers approved a licence application for the release of Norwegian Beavers in Scotland. Working under the banner of the Scottish Beaver Trial, and closely following IUCN Guidelines and the Scottish Code, the partnership successfully reintroduced Beavers in Knapdale (mid-Argyll) through a

<sup>1</sup>

[https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20120904094802/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/about\\_us/news/2010/140610.aspx](https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20120904094802/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/about_us/news/2010/140610.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.edp24.co.uk/news/21160997.welcome-suffolk-sea-eagle-plan-scrapped/](http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/21160997.welcome-suffolk-sea-eagle-plan-scrapped/)

<sup>3</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/10303266](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10303266)

<sup>4</sup> <https://wildkenhill.co.uk/eagle-project-on-hold/>

<sup>5</sup> [www.roydennis.org/isleofwight/](http://www.roydennis.org/isleofwight/)

<sup>6</sup> Since August 2020, SNH has been re-branded as NatureScot.

<sup>7</sup> [www.forestryengland.uk/news/white-tailed-eagles-successfully-returning-the-english-landscape](http://www.forestryengland.uk/news/white-tailed-eagles-successfully-returning-the-english-landscape)

<sup>8</sup> [www.forestryengland.uk/blog/white-tailed-eagle-project-summer-2022-update](http://www.forestryengland.uk/blog/white-tailed-eagle-project-summer-2022-update)

licensed trial. SNH were tasked with setting out an assessment of Beaver interactions with the human and natural environment, and the legal and management considerations that Scottish ministers should consider if the trial was a success (Gaywood *et al.*, 2016). A long process then followed with considerable influencing and lobbying behind the scenes by both those for and against the return of Beavers. In 2019 Scottish Government concluded that the trial was a success and brought into place legal protection for Beavers in Scotland that would allow them to expand their range naturally.

An updated Beaver management framework has been developed for 2022–2045 (IUCN/CPSG, 2022), which reflects a further shift in Scottish Government policy that now allows translocations of beavers to new release sites. The strategy was developed with the involvement of over 50 stakeholder organisations, through a collaborative process designed and led by the IUCN Species Survival Commission Conservation Planning Specialist Group. It aims to steer wider efforts to identify and actively expand the Beaver population to new catchments, while addressing negative impacts. It includes plans to empower and support communities to maximise the environmental and wider benefits of beavers, while minimising detrimental impacts through management and mitigation.

### **Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)**

A particularly successful example of a recovery project to help a species regain its former range has been the release of young Red Kites (Evans *et al.*, 1997; Brown and Grice, 2005; Dennis, 2021; Pienkowski, 2023). At the start of the release programme in England and Scotland in 1989, the UK population was only 251 pairs, and confined to Wales where it was only slowly increasing due to low breeding success. Following trials in 1989, young birds were released initially in the Chilterns in southern England and the Black Isle in northern Scotland. The source birds were taken from nests when 4–6 weeks old, mostly from Spain, with the remainder from Wales and Sweden. After arrival in the UK, they were quarantined in specially constructed aviaries at their release site for 35-days, with minimal human contact. Released birds were provided with food at feeding stations on, or near, the aviary.

The establishment of the re-introduced population was particularly successful in the Chilterns, following the release of 93 birds between 1989 and 1994. At least 76% of the released birds survived their first year (Evans *et al.*, 1997) and the first breeding attempts occurred in 1991, with four pairs successfully raising young in 1992. In 1994, the first kites bred that had been the young of released birds. By 2000 over 100 pairs of Red Kite were breeding in the Chilterns (Brown and Grice, 2005).

Although the Chilterns' population had grown rapidly, their range increased slowly as most birds remained close to their breeding area. Therefore, additional release sites were set up, starting with Rockingham Forest, in Northamptonshire, central England, in 1995. Initially, the young birds were obtained from Spain, but since 1998 all releases have been from the re-introduced Chilterns population.

The Red Kite is now much more widely distributed across Great Britain (Balmer *et al.*, 2013), despite evidence that in Scotland at least its expansion was constrained by persecution (Smart *et al.*, 2010). It is also now breeding again in Northern Ireland following a re-introduction programme that started in 2008. As a result, by 2016 the UK population had reached 4 400 pairs (Woodward *et al.*, 2020).

The re-introduction of the Red Kite has come full circle<sup>9</sup>. After careful consideration of the need and circumstances, Natural England has licensed the transfer of chicks from the wild in eastern England to Spain, to help restore some Red Kite populations that declined to nonviable levels due to poisoning.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2022/06/24/conservation-comes-full-circle-natural-england-licenses-translocation-of-red-kites-to-aid-conservation-efforts-in-spain/>

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