

News story: Beavers arrive in the Forest of Dean

A pair of Eurasian Beavers have returned to the Forest of Dean today (24 July) for the first time for around 400 years.

It is expected that the beavers' activity in the Forest of Dean will improve biodiversity in their new 6.5 hectare home and may have the potential to reduce local flood risk. Regular monitoring will continue on site throughout the three-year project to assess these ecosystem benefits.

The release was attended by Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, who announced £20,000 of new funding for the trial reintroduction of beavers in Devon to understand further the impact of bringing back one of England's native species.

Environment Secretary, Michael Gove said:

The beaver has a special place in English heritage and the Forest of Dean. This release is a fantastic opportunity to develop our understanding of the potential impacts of reintroductions and help this iconic species, 400 years after it was driven to extinction. The community of Lydbrook has shown tremendous support for this scheme and the beavers will be a welcome addition to local wildlife.

The project is an example of our wider approach to enhancing biodiversity. It is another step towards our aim of leaving the environment in a better state for future generations.

Forestry Commission Forest Management Director, West England Forest District, Kevin Stannard said:

Today's release of Beavers is a momentous occasion for the Forest of Dean.

We are looking forward to seeing the ecological and hydrological benefits the beavers will bring to the Greathough Brook.

I am proud to have led the Forestry Commission team, and support their commitment to connect people with nature here in the Forest of Dean.

The Forestry Commission unveiled plans for a trial reintroduction into the Greathough Brook in March 2017. Since then, Natural England granted Forestry Commission officials a licence to release beavers into a carefully chosen and

secure site which is now being used to house the semi-aquatic mammals.

Hydrological and ecological monitoring on the site is producing valuable scientific data and work is underway to ensure this informs future reintroductions.

‘Habitat engineers’

Rebecca Wilson, Head of Planning and Environment, West England Forest District, Forestry Commission said:

Beavers are natural habitat engineers, restoring complex wetland habitats and providing habitat for declining species whilst slowing the flow of water downstream. We are delighted to welcome beavers to the Forest of Dean and are keen to observe the many benefits they will bring to both local communities and the wider Forest of Dean environment.

Hydrologists from the University of Exeter are undertaking research into the impacts of beaver reintroduction at a number of sites in the U.K., including the Forest of Dean.

Professor Richard Brazier, a hydrologist from the University of Exeter said:

We have monitored the hydrology of the Greathough Brook for over a year now and shown quite clearly that the brook contributes to the flooding problems experienced in the village of Lydbrook. We now have a unique opportunity to study the impacts of beaver dams on the flood flows from this flashy and flood prone landscape. The study will be a valuable and important opportunity to quantify the benefits that beaver dams might deliver and therefore contribute to natural flood management in an upland, wooded catchment.

The Eurasian Beaver is a large semi-aquatic native mammal that was once widespread throughout Britain. They were hunted to extinction by the beginning of the 16th Century for their meat, fur and scent glands.

Keystone species

Beavers are a ‘keystone species’ – playing an important role in wetland ecology by creating ecosystems that provide habitats for many other plant, insect and mammal species. Few other animals, aside from humans, have the ability to so drastically modify and shape their surrounding environment. For this reason beavers are often referred to as “ecosystem engineers”.

Records show that the Greathough Brook was once home to thriving populations of water vole, glow-worms as well as wood white and pearl-bordered fritillary butterflies. These species depend on light, warm conditions – conditions that

can no longer be found with the decline in sheep grazing and shading from trees.

Beavers are well known for their ability to fell trees to dam shallow watercourses and create pools to make them feel safe. The associated wetlands, interconnecting beaver canals, coppiced woodland, glades and deadwood provides rich and diverse habitat for an abundance of wildlife including plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals.

Lydbrook has been subjected to several flooding events due to high volumes of water quickly running down the Greathough Brook and into the culvert system. This trial will identify how the beaver's dam building behaviour can help to hold larger volumes of water higher upstream in the natural pools and wetlands that will be created within the valley. The dams are permeable, allowing water to be gradually released downstream and slow the flow of water.

Funding for the Forest of Dean project was secured in part by grants from The Gloucestershire Environmental Trust and Forest Holidays.

Background

1. [Forestry Commission England](#) is the government department responsible in England for protecting, expanding and promoting the sustainable management of woods and forests and increasing their value to society and the environment.
2. Funding for River Otter Beaver Trial: The Secretary of State has agreed to provide £20,000 of funding for the River Otter Beaver Trial, in Devon to support analysis of research and the development of management protocols for this species. Continued research in this area is key to understanding the impacts of beaver reintroductions and ensuring that an informed decision can be made on the long term status of beavers in England.
3. The Greathough Brook is a short, steep stream in the Forest of Dean. Arising on the southern flanks of Ruardean hill it runs through a narrow wooded valley before entering the village of Lydbrook and flowing through a series of culverts north into the River Wye. Knowledge gained from the Forest of Dean trial will help to inform decisions on the status of the beaver in England going forward.