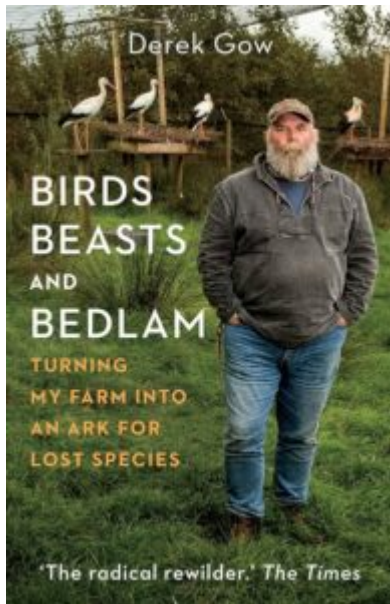


Restoring The Wild: How Reintroducing Bison Could Revive Britain's Landscapes And Ecosystems



04-04-2025 ~ *Reintroducing European bison to Britain, despite their absence from its history, could help restore ecological balance by fostering biodiversity and reversing some of the damage caused by industrial farming practices.*

Although there is no evidence that the [European bison](#) (*Bison bonasus*), known as wisent, ever roamed the islands of the United Kingdom, its genetic heritage suggests that it is attuned to the environment. The European bison is a hybrid that descends from the [steppe bison](#) (*Bison priscus*) and the [aurochs](#) (*Bos primigenius*), both extinct species that were once native to the UK.

Britain once hosted a broad range of great beasts. [We slaughtered the bears, elk, and lynx many centuries ago](#). The wolves lasted the longest. Now, only the names of their crags, hills, meres, or the ubiquitous deep pits where we caught and bound them for torture recall their former existence. As with the aquamarine blue moor frogs, black storks, and night herons, humans hastened the end of them all.

Today, one in seven of England's surviving species is also threatened with extinction. In large part, much of the landscape that appears to be so green is dead. [Chemicals and pesticides in the soil have killed smaller species](#). The disappearance of these minute species has caused a chain reaction within the natural order, starving, poisoning, or otherwise compromising the food chain.

Gone is the food for some creatures or the cover for others. The living space that remains is highly restricted and commonly of poor quality. [The absence of one pivotal creature can mean the loss of natural function upon which others depend.](#) Even when our understanding of this is crystal clear, we respond in a reluctant, slow-motion fashion.

The Downside of Conservation

Conservation comes in many forms, and my beginning was not with the wild but with the tame. At a time when you can drive through the landscape and see so many of the old black or spotted sheep, white long-horned cattle, or brick-red pigs more or less everywhere, it's hard to remember that these relics were [nearly extinct by the 1970s](#). Farming at that time was already set to conquer its Everests of "improvement."

[Rivers of government cash flowed into subsidies for everything imaginable](#), from the import of faster-growing continental livestock to new and super-productive crops, to fertilizers that flowed from white plastic sacks rather than freely from cows' backsides, to pesticides that killed their target species, and much more besides.

Guilds of focused advisors in drab brown overalls and tiny vans met farmers free of charge to explain how to employ this largesse. Colleges produced legions of indoctrinated students who marched out in ranks to feed the world. Research stations, laboratories, and experimental farms, all centrally funded, were established throughout the land.

Meadows full of dancing wildflowers or woodlands where spotted flycatchers dipped and weaved to catch beakfuls of insects twirling in sunlit strobes did not fit the narrative of those times. Most were plowed under or ripped free from the soil that had held them for centuries, awaiting incineration on well-prepared pyres.

Birds of all sorts died in myriads when cornfields, old pastures, and orchards were sprayed with new toxins. Frogs returned to breed in the spring to discover their ancestral ponds had vanished. Photographers produced heartbreaking black-and-white images of them sitting in massed aggregations on their drying spawn.

Breeds of livestock with their roots buried deep in Britain's culture were discarded as well. It did not matter that they had adapted to frugal living to

produce something—a little meat, milk, horn, or dung to fertilize small fields—for folk who had nothing and could offer them less.

Who cared if they had been brought by the [Norse, the Romans, or the Celts](#)? They were out of time. Small or slow-growing and difficult to handle with independent spirits, the sooner they were all gone, the better. Their qualities of disease resistance, fine wool, or superlative meat meant nothing. Any adaptation to specific environments was meaningless in a time when whole landscapes could be rearranged.

Farmers Are Not the Problem

To be clear, farmers are not the problem. The problem is the great false idol of the industrial machine that so many unblinkingly worship. In general, farmers are a well-humored bunch. The old ones with good stories are always the best, and I have spent many hours sitting in their cozy kitchens listening to their tales as small dogs snoozed next to the iron cooker and busy wives bustled to serve cakes.

There was slight Henry Cowan, who regretted until the day he died that he had allowed a passing dealer to buy his last two horses, kept long after the others had gone, for the glue works. Tall Francis Watson, a big bear of a man who, at the age of 17, had guarded the palace of the Nizams in Hyderabad and whose great joy it was to linger for no particular purchase in our village shop to converse with its Pakistani proprietors in Urdu. And Miss Bartholomew, whose old cats pissed on her house chairs and whose ancient pet pigs were turned by her stockman daily to ease their bed sores when they could no longer stand.

All of them were once characters of great color who have now passed in time. Their world was simpler, of clear rights and dark wrongs. The reapers who harvested in their golden youths are not of the sort that scythe the earth today. The prospect that the land that they had cleared of rocks, drained and deforested, and then reforested, enriched, and impoverished in the swiftest succession would ever be used again for any purpose other than farming would not have seemed plausible to them at all. The notion that some of England's [oldest beasts could be restored to accelerate nature's gain](#) would have seemed absurd.

The Benefits of Bison

So why bother bringing bison back to Britain when we could be content to sit back in our slippers and reintegrate beavers into the countryside, which, in theory

at least, is as easy as falling off a stationary bus? The answer, in large part, is process. If, as it seems tantalizingly tangible, we are going to move from an era of unequivocal public subsidy for [farming 70 percent of the British landmass](#) (23 million acres) to a time when public money will be employed more evenly to repair nature, then at least a few of the large creatures we hunted to extinction may be restored in a limited fashion to assist this endeavor.

[Bison, for example, are not cattle](#). They are high forest browsers. If you reinstall them in dark, dull plantation woodlands with little biodiversity value, they will smash and debark big trees, wallow in sand soils, gouge out damp clays, provide pesticide-free blood and dung in abundance for insects, and crunch down woody scrub at random in a jagged and irregular manner.

They rip the bark from the stems of broad-leafed trees in a frozen winter by inserting the teeth of their lower palate under the surface of the tree, gripping it tightly with their upper jaw, and tugging sharply downward in order to “whip crack” the length of the stem before it tumbles away like a falling curtain to be consumed.

A single bison can eat 32 kilos of bark in a day. Multiply this by a stamping herd, hoarfrosted with steaming nostrils, and the impact of bison on woodland structure becomes obvious. Whole groves of succulent, young trees are retarded or misshapen. Their wounds leach resin or sap, which snails cluster into to exploit.

Some bare areas may scab over and scar, while others decay completely for woodpeckers to peck full of voids. Bats, martens, and birds use these cavities as nesting sites, while specialists such as willow tits make their own abodes in desiccated pockets rotted down by mycelia of many sorts. Nature loves randomness, and there is more in the simplest of forms.

[The fur from a bison’s woolly coat will be gathered by birds from the grasping thorns of bramble or rose](#) or from their backs directly when it peels in scrofulous mats in the springtime. This warm, snuggly material, which is ideal for their nests, will be filched from them by small mammals and taken underground. The repetitive wallowing of bison in dry sandbanks scours these vegetation-free features in random patches.

In their well-trampled base lie easily excavatable egg-laying areas for sand lizards, while mining insects pit any exposed standing banks with their tunnels.

Over time, the fragrant possibility exists that the European bee-eater, a child-painted wonder of yellows, blues, browns, and greens, will one day grace them as sites for their nest tunnels.

Bison will, in short, do some things that cattle are incapable of doing and others that cattle don't do very well. This, of course, is hardly surprising, given that ten thousand years of preparation for domestication has profoundly altered the shape, biology, and behavior of cattle, while bison have retained their wild being intact.

By Derek Gow

Author Bio: Derek Gow is a farmer, nature conservationist, and author of [Bringing Back the Beaver](#) (Chelsea Green, 2022) and [Birds, Beasts and Bedlam](#) (Chelsea Green, 2022). Born in Dundee, Scotland, he left school when he was 17 and worked in agriculture for five years. Inspired by the writing of Gerald Durrell, Dow jumped at the chance to manage a European wildlife park in central Scotland in the late 1990s before developing two nature centers in England. He now lives with his children, Maysie and Kyle, on a 300-acre farm on the Devon/Cornwall border, which he is rewilding. Gow has played a significant role in the reintroduction of the Eurasian beaver, the water vole, and the white stork in England. He is currently working on a reintroduction project for the wildcat.

Credit Line: This excerpt is adapted from Derek Gow's book [Birds, Beasts and Bedlam: Turning My Farm Into a Lost Ark for Species](#) (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2022). It is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial--ShareAlike 4.0 International License ([CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)) by permission of [Chelsea Green Publishing](#) and produced for the web by [Earth | Food | Life](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.