



Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update No. 2 22nd July 2009

This is the second update on activity associated with the Scottish Beaver Trial and covers the period between 18th June and 22nd July 2009. A more detailed report on the first stages of the Scottish Beaver Trial will be available later this year.

Background

The Scottish Beaver Trial is a partnership project between the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and host Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to undertake a time-limited, five year long trial reintroduction of the European beavers (*Castor fiber*) to Knapdale, Mid-Argyll.

The licence for the trial was granted by the Scottish Government in May 2008. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) coordinates the independent scientific monitoring of the trial, reporting to the Scottish Government on whether the conditions of the licence are being fully addressed on the ground.

How are the beavers doing?

Three families of beavers (11 animals in total) were successfully released into three separate lochs within the Knapdale Forest, early in the mornings of 28th and 29th May 2009, although unfortunately one young male animal died shortly after release. The post mortem on this animal was inconclusive as to the cause of death.

The beavers consist of a family of four released into Loch Coille Bharr (an adult male and female and two juvenile female offspring), a family of three into Loch Linne/Fidhle (an adult male and female and one juvenile male offspring) and a family of three into Creag Mhor Loch (an adult male and female and one female kit). The first two families have quickly set up home in their respective lochs, exploring the full extent of the water bodies and are actively feeding on a range of herbaceous and tree species around the water's edge. They are regularly tracked and seen by field staff and volunteers and appear to have built burrows where they spend the day lying up. The family in Loch Linne have been particularly busy building a lodge which rests under a large boulder. They have also quickly created an area of 'beaver coppice' amongst dense woodland near the boat jetty at this secluded site and new shoots are already emerging from the stumps of some of the trees they have felled. As expected some animals have lost their tail mounted radio transmitters and in the coming months these animals will be trapped and have transmitters re-attached as required. One of the juvenile females from Loch Coille Bharr family was observed fighting with another family member several weeks ago and she now appears to have left the loch and relocated on a watercourse in the vicinity of the Fairy Isles, which lies south west of Coille Bharr. This is normal behaviour in animals of this age which disperse from the home territory when they reach around two years old. Although she has not been observed by field staff since the fight the signal from her radio transmitter is regularly picked up and we will continue to track her. The rest of the Loch Coille Bharr family have become quite well known locally, as their predictable emergence times and accessible location mean that there are regularly seen at dusk, and small numbers of local people and visitors alike are viewing them most evenings from the fishing boat jetty at the north end of the loch.

The Creag Mhor family of three did not unfortunately settle into their loch as expected. In the first week following release the animals seemed to be content in their new surroundings and were regularly recorded swimming around the loch, feeding and interacting with one another. The following week the adult female beaver appeared to completely disappear and she has not been observed or her radio signal picked up since. It is not known at this point whether she has died, lost her tail tag and relocated to another location within the trial area or dispersed outwith the trial area. It is concerning, although perhaps purely coincidental that unauthorised night shooting was heard very close to this vicinity immediately prior to the female disappearing. The incident has been reported to the Police who are investigating the matter. The disappearance of the adult female seemed to unsettle the adult

male who shortly after was tracked moving back and forth between the loch, nearby water courses and outwith the trial area onto the nearby Crinan Canal. After several days based on the southern bank of the canal near Bellanoch, with field staff monitoring his activity the male then disappeared and his radio signal has not been picked up since the end of June. Again it is not known whether the animal has dispersed more widely, lost his tail tag or died. **BREAKING NEWS 3/8/09:** the male has now been located at a fish farm in nearby Kilmartin. Field staff are beginning the process of trapping the animal and he will be relocated to the trial area as soon as possible. The female kit remained on the loch until mid July, with field staff leaving supplementary food for her in light of her parents' disappearance. However shortly afterwards she was recorded on the canal, after possibly following her fathers scent. After a short time on the southern bank of the canal it was decided by the beaver trial partners, and in liaison with Scottish Natural Heritage and the site owners, British Waterways, to trap the animal and relocate her back to the release loch, following the erection of 'beaver-fencing' along the northern edge of Creag Mhor loch. Before trapping could begin in earnest however the animal disappeared from the canal and has not been observed or had her radio signal picked up since.

This unfortunate situation has been both puzzling and concerning, however field staff and volunteers are continuing to regularly search for these animals, both within and outwith the trial area. Being the height of the growing season with abundant vegetation all around, all the beavers are leaving only relatively few field signs. As the autumn approaches however more obvious field signs will be apparent and if some or all of these animals are still alive then it is expected that the signs they leave will be found by field staff, volunteers or local people and the animals can, if necessary, be relocated and monitored.

Despite the unexpected events mentioned above however, it is important not to lose sight of the big picture, which is that the majority of beavers have settled quickly, are behaving naturally and they and their activities are being regularly observed and recorded as part of a scientifically monitored trial in accordance with the licence conditions laid out by the Scottish Government.

Research & Monitoring

- The post release monitoring of the project, led by SNH continues on track, with the publication of the first baseline survey reports expected in the next few months. See www.snh.org.uk/scottishbeavertrial for further details.
- Research proposals associated with the trial are currently being refined by the partners and will be discussed by the SNH led Research & Monitoring Coordination Group in the coming months.

Staff & Volunteers

- The numbers of people involved in the trial continues to grow and Jenny Holden, the SBT Field Officer now has a group of around eight regular volunteers who are assisting with all aspects of the trial, but mostly focusing on tracking and recording animals in the field. Following the three Beaver Training Days held back in May the first volunteer training night was held on the 1st of July and was enjoyed by all involved.
- The staffing for the project has been boosted by the arrival of Roisin Campbell-Palmer who has been appointed as Beaver Team Leader for RZSS. Roisin will manage all aspects of RZSS involvement with beaver issues including the SBT, and take responsibility for contact between SBT and the Norwegian colleagues. She is also just beginning her PhD which will investigate how chemical communication could aid reintroduction success in the Eurasian beaver.

Liaison & Communication

- The third local Stakeholder Forum meeting is due to take place in late August 2009 and will include a field visit to the trial site to look at the effects the beavers are having to date.
- Jenny has started a 'Beaver Blog' about the trial which can be seen at <http://blog.scottishbeavers.org.uk>
- The trial continues to generate media interest and along with ongoing newspaper coverage the BBC's Countryfile programme filmed on site last month.

Potential future release proposal

- The Scottish Government licence permits the trial partners to release up to four families of European beavers into Knapdale as part of the trial reintroduction. In order to establish a small, but viable population of animals within the trial area and therefore fulfil the objectives of the trial and licence, the SBT partners will be proposing that a fourth family or pair of animals is released into the trial area as soon as is practically possible. Should agreement come from the Scottish Government on this matter then the animals used will be some of those remaining in captivity which are of Norwegian origin and have already been through the standard quarantine procedures.

Interpretation & Education

- The whole process of capture, quarantine and release of the beavers has been captured on film by an SBT commissioned independent film maker. This short, documentary style film will soon be transferred onto DVD for viewing and circulated for wider use.
- The Education and Interpretation Working Group of the trial have just produced a first draft Education Plan for the Scottish Beaver Trial which will guide the development of education and interpretation projects associated with the Trial.
- The Education and Interpretation Working Group will also shortly be leading on the production of a general information leaflet on the trial for public use, particularly in the local area.

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22nd July 2009