

SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL



BRINGING BACK BEAVERS TO SCOTLAND

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Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update No. 22 11th June 2014

This is the 22nd and final update from the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) and covers activity between 6th November 2013 and 31st May 2014

Project Background

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

The licence for the Trial was granted by the Scottish Government in May 2008, with the first beavers being released in May 2009. The Trial ran until May 2014. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) co-ordinates the independent scientific monitoring of the trial, reporting progress to the Scottish Government and monitoring how the conditions of the licence are being addressed on the ground.

What's been happening in Knapdale?

It has been several months since my last update and this delay has been because I wanted to wait until after May to let you know about the final few months of the field monitoring phase of the Scottish Beaver Trial, which was completed on the 31st May 2014.

Following the first releases of beavers back in 2009, it is with a mixture of pride, relief and some sadness that I can report that the five year scientific monitoring period has been successfully delivered and has now come to an end.

The past few months have been a bit of a whirlwind in terms of activity but the final sets of field data have now been collected and handed over to Scottish Natural Heritage and the various Independent Monitoring Partners in time for them to begin their analysis and report writing. But more of that later.

Last winter turned out to be another mild, wet one through on the West coast and the Knapdale beavers did not have to endure frozen lochs and icy vegetation as happened in the first two winters of the trial. As usual for these seasons, the beavers remained active throughout winter and early spring, and although their body weights dropped as they used up their fat reserves, they remained in good condition and were regularly caught on the infra-red camera traps deployed around the trial site release lochs (see image below).

At the time of writing there are 10 beavers confirmed in the trial area, a family of four at Loch Linne, a family of three at Loch Coille Bharr (which also includes the Dubh Loch flooded forest area), a breeding pair at Lochan Buic and a single adult male at Lochan Beag. It is still unclear whether any of last years'

kits have survived the winter but unfortunately it does not look promising for these youngsters. Although a sad loss, events such as this and the other births, deaths and movements of the beavers help to provide valuable information from the trial process, which aids our understanding of the dynamics of a beaver population and better informs the final reporting from the trial.



Adult beaver 'Bjornar' caught on camera trap by Loch Coille Bharr © Scottish Beaver Trial



Dubh Loch beaver site seen from the air showing flooded forest

and new viewing platform at bottom left © Scottish Beaver Trial

In contrast to the winter, early spring was relatively cold and prolonged this year and even coastal Argyll (warmed by the Gulf Stream) seemed to sit dormant longer than usual. Spring came eventually, though, and it seems fitting to me that the five year monitoring period ended when Knapdale was at its best, with carpets of bluebells, forests a dozen shades of green and the first white water lilies opening under blue skies.



Knapdale loch and forest © Scottish Beaver Trial

Interpretation & Educational Activities

While the fieldwork element of the trial has now finished, the public engagement certainly has not and, true to form, the educational work carried out by the SBT Educational Team over the past few months – led by Ranger Oly Hemmings – has been impressive. Between November 2013 and this May, 2,375 people (including 622 school children) took part in 39 beaver walks, talks and events.

Highlights included 19 ‘Beavers at Home’ and ‘Beavers are Back’ lessons delivered at 8 schools; a highly successful ‘Love your Beavers’ event at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh in February; and the guest appearance of Bruce the Beaver and Oly Hemmings at the VisitScotland Tourism Expo at the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre in Glasgow in April.



Castlehill Primary School children from Campbeltown build an arch to learn about 'keystone species' © Scottish Beaver Trial



Bruce the Beaver at VisitScotland Tourism Expo 2014 © Argyll and the Isles Tourism Ltd.

Scottish Beaver Trial
Guided Walks Tuesdays 8th - 22nd April
Easter 2014 Saturdays 5th - 19th April



Booking essential
 please phone
 (01546) 603346

6pm at Barnluasgan
Information Centre.
 £2/adult. £1/under 16s.
 Under 3's free.
 All children to be
 accompanied by an adult.
 Boots & waterproofs advised.
 No toilet facilities.

Directions: from Lochgilphead follow A816. Turn left onto B841 at Cairnbaan. Turn left onto B8025 signed Tayvallich, turn left at fork in road by stone cross, and left into Barnluasgan car park.

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 2014 European
 Beaver Spring

Poster for Easter 2014 SBT guided walks programme © Scottish Beaver Trial

Research and Publications

Although unconnected to the Independent Monitoring Programme associated with the trial, a series of behind the scenes research efforts have been carried out with partner organisations around the UK and Europe. In total, articles have been published in 13 scientific journals, many focusing on novel veterinary techniques for working with beavers and furthering our knowledge of the genetics of beaver populations across the Eurasian range of *Castor fiber*. Both of these research areas are of significance, particularly if Scotland decides to lead the way in the UK with further reintroductions to the wild at some point in the future.



RZSS Veterinary Surgeon, Romain Pizzi, examining an anaesthetised beaver using keyhole surgery © RZSS

Liaison Work

Following on from the 2007 public consultation run by the SBT Partners prior to their Scottish Government licence application, we had long planned to repeat the exercise towards the end of the trial. This would help us gauge whether people's opinions had changed about the beavers and their impacts over the past six years.

During February and March this year we ran an eight week long consultation exercise focused on the local area to gather opinions on the presence of beavers. A public talk was held in Kilmartin, followed by several drop-in sessions at local community hotspots and an on-line survey via the SBT website, plus a separately commissioned YouGov poll.

The responses received confirmed our view that the majority of people support wild beavers living in Knapdale (84% of Mid Argyll residents, with 11% disagreeing). Additionally, 80% of local people believed that beavers had helped tourism and the area's economy (4% disagreed). Further afield, 74% of Scottish adults who were aware of the trial support beaver reintroduction, with 6% disagreeing.

One of the highlights of the last few months was undoubtedly the two events held in mid-May to celebrate the successful delivery of the field monitoring phase of the trial. On the 14th May, the SBT Team left their wellies and waterproofs behind and donned their best Sunday clothes to attend an event at the Scottish Parliament, hosted by Mike Mackenzie MSP. Speakers at the event included Professor Colin Galbraith (Chair of the SBT Steering Group) and Paul Wheelhouse MSP (Minister for Environment and Climate Change), who reflected on the last five years of the trial process. An opportunity for guests and MSPs to try their hand at beaver games and taking 'selfies' with special guest Bruce the Beaver was too good an opportunity to miss for many attendees!



Team Beaver at the Scottish Parliament, May 2014 © Phil Hannah



**Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Bruce, Michael Russell MSP and Paul Wheelhouse MSP
© Phil Hannah**

Media Activity

You may recall from my last update that the Trial was Highly Commended in the 2013 Nature of Scotland Awards. Well, we went one better in January when the Scottish Beaver Trial was awarded the 'UK's Best Conservation Project, 2013' by readers of the BBC's Countryfile Magazine! Many thanks to all of you that voted for us.



SBT Project Manager Simon Jones with BBC Countryfile Magazine's award for

'UK's Best Conservation Project, 2013' © Scottish Beaver Trial

This award also caught the attention of the national media. Other media highlights over the last few months include a feature on the role beavers might play in flood alleviation following the devastating floods experienced in the south of England (theguardian.com, 29 January 2014) and coverage of the results from the public consultation exercise (BBC News, 29th April 2014).

Fittingly for a project that has captured the imagination of millions of people, we ended on a media high and were delighted to welcome back the BBC Springwatch crew in the final days of the field monitoring period. Two films were aired in separate episodes (numbers 4 and 5) and these investigated the underwater world of the Knapdale beavers, explored some exciting research in the field looking at the use of predator scents to deter beavers, and included an interview on progress to date and the next steps in the trial process.



Roisin Campbell-Palmer, SBT Field Operations Manager, explains a predator scent experiment to a BBC Springwatch cameraman © Scottish Beaver Trial

So what happens now...

Even though the five year monitoring period is over, the Trial is not. Over the next 12 months all of the data collected by staff, volunteers and independent monitoring partners from thousands of hours of fieldwork will be analysed, collated and summarised into a synthesis report by Scottish Natural Heritage, who will then present it to the Scottish Government this time next year.

The report will cover not only the findings from the Scottish Beaver Trial, but also the findings from the work of the Tayside Beaver Study Group, Beaver Salmonid Working Group, National Species Reintroduction Forum and experiences from our neighbours in Europe who have already reintroduced beavers back into the wild.

This report will be considered by the Minister for Environment and Climate Change and colleagues in the Scottish Government, and we hope to learn of the decision on the future of beavers in Scotland at some point in the second half of 2015.

The beavers in Knapdale will remain in place until such a decision is made. The site, managed by Forestry Commission Scotland, will remain open to visitors as usual and the Scottish Beaver Trial Partners are leaving Oly Hemmings in place as a Beaver Ranger to keep a presence on the ground during this time.

Oly will work part time and continue to run guided walks, talks and educational events as well as keeping a watchful eye over the beaver families. Oly will be supported and line managed by Roisin Campbell-Palmer (RZSS Conservation Projects Manager, rcampbellpalmer@rzss.org.uk) from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, who will be based at Edinburgh Zoo but will lead on the low key field monitoring of the beavers during this period. I will maintain an overview of the trial on behalf of the Scottish Wildlife Trust from their Edinburgh offices.

Many thanks to you for following these project updates. Although they will cease, you can continue to keep up to date with what's happening at the trial by visiting our website, blog, Facebook page and on Twitter. In the autumn, the SBT Partners also plan to publish our final report on the Trial, which will be very much the story of the project and will be separate from the reports issued in 2015 by the Independent Monitoring Partners and SNH. Please look out for links to the report on the SBT website and social media. You can also see an excellent short film on the highlights from the last five years on the SBT website home page.

Lastly, it only remains to be said that it has been an amazing five years for all involved. A huge thank you to all the staff, volunteers, partners, funders and stakeholders who have contributed to this ground-breaking project. There have been many twists and turns in the fortunes of the Knapdale beaver families since 2009, and I'm sure that they will continue over the coming months. I for one will be keeping my fingers firmly crossed for them.

Best wishes and farewell for now.

Simon Jones, Scottish Beaver Trial Project Manager and all at the Scottish Beaver Trial Team.