



BRINGING BACK BEAVERS TO SCOTLAND

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**Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update No. 15
30th January 2012**

This is the 15th update on the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) and covers activity between 24th October 2011 and 30th January 2012.

Background

The SBT 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 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 will run until 2014. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) coordinates 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?

As I write this update, memories of the bitterly cold winters experienced in Knapdale over the past two years seem to be a lifetime ago. As we braced ourselves for yet another mini ice age in Scotland, Mother Nature had a different trick up her sleeve this winter and instead of blanketing us with metres of snow and ice she has instead blasted us with lashing rain and howling gales for what seems like months now. It feels more like a prolonged autumn than a real winter, although there is still time yet for arctic conditions to arrive. What affect all of this changeable weather is having on our beavers we can never fully know, but as they are from Norway where many months of ice-over are the norm, these animals are accustomed to cold weather. Beavers do not hibernate and remain active throughout the winter. To do so they need a continuous supply of food and these supplies come from their carefully constructed food caches: masses of green branch-wood which are attached to the edges of their home lodges, like annual larder extensions. It is changes in beaver behaviour that are one of the first signs of the coming autumn and winter, as they begin to fell more trees and shrubs close to the lodge and laboriously transport the cut sections back to their large food caches which each family must prepare. January and February are also the months when adult beaver pairs mate. So far the trial has seen two out of the four adult beaver pairs breed for two years running and this year we are all hoping that some of the younger females may successfully produce offspring for the first time, although we will not know this until mid to late summer when the kits emerge.

The remote, infra-red trail cameras that I told you about in my last report have been put to good use over the past few months by our Field Operations Manager, Roisin Campbell Palmer and Field Officer, Rob Needham. As well as giving us some fascinating insights into the feeding, lodge building and mutual grooming behaviour of the four separate beaver families, the cameras prove an excellent way of remotely assisting with the assessment of the beaver's body condition, health status and the presence or absence of ear and telemetry tags used to identify and track individual animal's movements. You can see some of this remarkable footage yourself by visiting the official Scottish Beaver Trial blog at <http://blog.scottishbeavers.org.uk>

An intriguing twist to the tale of Trude, the young female beaver living at Lochan Buic, was discovered in late October when it was found out that she has been participating in a spot of 'wife swapping' with the

neighbouring pair of beavers from Creag Mhor Loch. So now Trude's ex-mate Christian lives with Elaine on Creag Mhor Loch and Eoghann, Elaine's ex-mate has now moved into the lodge on Lochan Buic with Trude. With a plot nearly as complicated as an episode of EastEnders we'll keep you informed as to how these newlyweds get on with each other in the coming months.

Another interesting development related with the Trial happened in mid November when a report came to us of field signs which resembled beaver activity on the island of Shuna, which lies approximately 15 km north of Knapdale. After speaking with the landowner and tenant, an SBT Field Team visited the island a few days later and confirmed that the field signs were indeed beaver gnawing on aspen trees. The team then swept of all the islands' watercourses and although a few signs were found these were many months old and no fresh evidence of beaver activity was found. It is most likely that these field signs came from one or more of the beavers that dispersed from the trial area soon after release in the summer of 2009. We will continue to follow up any reports of potential beaver activity outwith the Trial site and are keen to hear from any local people or visitors to the area that may have information that could lead us to tracing the location of any dispersed beavers from the Knapdale trial area.



Old beaver gnawing signs on aspen, Shuna, Nov 2011 (© Butterfly Conservation)

Roisin and Rob have also had a busy few months carrying out live trapping of the beavers across the four release lochs. This trapping uses two very different methods; Bavarian cage traps and the Norwegian boat and net methods. Videos showing both of these techniques in action can be seen on the website at www.scottishbeavers.org.uk/beaver-facts/video Live trapping requires a mix of technical skill, patience and calm weather and aims to trap every beaver at least once a year in order to fully assess their body condition, replace any missing tags and with our very young beavers allow us catch them for the first time, to allow them be sexed and have a tiny, uniquely coded microchip implant under the skin at the back of the neck, just as with many pet dogs and cats. In the last year 9 of the 12 beavers have been safely caught, assessed and re-released and all have been in good condition for the time of year.



Infra-red, remote trail camera captures 'Katrina' investing a Bavarian beaver trap Nov11 (©SBT)

Monitoring the beavers and their effects

When you are next tucked up in your warm, snug bed, listening to the wind and rain lashing down outside in the black night, spare a thought for our hard working SBT Field Team who could well be braving the elements in the forests and lochs of Knapdale in order to carry out scientific monitoring work on the beavers and their effects. The Field Team, led by Roisin is comprised of various staff, volunteers and students who all contribute towards gathering data required for the trial. Other field work is also carried out by independent scientists from the various SBT Independent Monitoring Partners; expert institutions that are coordinated by Scottish Natural Heritage and gather and analyse different types of beaver related data before reporting them to SNH and the Scottish Government.

There are now 11 commissioned reports available on the SNH website (see address below) covering the interim findings to date of the various independent monitoring partners involved in the monitoring of the beavers and their effects. These reports cover woodland, fish and aquatic macrophyte (water plant) communities, along with river habitats, beaver/otter ecology and historic site findings. More reports are due to follow in time, with the findings of the studies into hydrology, Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies), beaver health, public health, water chemistry, and scheduled historic monuments only being published at the end of the trial in 2014.

All of these reports can be viewed online or downloaded from the SNH website at www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/safeguarding-biodiversity/reintroducing-native-species/scottish-beaver-trial/the-monitoring-programme

Interpretation & Education Activities

Since my last update there have been 18 SBT related talks, guided walks and events to a total audience of 539 people over the autumn and early winter period. As well as talks to clubs in Glasgow, Callander and Inverary groups, highlights have included school visits by pupils from Inverary Primary School and North Berwick High School, along with two teacher training sessions at Lochgilphead Joint Campus and Edinburgh Zoo. On the same busy day in November, Roisin was asked to present to a large group of delegates at the Norfolk Biodiversity Forum, whilst I was in London speaking at the annual Biffaward awards ceremony for all those projects like the SBT that have benefited from generous Biffaward funding <http://www.biffaward.org/home>



Local Argyll Teachers taking part in SBT Continuing Professional Development Day 18/11/11 (©SBT)

Liaison & Communication Activities

In late October we were delighted to announce the winner of our junior 'Name that Beaver' competition. Sarah Bell, aged 6 of Airdrie, North Lanarkshire won a beaver safari for her family, with the name of 'Barney' for one of our first born beaver kits.



'Name that Beaver' competition winner Sarah Bell (with Bruce the Beaver) and 'Barney' (©SBT)

Over the festive season the Trial featured once again on the BBC Springwatch Christmas Special and will also be seen on the forthcoming S4C Welsh language programme 'Antur y Gorllewin' (English subtitles are available on the programmes website) hosted by Iolo Williams, a regular Springwatch presenter.



Rob Needham and Iolo Williams by beaver dam during filming of 'Antur y Gorllewin' (©SBT)

Website & Blog

We have recently updated an important section of our website and you can now download all of the activities from the Scottish Beaver Trial Education pack on the 'Learning Zone' section of the SBT website at www.scottishbeavers.org.uk/beaver-facts/learning-zone

All up-to-date information on the Trial can be found at the **SBT website** www.scottishbeavers.org.uk and for regular news from the Field Team make sure you look up to the **Official SBT blog** <http://blog.scottishbeavers.org.uk> Recent reports and updates can be viewed on the SBT website in Beaver Facts > Publications and News > Project Updates.

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If you have any questions about the Scottish Beaver Trial then please visit our website www.scottishbeavers.org.uk or contact me at:

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