

SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL



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Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update No. 10 22 October 2010

This is the 10th update on the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) and covers activity between 28th July and 21st October 2010.

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 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.

What's been happening in Knapdale?

Autumn is now well and truly upon us over on the West coast and although the seasonal colours of Knapdale are a pleasure to behold, the shortening days, dropping temperatures and wet, windy conditions make fieldwork a real challenge for SBT staff and volunteers at this time of year. Regardless of the weather the scientific monitoring and recording of the beavers and their impacts must continue as the animals busy themselves for the coming lean, winter months. As the green vegetation of the spring and summer dies back the beavers' diet becomes less varied and they spend more time foraging on small to medium sized trees close to the water's edge, as well as putting extra effort into making sure their dams and lodges are ready for the coming months.

Whilst there never seems to be a quiet period in the project, this summer has been particularly busy for all involved and hence the reason why it has been a while since my last update to you all. Here are some of the highlights from the past three months:

- **Babies**

Without a doubt the high point of this year so far was the discovery back in late July that our first beaver families had bred and managed to produce two kits. Delighted SBT field workers managed to catch the first glimpses of the kits, one from each of the Dubh Loch and Loch Linne families taking some of their first swimming and feeding lessons from their parents. Although beavers are clearly very much at home in the water, it was also apparent that learning to swim well is a process of trial and error! The photo below was taken after much patience and many midge bites. We also hope to release some high quality film footage of one of the kits and their parents in the near future. Let us hope these are the first of more young beavers to be born in Scotland after such a long absence.



Beaver kit with parent, Loch Linne - © Steve Gardner

We now have 12 beavers in four groups of beavers at four separate lochs within the Trial area. Along with the two families who have just bred we also have two young pairs of beavers at nearby sites. In my last update I told you about the release in June of 'Elaine' and 'Eoghann' into the Creag Mhor Loch in the northern part of the Trial area. This young pair have settled well at this site and also use a nearby adjacent lochan. Although quite secretive in nature the beavers are regularly observed by field staff and are active felling small trees along the densely wooded shorelines. Eoghann was trapped and then examined by a local vet a couple of weeks ago as he has developed an abscess on his rump (unconnected with his radio tag patch), but after inspection and some minor treatment he was released again and field staff are keeping a eye on him.

- **Latest beaver release**

On the 21st September 2010 we released a single, young male beaver 'Christian' into Loch Buic south of the other release sites, who was trapped from the wild in Norway by Prof Frank Rosell and our very own Field Officer and expert trapper, Christian Robstad. Scottish Government vets granted us special permission to immediately release him following a period of quarantine in Norway, where he passed all necessary health checks. This release was carried out in an effort to form a new pair with the widowed female beaver, 'Trude' who is still resident at this site following the unfortunate death of her original partner 'Tallak' back in May this year. Again with permission from the Scottish Government to use this replacement beaver, the release went well and after what can only be described as a 'robust' welcome to his new home by Trude, the beavers now seem to be forming a pair bond well and have recently been observed carrying out lodge building activity. This activity hopefully means they are establishing a territory together and preparing for the winter season ahead.



Christian' in quarantine pool, Norway ©

Prof. Frank Rosell

- **Access update**

The circular track around Loch Coille Bharr which includes the 'Beaver Detective Trail' has been partially blocked for several months now following the creation of the Dubh Loch beaver pond. Work commenced in August on the construction of a purpose-built detour path, which will allow visitors to circumnavigate the beaver pond and dam and rejoin with the main track. This work which has been led by FCS and funded by the SBT Partners will officially open within the next few weeks and an ingenious section of floating pontoon gives the remarkable experience of walking across part of the main loch, whilst also giving some excellent views of the beaver dam and pond.

Staff, volunteers & organisation

Jenny Holden our first SBT Field Officer has now moved on from the Trial to pastures new and we wish her good luck in the future. Christian Robstad has recently stepped up into the full-time SBT Field Officer role and is currently assisted by Nathan Dove who joined us in August as a temporary Field Assistant. Several local FCS Conservation staff members regularly assist with field work, particularly night tracking observations and volunteers and other RZSS and SWT staff members continue to help us with delivering the demanding programme of work on the ground. Over the next few weeks we also hope to welcome our first work placement pupil from Lochgilphead High School who will be learning how the day to day running of the Trial works and helping with fieldwork.

Following a review and evaluation of the first year of the SBT by SWT, RZSS and FCS staff members involved in the project, we will shortly be adapting our organisational structure to help better deliver the Trial in the coming years. I will continue to oversee the planning and implementation of the Trial as a whole as SBT Project Manager, but as from next month Róisín Campbell Palmer (currently Beaver Team Project Leader, RZSS) will take on the new role of 'SBT Field Operations Manager' and will have overall responsibility for managing the field operations in Knapdale, including the line management of the field staff. Along with this change a new 'SBT Management Team' will be formed to draw together much of the expertise that currently exists in the separate, specialist working groups for the project (i.e. Fundraising, PR & Communications and Education & Interpretation).

Interpretation & Education

This summer saw many visitors come to the Trial area in order to see for themselves what the beavers had been up to and learn about the SBT. On 26-29th July RZSS Education Officers and SWT staff led four evening beaver guided walks from the Barnluasgan Information Centre down to the Dubh Loch beaver site, as part of the wider 'Dalriada Project' summer events programme. In total 175 people turned up for the guided walks, with one night alone attracting 74 people, which proved to be quite a challenge for the group leaders! Despite the large numbers of people everyone managed to see the beaver dam, pond and tree felling activity which is so striking at this site and two groups were also lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a beaver swimming in the loch. RZSS and SWT staff also represented the SBT Partners at the Crinan Canal Festival on the 1st August and the well attended Mid Argyll Show on 14th August. Including these events there have been 11 SBT related walks, talks and events since my last update, with over 950 people in attendance.



Amy Cox (RZSS Education Officer) leads a 'Beaver Safari' July10 ©RZSS

In September the Trial site has also hosted film crews who filmed some beavers for a new BBC natural history series to be aired in 2011 and the Trial will also feature in the BBC Wildlife magazine next year.

Liaison & communication

On 8th September HRH, The Princess Royal visited the Trial site in her capacity as Patron of RZSS. The Princess was taken by SBT staff to see the Dubh Loch beaver dam and pond and then visited the beaver lodge on Loch Linne.



HRH, The Princess Royal setting off on Loch Linne, Sept10 ©RZSS

Other recent visitors to the Trial site have included the SNH-led UK Inter Agency Mammals Working Group which is comprised of mammal experts from most of the main UK government agencies, who learnt about the details of the SBT.

On the evening of 12th October 2010 an SBT Public Drop-in session was at the Cairnbaan Hotel and approximately 30 people called by to chat to SBT Partner staff and learn more about how the Trial is progressing. New film footage taken by local wildlife camerawoman, Mary Lou Aitchison of the Dubh Loch beavers and kit was also shown for the first time in public. The following day saw the 5th SBT Local Stakeholders Forum (13/10/10) take place at Tayvallich Village Hall. These forums are an opportunity for local

people, businesses, landowners and organisations to listen to updates on progress with the Trial from SBT Partner, FCS and SNH local staff and discuss in detail any issues or concerns that they might have. In total 24 people attended the forum on this occasion, which was chaired by local Councillor Donnie MacMillan.

Also on the 12-14th October was the British & Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) Mammal Working Group conference held at Belfast Zoo. Róisín Campbell Palmer presented a talk and an award winning poster regarding the first year of the SBT at the event. At the start of October Róisín and Professor Frank Rosell of Telemark University College had a review research paper published in The Mammal Review scientific journal addressing the conservation of the Eurasian beaver (see below).

Last month I, on behalf of the SBT Partners drafted the 'European beaver Species Action Framework Implementation Plan' and submitted this to SNH, as our first contribution to this Scottish Government strategic framework. See www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/species-action-framework/ for further information.

- Website & Blog

Up-to-date information on the trial can as always be found at the SBT website and the official blog. Recent reports and updates can be viewed in Beaver Facts > Publications and News > Project Updates on our website www.scottishbeavers.org.uk

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

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1. ¹ Róisín CAMPBELL-PALMER and Frank ROSELL¹ [Conservation of the Eurasian beaver *Castor fiber*: an olfactory perspective, Mammal Review 2010, Volume 40, No.4 \(pages 293–312\)](#)