

# Rewilding

## It's not all about wildcats and wolves



**Cheryl Marriott**  
Head of Conservation

The concept of rewilding has grabbed traditional nature conservation thinking by the shoulders and given it a much-needed shake. But does the term make you anxious or excited? Rewilding means very different things to different people.

The idea seems to originate from the US, where conservation projects were developed in the 1990s covering vast tracts of land. These initiatives often involved the reintroduction of large predators that had previously been lost. To some, rewilding must include top predator reintroductions to qualify. This is a big reason for nervousness surrounding rewilding, with people concerned about the safety of domestic pets and livestock. But as Rewilding Britain (a new charity formed after the publication of George Monbiot's book, *Feral*) rightly point out, rewilding is not all about wolves and lynx. The trick is to take the principles of the pioneering projects and translate them to suit other places, including areas that are significantly smaller and more heavily populated.

### CASE STUDY

## Carrifran Wildwood

There is a growing list of projects across the UK that have been inspired by the rewilding idea. Carrifran in Dumfries and Galloway used to be a barren Scottish glen. Heavy grazing by sheep and goats meant the vegetation was sparse and species-poor, supporting very few types of birds and mammals. Between 2000 and 2004 the grazing animals were removed and, with some human help in the form of tree planting, nature began to recover. Montane scrub, heath and bog are regaining their former status while notable plants, birds, insects and small mammals multiply in their new-found haven. The landscape impact is dramatic; the dull and denuded vegetation has been replaced by thousands of oak, ash, alder, hazel, birch, holly, hawthorn, juniper, bird cherry and willow saplings. It is still early days in the life of a wildwood. In future, decisions will need to be made about allowing large herbivores in to create the disturbance and variety in habitats needed to support maximum biodiversity. Carrifran is a great demonstration of how positive and dramatic landscape-scale change can be, and how quickly wildlife responds.

Find out more at:  
<https://bordersforesttrust.org>

before

## CASE STUDY

# Knepp Wildland Project

The Knepp Castle Estate used to be 3,500 acres of intensive dairy and arable farmland situated on heavy weald clay in West Sussex. The farm rarely made a profit and in 2001 the entire farming system was changed; internal fences were removed and free-roaming grazing animals – longhorn cattle, Exmoor ponies, Tamworth pigs and two species of deer were introduced, acting as proxies for herbivores that would have grazed the land thousands of years ago. The ethos is for humans to take a step back and let natural processes – in this case large herbivore grazing – take control. The different grazing preferences help create a mosaic of habitats, from grassland and scrub to open-grown trees and wood pasture. The increase in biodiversity has been astonishing. In just over a decade Knepp is now a breeding hotspot for purple emperor butterflies, turtle doves and nightingales.

Find out more at <https://knepp.co.uk/home> or by reading *Wilding* by Isabella Tree.



The Knepp wilding project in Sussex has demonstrated how quickly wildlife can recover when humans take a step back and let nature and natural processes take over, like in this mosaic of scrub and flower-rich grassland.

CHERYL MARRIOTT



after



Could some Trust nature reserves like Windmill Farm be managed differently in future, following rewilding principles?

NICK MARRIOTT

# Rewilding – it's not all about wildcats and wolves


The essence of rewilding is the reinstatement or 'upgrading' of natural processes. These might be rivers allowed to move freely in a floodplain, streams newly dammed by beavers, or grazing animals given the freedom to roam larger areas and behave more naturally than in conventional farming. Ultimately, the aim is to move towards a point where nature can look after itself, without the need for humans to garden it with chainsaws, brushcutters, mowers and flails. You can think of rewilding as a spectrum of natural process function, from low on the left to high on the right. Low would be conventional intensive farmland and high would be an area where wildlife looks after itself. If natural processes can be upgraded at least in part and you move from left to right you are going in the right direction, even if full-on rewilding isn't possible.

“ We're seeing a surge of interest in rewilding, from all corners of the country. So many people want to see nature not just clinging on, but thriving again, and us with it. That's as much about our oceans as our land. Cornwall has a huge part to play. ”

**Alistair Driver**, Specialist Advisor for Rewilding Britain

A nerve-racking difference between rewilding and human-led nature conservation management is that there is no defined end point. Traditional nature conservation in the UK is rooted in protecting areas of wildlife habitat that survived as land use around them changed. It was the best we had, but was already highly modified by humans over the centuries. We have come to think of these modified habitats as something we should protect exactly as they are now, rather than how we could make them even better. Another issue is that we are often restricted in the way we manage land, including nature reserves, due to financial necessity. Land management has to follow set rules in order to qualify for agricultural subsidy payments. This does little to reinstate natural processes on nature reserves because the subsidy scheme is designed for land with food production as its primary purpose, not wildlife enhancement. An ecological case of round peg, square hole.

Without a cultural memory of natural ecosystem function in the UK, it's no wonder that we are nervous about the landscape change that results from rewilding. But with 56% of UK species in decline despite our best efforts (a trend mirrored in Cornwall), surely a big shake-up is called for? Perhaps it's time to leave our ecological comfort zone.



This valley in Bavaria has been recolonised by beavers and other wildlife is now thriving as a result

We are unlikely to see wildcats or wolves returning to Cornwall in our lifetimes, but beaver reintroductions could transform the countryside.



Wolf



Wildcat



A beaver dam-building

DAMIAN WATERS / DRUMIMAGES.CO.UK

ELLIOT SMITH

DAVID PARKYN



The topography of this farmland in Cornwall is similar. Imagine if beavers were given the space to create incredible wetland habitats here



### Factfile

[rewildingbritain.org.uk](http://rewildingbritain.org.uk)

### Feral

by George Monbiot



### Wilding

by Isabella Tree