



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com



SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

Date - June 2014

Duration - 7 Days

Destinations

Inverness - Loch Ness - Glen Righ Forest - Fort William - Loch Linnhe - Corran - Ardnamurchan Peninsula - Strontian - Loch Sunart - Carna - Loch Shiel - Cairngorms National Park - Aviemore - Glenlivet - Braemar - Blairgowrie

Trip Overview

Although I have never entirely neglected the wildlife in my own country and often spend weekends away looking for various animals, I have only seriously considered a comprehensive United Kingdom wildlife tour since I began planning a trip to Yorkshire in early 2013. I was always aware that whilst a really interesting trip incorporating a wide variety of animals was certainly possible, the attitude towards wildlife in general is so poor on these isles that it was always preferable to travel abroad, despite the many problems



that other countries also face. At one stage the wildlife of the United Kingdom was as diverse as most regions in Northern Europe with Eurasian lynx, brown bear, grey wolf, Eurasian beaver and wild boar all playing an important and in some cases vital role in a rich ecosystem that now has to be 'managed' at a tremendous and generally unnecessary annual cost. A succession of hapless governments have singularly failed to protect the wildlife of this country, producing an embarrassment of increasingly bizarre management policies based at best on knee-jerk reactions and at worst on the need to mask the extensive habitat destruction they have presided over and the desire to protect an elite few who generally prefer killing animals than conserving them. In the Highlands, for example, estate managers have persecuted foxes to within an inch of

extinction in some areas, not to protect the local farmer's chickens, as has always been argued, but to ensure that foxes do not eat the game birds that guests will be charged a small fortune to shoot on the various estates each year. When you consider that the majority of major landowners are multi-millionaires, it is hard to fully comprehend the greed that drives this type of mentality from individuals who should view their responsibility as custodians of the land as a great privilege, with the opportunity to do an immense amount of good for their local environment. The current situation with the red and grey squirrel is in some ways even worse, as a few so called conservationists are now calling for the grey version of the species to be eradicated in order to encourage the return of the native red squirrel, despite the fact that greys have been resident in the United Kingdom since 1876 and their role in the demise of the red squirrel has been greatly exaggerated. If we were to cull the real force behind the reduction in red squirrel numbers, then there would not be many people left in the UK, as the truth is that habitat destruction and human persecution have been far more responsible for the decline in red squirrel numbers than grey squirrels could ever be. It is worth remembering that we have more or less exterminated the red squirrel now on two separate occasions within the last two centuries and that they had to be reintroduced to the Highlands back in

the mid 19th century purely because they were previously viewed as pests in the same way that grey squirrels now are and were automatically killed by gamekeepers. They thrived upon their return and their numbers increased so rapidly that the powers that be thought it would be good idea to exterminate them once more and squirrel clubs were formed with the sole purpose of killing as many red squirrels as possible. Hundreds of thousands of reds were slaughtered in a 25-year period until the late 1920s and a few years later it was the grey squirrels turn, when the British government decided that the foreign species was now too widespread and began paying bounties for every grey squirrel killed, resulting in the destruction of several million grey squirrels in just



over a decade. After centuries of persecution at the hands of man and the whims of ill-informed governments, red squirrels are once again being viewed as an icon of conservation and grey squirrels as the evil foreign interlopers. The clamour to eradicate this invasive species is becoming ever louder, with no understanding that many of the animals that form part of the British countryside have also been introduced, including four of our six deer species, brown hares and rabbits. Cats are not native to the UK either, but they are tolerated despite the fact that they kill several million indigenous birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians every year. Ecological cleansing is very rarely either acceptable or effective, particularly as we have generally created the problems by meddling with nature in the first place, and the real reason that both species of squirrel have been persecuted across the centuries again goes back to the powerful landowners, who know that squirrels will eat the food intended for the huge number of game birds that have to be reared each year. The shooting industry remains extremely powerful in the UK and is responsible for the release of millions of

invasive birds on an annual basis. So basically foxes and many other genuinely endemic species, including red squirrels for several hundred years and a large number of native birds labelled as pests, are being killed purely in order to enable wealthy people to shoot birds that should not even be in the country and have been intentionally introduced purely for financial gain. If it were not so grotesque, the irony would actually be laughable and the recent experimental badger cull in certain regions proves that very little has been learnt over the years and that the future of our wildlife remains in the hands of the people least likely to safeguard it. To simply experiment with the lives of such beautiful creatures was an abomination in itself, as there was very little conclusive scientific evidence confirming that badgers were the main transmitters of bovine tuberculosis or indeed that shooting some, and thereby

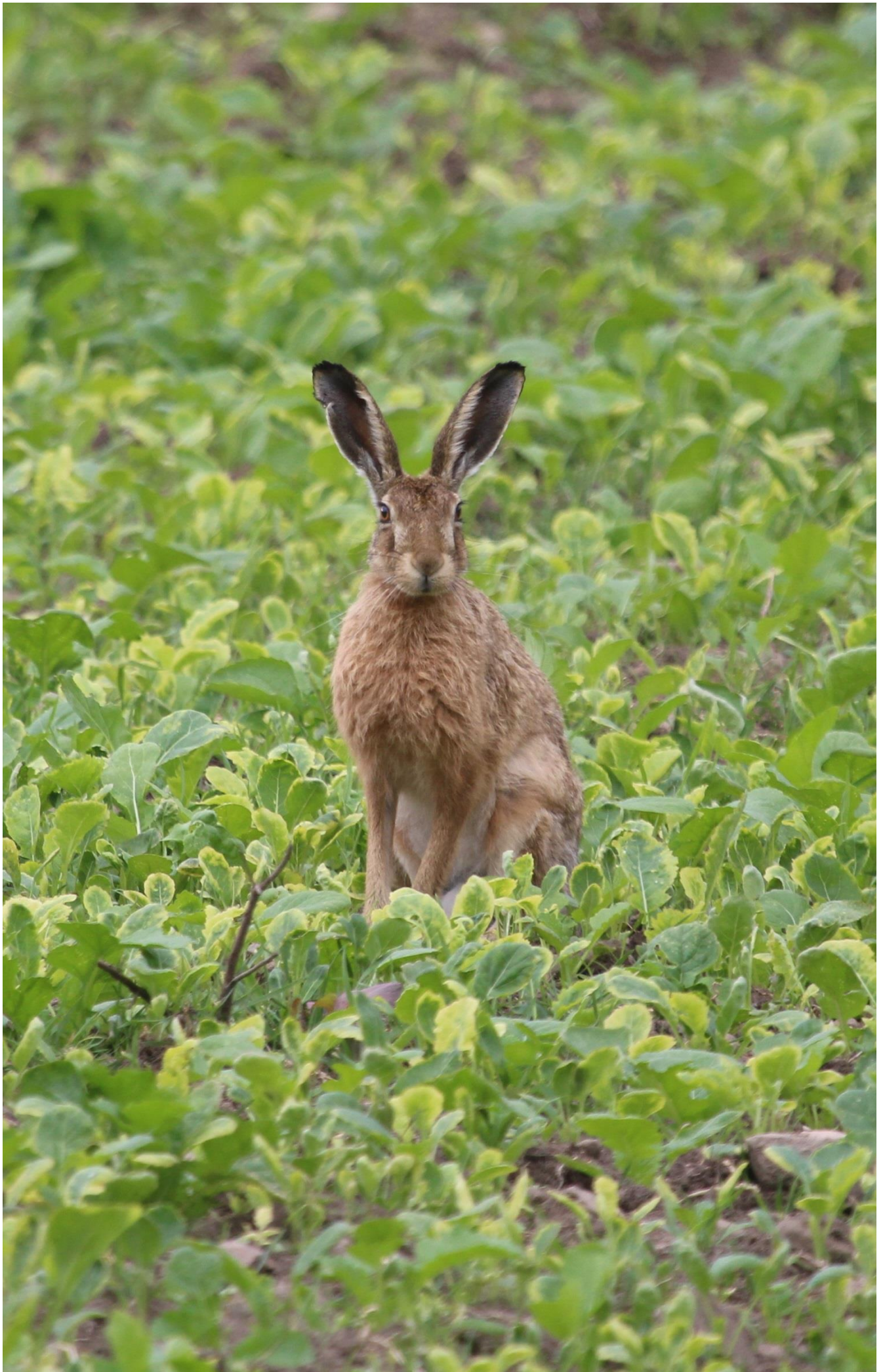


dispersing the survivors over wider areas, would not make the situation worse if they were found to spread the disease. Although the financial implications pale into insignificance when measured against the lives lost, the entire sorry episode cost millions of pounds of public money, simply to appease farmers who should have been ensuring that infected cattle were not moved from farm to farm and that they were actually testing effectively for the disease within their herds. It is difficult not to consider that those calling for the badgers to be killed, were largely the same farmers who thought that feeding the remnants of sheep and cows to other cows was a sound and ethical practice and ended up producing the BSE or Mad Cow Disease epidemic, which cost the lives of over four million cattle. Whilst our systematic abuse of the animals of these isles has somewhat undermined any serious thoughts of a meaningful national wildlife tour, so too has our national park system, which is almost entirely unfit for

purpose. In reality, we have not actually protected any areas for the benefit of the resident wildlife and have instead simply drawn boundaries around the most scenic parts of the country and called them national parks. Thousands of people live in these so called parks and industry, particularly agriculture on a vast scale, continues unchecked. Land owners are free to control the wildlife in any way they see fit and to exterminate species they feel will undermine their profits. When I visited Yorkshire in 2013, I was driving past farms with dead foxes and crows hanging from fence posts and this was not in some remote region, but in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, where tourists were expected to flock to see the wildlife. When you consider the glorious national parks across the globe, it is almost embarrassing to so name ours, as I doubt that many tourists would be happy to drive mile after mile in the Serengeti, if all they were likely to encounter were huge herds of livestock interspersed with the odd isolated antelope. Major roads run through the majority of our parks accounting for the lives of thousands of animals each week and in the Cairngorms National Park, which is considered to be the finest reserve in the country, the speed limits on most of the roads are either 60mph or 70mph. On one slow three-hour drive on this trip, I counted 119 dead animals and birds, including several roe deer, a red deer fawn, foxes, mountain and brown hares, a weasel, a pine marten, several hedgehogs and dozens of rabbits. Most people would be delighted to see that many animals during an entire trip in the United Kingdom, but on the same drive I encountered just one live animal, an understandably nervous roe deer. It is against this backdrop of apathy and administrative ineptitude that any tour would have to be



planned and all participants would be searching for wildlife despite the environmental legislation across the land and not actually as a result of it. My original intention was to select the best wildlife areas within England, Scotland and Wales and to visit carefully selected destinations that were known to be reliable for sightings of specific animals. This may still work, although a great deal of time will be wasted travelling and it probably makes more sense to run the tour in the best wildlife region within the United Kingdom, which is undoubtedly the Scottish Highlands. This initial trip was to research areas that I have not visited for many years and to assess the likelihood of various species being encountered over a period of between one and two weeks. As the tour would include the northern hemisphere summer solstice, light was not going to be an issue and indeed it was still light at 11pm and again by just after 3am. Whilst this appears to be ideal for observing animals, it did make searching for some nocturnal species slightly more difficult, as I could not begin any serious spotlighting until almost midnight and then only had a very brief window available to me. Given that



the early morning is the best time to look for some animals, this resulted in very long days in the field and on one occasion I went 41 hours without sleeping. The results however were spectacular and although this was only a short trip and I still have several additional destinations to research, the initial indications are that it will be possible to arrange one tour that will introduce visitors to the vast majority of Britain's major mammal species, as well as a large number of birds and several interesting reptiles and amphibians. Unfortunately, I had a marine tour cancelled at short notice, which would have almost certainly produced several additional species and I believe that over 30 different mammals are likely to be encountered during a trip of around two weeks, particularly as I have further areas to try that I know are good for various animals. Obviously people will not want to spend as long in the field as I did each day, so two weeks would make the entire trip more comfortable and would also provide second or even third opportunities to find a few of the more elusive animals if we were initially unlucky, as not all of the wildlife can be routinely observed and a degree of



patience will certainly be required. Fortunately, even when there are no animals to be seen, the landscapes of the Highlands are as ravishingly beautiful as anywhere on the planet and many of the destinations that I am currently planning the tour to include are among the most impressive. None of the areas visited can be accurately described as pure wilderness, as people have lived in these regions for several thousand years, however, the vast majority of the Highlands remain largely unspoilt and it is easy enough to escape the throngs of visitors that converge on the main tourist attractions. After exploring around Loch Ness for a while, I saw both red and sika deer at different sections of the loch, my first main stop was at Glen Righ Forest to look for one of Scotland's iconic animals, the red squirrel. There are a few feeders at Glen Righ and a public observation point, but you can see squirrels on some of the easy trails and I was fortunate enough to spot two on a short walk and another two at the feeding station. Whilst I did not spend a great deal of time looking for them throughout the trip, red squirrels are not encountered routinely by any means and my only other sighting was of a solitary animal around Glenlivet in the Cairngorms National Park. I had a few other target species that I knew I had to find reliable sites for and by the end of my first day I had encountered another two of them, otter and pine marten. The otter was swimming in Loch Sunart on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and although I was not able to take a great photograph, I was delighted to observe one of my favourite animals so early in the tour. I had mixed fortunes with otters over the next few days, as I actually found six in total but also spent several hours at various locations without success and the only one I got very close to was in the early hours of the morning near Fort William. Unfortunately I was driving when it came waddling down a side road directly in front of my car before darting into the vegetation as I fumbled for my camera on the passenger seat. I will try further locations when I next visit, but the main problem was that I was simply not aware of the otters habits in this area and just how dependent they were on the tides to feed. By the time that I had worked it out and was starting to find them more regularly, it was time to leave and I expect far better sightings when I return later in the year. I was also incredibly unlucky on a couple of occasions, particularly on Carna, a small island in Loch Sunart which will shortly become one of the most important wildlife destinations in Scotland. I had a great local guide on Carna and I was already aware that most visits to the island result in otter encounters, many of which are at extremely close quarters. It was just one of those days on this occasion, as my guide and I sat there for ten hours, many of which were spent in the rain, before finally accepting defeat. Pine Martens were even more plentiful and I saw nine during my stay. However, photographing them was another matter entirely, as martens are as quick as you would expect small carnivores to be and the combination of long grass at this time of year and often torrential rain, is not a good one in terms of photography. Having to drive and park safely when one comes bouncing down the road also makes the entire process more difficult and the easiest solution is to observe them in completely natural conditions and to also visit a hide or lodge where you know they are attracted by food, just in case you have not been able to achieve a decent picture. I do not generally agree with predators being fed, but a lot of people like to encourage martens into their gardens in parts of Scotland and it does not cause a great deal of harm as long as the amounts of food are negligible and the martens are not allowed to become dependent on the free meals on offer. People have been attracting birds to feeders for decades with no real issues and whilst it is essential that the food is placed outdoors and the martens are not approached, hand fed or tamed, I am happy enough to enjoy the experience, providing it is done correctly and not to the detriment of the animal. As far as I am concerned, the key is always finding these beautiful animals in the wild first and I am aware of several sites where they are likely to be observed and will research a few more on my next trip. In addition to red and roe deer, which were both regularly observed, and mountain hare, which I would find in the Cairngorms towards the end of my tour, the animal I most wanted to search for was the Scottish wild cat, as I have seen our only surviving felid a few times in Scotland previously, but the last occasion was many years ago and I was well aware that their numbers



have reduced dramatically in the last twenty or so years and that they are on the very brink of extinction. There are now believed to be significantly less than a hundred wild cats remaining and no one knows for sure how many of these cats are genetically pure, as the main threat to this primitive and incredibly hardy creature is cross breeding with domestic cats, which of course gradually dilutes the wild cats genes until you are left with an animal that is similar in appearance to a wild cat, but has retained none of the attributes of the original animal. After failing to act for the best part of two decades, Scottish Natural Heritage, the organisation responsible for protecting Scotland's wildlife, announced the following action plan to save the wild cat in 2013: 'we are seeking to protect a distinct group of cats that look like wildcats, but may not all be genetically pure wildcats'. Which basically means they are going to reclassify feral tabby cats as wild cats and more or less guarantee the extinction of an animal that has roamed Britain long before man and long before domestic cats were ever introduced. In terms of a survival plan, this is somewhat akin to renaming pigeons as tigers, to ensure the future survival of the tiger. I have no idea who can be working for or advising an environmental organisation that can produce a policy of such outstanding stupidity, but with this type of leadership, it is no wonder the wildlife of the United Kingdom remains in such jeopardy. Fortunately, an independent group of committed locals have formed Wildcat Haven, with the sole intention of testing



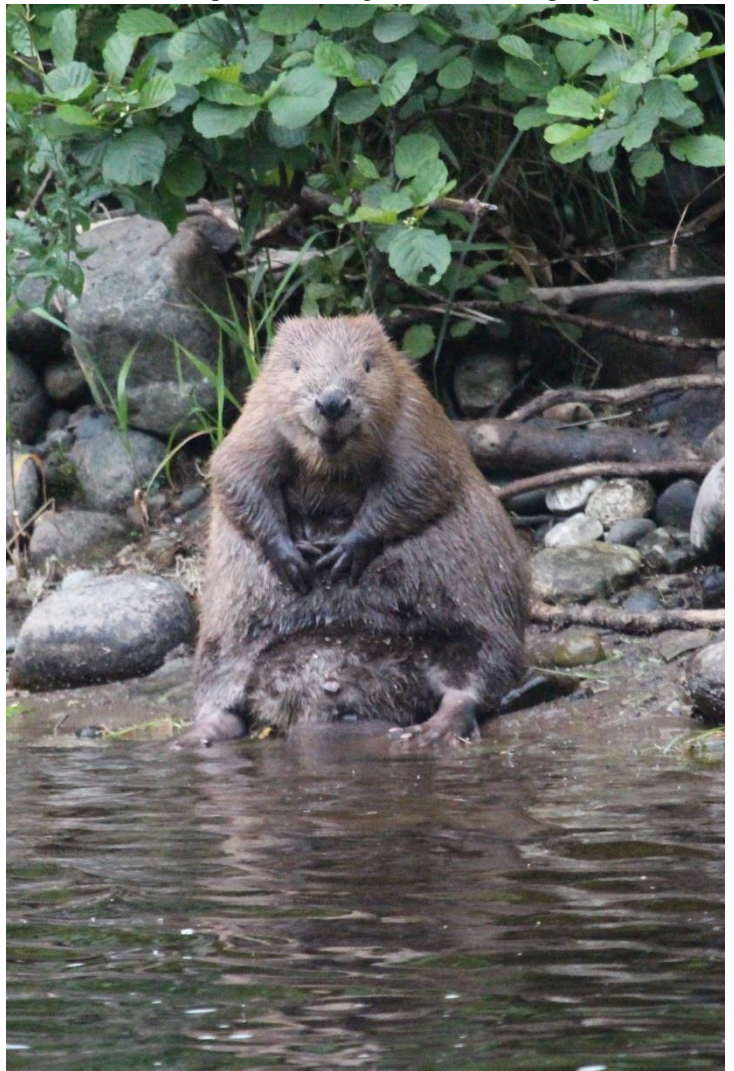
the genes of trapped wild cats and using the purest specimens to breed and repopulate the Highlands. The plan is so simple and so likely to succeed, no governmental agency could have ever thought of it and I intend to partner Wild Globe with Wildcat Haven and to take guests to observe the wild cats and to learn more about one of the most important conservation projects in the United Kingdom. The initial breeding site will be a large enclosure on the Island of Carna, which will be overlooked by a viewing hide, to give visitors the unique opportunity to observe these incredibly rare felids in a totally natural environment. Of course they will not be wild in the truest sense whilst in the fenced area, but they will have been taken directly from the wild and will be the purest possible remaining versions of the species. I will also devote

part of the tour to looking for wild cats in other areas within the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, but visitors should be aware that you are searching for a tiny number of animals across a vast landscape and, although many people who visit the Highlands believe they have seen a wild cat, the vast majority are actually seeing feral tabby cats, which litter the area and are very similar in appearance to the

wild cat. Guests will have some chance to see the genuine article, as I already know one good location to look for them and the odds will improve further as I devote more time to the region and learn more about the habits and territories of these ancient animals. On this trip I was incredibly fortunate, as I could not devote sufficient time to the one area that was most likely to be productive and had more or less given up on finding the elusive cat, when one crossed the road just a few metres ahead of my vehicle. Having seen them previously, I was aware that this was definitely a wild cat, as the stripe along the cats back stopped abruptly at the beginning of its tail



and the tip of the tail was a round black ball and not the narrow black strip that you would see on a domestic cat. However, I had no way of telling how genetically pure the individual I observed was and that is the main problem facing the locals attempting to save the species. Although, as usual, all of the photographs that appear on this trip report were taken by me, I had no chance of capturing the wild cat whilst driving and the above photograph has therefore kindly been provided by Wildcat Haven and is copyrighted to Adrian Bennett. A few days before I was due to travel to Scotland, I was made aware that Scottish Natural Heritage had allocated £450,000 of European Union funding to the eradication of the black rat on the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides. Although these are the last remaining populations of black rats in the British Isles, and have lived on these islands for at least a century without obviously damaging the seabird breeding colonies, it has been decided that they should all be killed just in case they might be having an adverse effect on the seabirds. It is difficult not to consider that perhaps they should spend the money on something more worthwhile, like saving the native creature they have so negligently allowed to almost disappear, the same creature that should be the iconic image of Scottish wildlife. The wild cat was not the only animal I saw whilst driving, as I had to cover long distances and spent a fair amount of time in the car. Both of my fox sightings, including a mother with a tiny cub, were whilst driving at night in the Cairngorms and I also had the extraordinary view of a stoat with an entirely white tail in the same national park. Even in their full white winter coats, stoats retain their highly conspicuous black tail tip, but I saw this one clearly as it ran across the road just ahead of me and its tail was totally white. The Cairngorms was also productive in terms of hares, as I encountered a large number of brown or European hares at various locations, as well as probably a dozen or so mountain hares on one hike specifically designed to find them. Whilst I have two far more reliable sites to try when I next visit, I was less successful with badgers, as I spent five hours staking out one particular sett, but the badger's foraging times are far less reliable in the long, light summer evenings and I eventually had to abandon my vigil when the rain became so torrential I was unable to even see the entrance that I had been waiting patiently at. A small population of feral goats aside, which I always love to see, the remaining highlight of my trip was the fantastic hour or so that I spent with wild Eurasian beavers at Blairgowrie, just south of the Cairngorms. Beavers are believed to have been hunted to extinction in the United Kingdom in the 16th century, but are now being reintroduced to multiple countries across Europe and a five-year Scottish Beaver Trial at Knapdale Forest has just come to an end. Apparently the trial was to assess whether it will be feasible to reintroduce beavers to Scotland, which I find slightly strange given that they are a native species and flourished on these isles for thousands of years before we exterminated them. Those intrepid guardians of our wildlife at

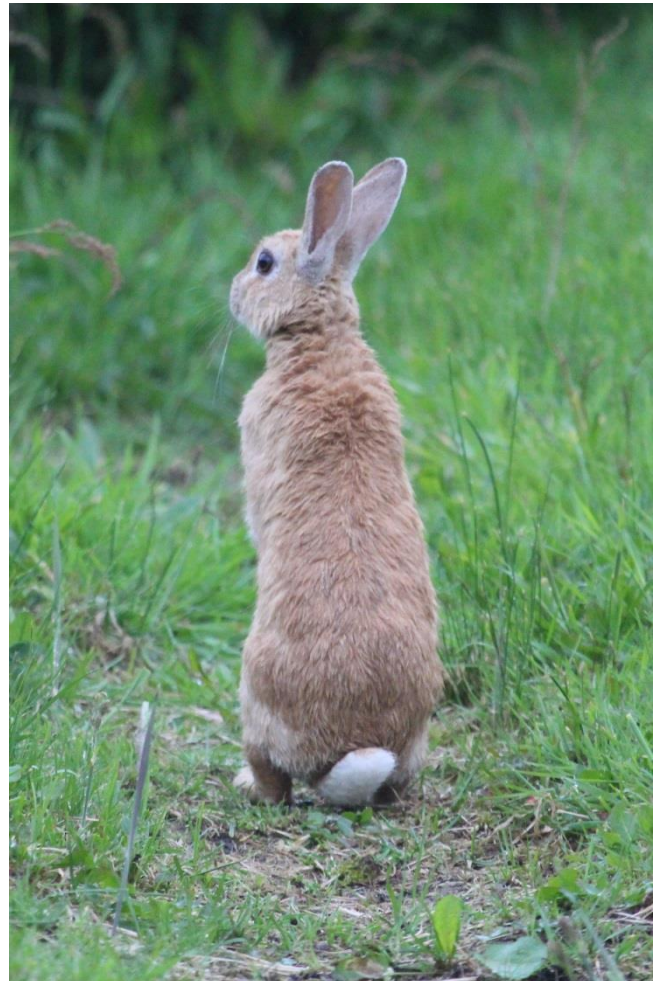


Scottish Natural Heritage are going to report the trial findings to the Scottish Government in May 2015, but it will be an absolute disgrace if the beavers are not allowed to remain, as almost every applicable country in Europe has embraced the desire to return beavers to their rightful place in the wild. Scottish Natural Heritage do not need to look any further than Blairgowrie for evidence that these creatures belong here, as they have been living and breeding successfully in the local rivers for more than a decade. It was a true privilege to watch these fascinating animals in my own country for the first time and although I am not sure how many I actually observed, it was impossible to distinguish between the yearlings, it was great fun to see them munching on the small branches they had coppiced and to watch them swim between their lodge and main feeding area. Beavers have been identified as a keystone species,



which basically means that they play a critical role in the environment in which they live and that their absence would have an adverse effect on the entire ecosystem. Their intended long-term reintroduction therefore raises important issues regarding the possible return of other keystone species, the absence of which has clearly had a significant impact on the habitat of much of the Highlands. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of my stay in the Cairngorms, was a visit to a small section of forest in the Glenlivet area, which had been completely barren when it was fenced off over twenty years before. No planting of any kind had taken place and instead deer had simply been excluded for the entire period. The results were quite astonishing, as the entire area resembled original Caledonian Forest,

protecting populations of red squirrels, badgers and pine martens and showing visitors exactly what the Highlands would look like if the deer numbers were naturally controlled beyond the farmland. Many people are already aware that the extinction of the keystone predators across the United Kingdom, particularly wolf and lynx, has resulted in an ecological imbalance that is having a serious effect on our countryside and has resulted in us managing many of our wildlife populations, usually disastrously. Although ecosystems are unbelievably complex, their basic premise is fairly simple, in that the apex predators control the number of grazing animals and thereby protect the natural habitat for every species. If large carnivores were reintroduced, there would undoubtedly be fewer deer and they would be more difficult to observe, but the ones that remained would be fitter and stronger, as the predators would quickly dispense with the weak and the sick, therefore ensuring a healthy gene pool for future generations. Although I do not believe that it will ever happen, as we in the UK expect other nations to conserve their major predators, but will never consider living with animals that could even possibly harm us, the reintroduction of both the wolf and lynx would produce the same astoundingly positive effects that Yellowstone has experienced since the return of wolves in 1995. Everyone was aware that the wolves would reduce the burgeoning deer populations, but no one had any real idea of just how dramatic their return would be on an entire ecosystem. Not only did the wolves predate on the deer, but they changed the actual behaviour of their prey, which now avoided entire areas, allowing almost barren regions to completely regenerate after decades of overgrazing. Within a few years complete forests had reappeared, providing natural habitat for a huge number of birds and other creatures returning to the park. As they now had the vegetation to sustain them, beaver numbers increased and these incredible environmental engineers quickly provided suitable habitat for a host of other animals, including mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish. The wolves rapidly reduced the almost out of control coyote populations, resulting in an increase in the number of rodents and rabbits in the park, which in turn attracted a wide variety of raptors and small carnivores. Bears could once again feed on the berries produced by the regenerating vegetation and as their numbers also increased, so they killed young deer to further enhance the natural cycle instigated by the wolves. Even the geography of the park changed, as the renewed forests and vegetation resulted in far less soil erosion and protected the river banks from collapse, which actually changed the way in which the rivers themselves flow. Within considerably less than two decades, a relatively small number of wolves had totally transformed the ecology of Yellowstone, superbly demonstrating that just one keystone species can achieve what we have singularly failed to accomplish for centuries, ecological harmony. If we could leave the wolves to live in peace, exactly



the same process would take place in the Highlands, but instead we continue to kill our foxes, our largest remaining predator, and then complain about the cost of having to cull huge rabbit populations. I have even heard it suggested that to reintroduce wolves would be unfair on the deer, but in reality, very few of the red deer that visitors so enjoy seeing in the Highlands are allowed to live beyond about five or six years of age, as the longer they live the less profitable they become to the owners of each estate. We, as both governments and individuals, have spent centuries playing god on this once beautiful island and until someone finally accepts that there is no way of artificially managing wildlife, then millions of pounds will continue to be spent every year attempting to rectify the problems created by a legacy of greed and poor decisions. We could let nature do it for us, but I doubt that we ever will and sadly it remains necessary to travel beyond these shores to experience a more complete northern hemisphere ecosystem. Hopefully this will eventually change and meanwhile, the Scottish Highlands remain the best destination to enjoy the native wildlife that has somehow endured. I will return to continue my research as soon as possible and to also support Wildcat Haven and their efforts to save an animal that has received less attention and had far less resources devoted to it than the Loch Ness Monster.

For the purposes of this report, the Ardnamurchan Peninsula refers to the area west of the Corran ferry.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	European Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i> ssp	One crossing the road just before Ardshealach on the A861.
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Mother and cub and one individual in the Cairngorms.
3	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	Five at various points on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and one walking along the road near Fort William.
4	European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	Seven on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, one at Fort William and one in the Cairngorms.
5	Stoat or Ermine	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	Individual with a white tail running across the road in the Cairngorms.
6	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	Two small herds on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.
7	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Large numbers on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and small herds at most other locations.
8	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Routinely encountered at every major destination.
9	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	A herd of fifteen towards Whitebridge by Loch Ness.
10	Wild Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i> ssp	Small herd of six on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.
11	Western European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Two on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and one in the Cairngorms.
12	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	Around a dozen at one destination within the Cairngorms.
13	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Twenty to thirty in the Cairngorms.
14	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Low numbers on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and at Fort William. Abundant in the Cairngorms.
15	Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	One male and one or two yearlings at Blairgowrie.
16	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Four at Glen Righ Forest and one in the Cairngorms.
17	Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	One running across the road on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.
18	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Solitary individual running into a derelict outbuilding in the Cairngorms.
19	Long-tailed Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	One at the side of the road on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.
20	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	One swimming on Loch Sunart.
21	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Small groups on Loch Sunart.
22	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	Adult and calf in the distance whilst watching otters at Loch Sunart.



14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com

