

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Malvern Group 3.11.16

Johnny Birks: Can we restore our native mammal predators to Britain?

96 people attended this hugely informative, well-illustrated, controversial but balanced talk on Thursday evening last week. Johnny Birks presented the Malvern Group with an overview of the impact of humans on Britain's carnivores, many of which are now extinct in this country: brown bears, wolves and lynx are just some of them. It is very difficult to restore carnivores to modern ecosystems, and predictably there is much resistance from powerful groups such as farmers, gamekeepers and indeed often the general public. The problem is that the consequences of losing these and other animals are ecological, socio-economic and cultural. When the larger predators are removed, the smaller ones like foxes and badgers thrive in unnatural numbers, the deer population explodes, and invasive prey species like grey squirrels and rabbits spread everywhere.

Some mammals are already recovering in this country after great scarcity in the early 20th century. Wild boar are established in a few areas and expanding, beavers are present in several places, polecats are now over most of Britain and otters thrive in many rivers. People have to make uncomfortable adjustments when predators recover; they become used to the situation where wild animals are rare and feel that their traditions or "rights" are threatened by their reappearance. Therefore very careful planning, consultation and groundwork is necessary when the reintroduction of any species is being considered. Johnny spoke at length about the Vincent Wildlife Trust pine marten recovery project with which he has been involved. After a feasibility assessment in 2014 and consultation with the local communities, 39 pine martens have been moved from Scotland and released in Wales, with good signs of success so far and evidence of breeding. The Lynx UK Trust is currently considering the possibility of reintroducing lynx to the Kielder Forest in Northumberland.

It was interesting to see our situation in Britain in a European context. Here we have low woodland cover and hence fewer suitable habitats for predators; in Europe there are still 12,000 wolves, 17,000 brown bears and 9,000 lynx. In places they come into conflict with humans, but in others they are accommodated and doing well.



Female pine marten and 3 kits in a den box in Galloway Forest. Photo by Johnny Birks.

The next meeting of the Malvern Group is on Thursday December 1st at 7.30pm at the Lyttelton Rooms, Church Street. Ed Drewitt will talk about "Our Local Raptors". Admission is £2.50 and all are welcome.

Alison Uren