

Report on the Local Group Meeting on 02 March 2023

Kate Wollen Assistant Ecologist, Forest England.

Kate described the setting up of a project to reintroduce beavers in The Forest of Dean, and gave an update on the project's progress so far. The project occupies a 6 hectare, fully fenced woodland site based on Greathough Brook in The Forest.

Kate began by giving some facts about the animals. Beavers were once widespread and common in the British Isles, but they were hunted to extinction by the beginning of the 16th century for their meat, fur, and scent glands, once an essential component of perfumes. Although fewer in numbers than they were, they remain widespread in continental Europe, and a separate species lives in North America. They are large members of the rodent family, reaching up to a meter in length including the tail and up to 25 kilos in weight. They have powerful back legs with webbed feet for swimming, but their front paws are like clawed hands, better suited for handling timber and building dams. The tail acts as a rudder. They have powerful upper and lower incisors that are bright orange – the result of naturally occurring iron oxide in their teeth. The constant grating together of their incisors keeps them sharp. Beavers are totally herbivorous, feeding mainly on bark.

They live for 12 to 14 years, and adult male and female are almost identical. They mate for life, producing litters of 2 to 4 “kits” in early spring. The nose, ears and eyes, are placed towards the top of the head, the primary sense organs remaining just above water when swimming. They have a very keen sense of smell.

A number of projects for the reintroduction of beavers have been set up in England and Scotland. Other notable sites include those on the River Tay in Scotland and the River Otter in Devon. In these, beavers have started to be allowed to roam free, but “chipped” and closely monitored.

The Greathough site in the Forest of Dean was established in 2016, with the first beavers, three adults from Bavaria, being introduced in July 2018. Early problems were encountered, particularly when one of the beavers was found to be carrying a rather nasty tapeworm, which was also found in a small number of the native German population. DEFRA acted quickly, banning the introduction of beavers from Europe and setting up a continuing monitoring program for the British population. At Houghton, the infected beaver was immediately put down and the other two, fondly called Bertie and Betsy, moved to a site in Devon. The project lay largely dormant until autumn 2019, when a pair were brought from Scotland. Sadly, the female died, but was replaced, and the new couple seem to be getting on well, working together to build more dams (7 so far).

Their dams are creating new pools and wetlands which are increasing water storage and slowing water flows, which will help to prevent flooding lower downstream, and improving water quality by filtering sediments and pollutants.

Concern was stated at the meeting that our natural forest trees might be at risk. Kate stated that the animals tend only to fell smaller trees or take side growths from larger trees, effectively pollarding them. In the wild they have rarely been seen felling trees more than 20 meters from the river, The resultant opening up of areas of the forest has created sunlit spaces between the more mature trees encouraging wildflowers and butterflies to return.

The reintroduction generally has seemed successful and DEFRA, judging the impact of beavers to be positive for flood prevention, is supporting more schemes for “free-living” beavers that will roam free, but chipped and monitored.



Photo by Kate Wollen

Monica Denham

Sightings reported at the March meeting:

Sparrowhawk, nuthatches, redpoll. Welland

Red kites. Chase End

Lesser spotted woodpecker, dippers. The Knapp

Little owls. Castlemorton Common