

Bamff Wildland

What began with beavers became a pioneering farm-scale rewilding project, as Sophie Ramsay reports.

I want to tell what the forests were like
I will have to speak
in a forgotten language

W.S. Merwin

Bamff Wildland began on Hogmanay of 2020. A frosty midwinter day, and our farm partners, Andrew and Peter Mitchell, quietly rounded up three hundred sheep from twelve fields. Now, in high summer of 2025, we have breeding herds of Exmoor ponies and Luing cross cattle, and six Tamworth pigs in their place, free roaming through 170 hectares of pasture, woodland and beaver wetland. It is a thrilling and visceral change that we experience daily in body and mind.

We manage for the restoration of natural processes, which means certain interventions, and a lot of watching. We remove Invasive Non-Native Species (especially *Rhododendron ponticum*), plant small numbers of native trees and thorny shrubs in protected copses, sow yellow rattle and other locally native wildflower seed, and check on our rewilding stock. With our brilliant steering committee, we have developed, and followed, a monitoring plan to capture change across taxa and time, and to learn when we may need to adapt our approach. We have worked with Stirling University for over 20 years on beavers, and have accrued vital data on the benefits they bring. Their researchers are now giving focus to the rest of the Wildland too.

Pig parade. All photos: Dave Maric.



Trophic rewilding

How do you restore land that has been farmed since the neolithic? What *were* the forests like? In what language can we talk about them? Trophic rewilding—the restoration of ecosystems by reintroducing key species—is an increasingly well-evidenced approach, not only in the case of apex predator introduction, like wolves at Yellowstone Park, but for any species that can affect trophic interactions by its presence and behaviours. Researchers from Aarhus University in Denmark recently published data on native forest plant species in central and northern Europe, showing that 80 per cent prefer high light conditions—as created by large herbivores. But we are so unfamiliar with open woodland that it barely exists in our minds. It transgresses all of the definitions built into land classification and public funding in Scotland. Trees, scrub, marsh, bracken and gorse are ‘ineligible features’ under the area-based farm subsidy system, representing a failure to keep land in agricultural condition. Under the Forestry Grant Scheme system, open woodland would represent a failure to meet the correct density of stems per area, even for natural regeneration. So when you decide to manage in a way that may result in this dynamic, self-willed habitat mosaic, your decision is a violation of norms. Perhaps even a provocation. You do it because you decide it is necessary.

Rewilding is often criticised on the basis that we cannot go back in time. However, “the ‘re’ in ‘rewilding’ means ‘again’ rather than ‘back’”, says Jens-Christian Svenning, professor from the department of biology at Aarhus University, and leading ecologist at Rewilding Europe. “By looking at the past, we can learn what steps we need to take now to enable our degraded wild ecosystems to function again”. We cannot go back. Our ecosystems are permanently changed by the Anthropocene. But each spring and summer at Bamff, we see what kind of change has arisen, in an eruption of flowers and invertebrates. This year has seen a particular shift. Whilst our data is still emergent, our perceptions tell us about the many moths, butterflies, dragonflies, hoverflies, that dance on the edge of our vision, that flutter from the grass with every step. We see dimensions that did not exist before: vertical space, all of the surface area of thousands of plants, constantly growing up, flowering, seeding, and slowly coming down again to the earth.

Ponies and beavers

The Exmoor ponies arrived on Twelfth Night, 2024, streaming out of the back of a horse lorry on the drive, into the long pale winter grasses. They are supple and beautiful, dark with paler accents and muzzles—a coat pattern called ‘pangaré’ associated with wild equines. They met the pigs first, who never miss any excitement,



and then the cattle, who chased them in circles. It felt primal. Exmoors are a 'primitive archetype', perhaps the closest animal that exists to the wild northern European pony. They are arguably not a breed, since they are not a result of cross breeding by humans, and they have retained primitive traits because they have lived as wild on Exmoor, and so have been exposed to natural environmental pressures. Debbie, who owns the Exmoors, became interested in rewilding as a way of saving them. They can only retain these traits by continuing to live as semi-wild animals. Then she saw how Exmoors also benefit rewilding, particularly increasing the diversity of flowers through their preferential grazing. Exmoors were reduced to around 50 individuals after the Second World War, so careful breeding is vital to genetic resilience; in autumn 2024 Debbie brought in two extra mares

Grey heron; Bamff beaver; Exmoor pony.



to widen the mitochondrial base. Their presence has changed our lives. Being close to them is extraordinarily grounding, and moving, and it is hard to find words for the life-affirming joy of seeing newborn foals arrive.

When we started our project, even more so when we brought beavers to Bamff in 2002, we hardly knew of anyone doing anything similar in Scotland. It was an act of faith. In spring of 2020, Pete Cairns, from the rewilding charity SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, had emailed us to ask if we would like to be one of six founder land partners of Northwoods Rewilding Network. Today, there are 91, each representing a step into a new future of conscientious, biodiversity-led management. They are land holdings of between 50 and 1,000 acres, and include farms, crofts and community woodlands; one example is Laikenbuie Ecology Trust, near Nairn (see page 9). Each is a lighthouse, allowing others to find their way. We also engage across borders, and are land partners in Rewilding Britain, Rewilding Europe and Global Rewilding Alliance (GRA). A case study based on the scientific work on the beaver habitats at Bamff was part of a GRA report on animals shaping wetlands, presented at the Ramsar COP which took place from 23 to 31 July 2025 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

30 by 30

We are in the process of becoming an OECM (Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures). OECMs are a new voluntary classification created to help meet Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework: 30 per cent protected land and sea by 2030 (known as 30x30). We completed a pilot scheme in June 2025, and

are one of six projects being taken forward on the basis of 'best fitting the criteria'. We are really proud to work within this global effort to combat biodiversity loss. OECMs are distinct from traditional protected areas, not only in that they are voluntary and not top-down designations, but also in that, although biodiversity must be an outcome, it does not have to be the primary objective of a management approach. This leaves quite a lot of space for interpretation within different countries, but it is essential that in the rush to reach 30 per cent by 2030, the bar is not set too low. Taking part at this stage helps us to establish the rewilding approach as one of the officially approved methods for restoring and supporting biodiversity in Scotland. We hope our participation will enable other rewilding projects to be identified for OECM status, and others to emerge, because we have helped tread the path down. We need the kind of radical but well-evidenced approach that rewilding represents.

These are still early days, and who knows how things will be in ten or twenty years? But if you come to Bamff, especially in high summer, with the valerian, meadowsweet, angelica, with young birch and willow saplings in leaf; the tracks of ponies and deer, the expansive beaver wetlands, the warning calls of osprey and kite and buzzard; if you walk the meadows and marshes and woodlands on a warm evening, you might, in some atavistic corner of your mind, start to remember, and you might even begin to find words.

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