

# Leave it to Beaver!

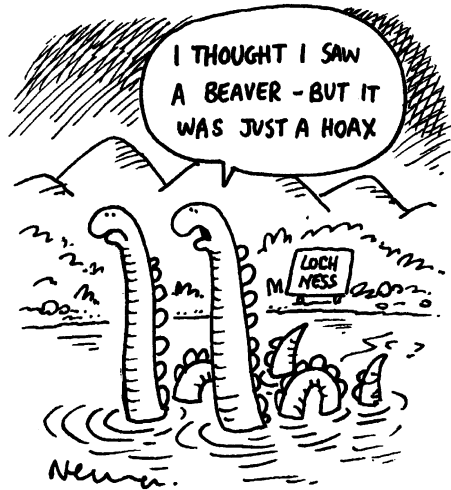
## Rodents on the Rebound

**Hot on the hooves** of “In Tusks We Trust” (see *DoD* No. 7, p.9) comes evidence of beavers escaping from captivity and living successfully in the wild in Britain. Along with escapes into Loch Lomond and in Essex, the two most significant incidents so far have been in Ashdown Forest (East Sussex/Kent) and on the River Axe in Somerset. One of the two males that escaped in Ashdown Forest in Spring 1998 is still at large, and has established a bankside lodge on a lake system in the upper catchment of the Medway. It has been felling trees and building up a large food store of branches that resembles a huge swan’s nest. There are no plans to recapture it at present—most people don’t even realise it is there! There are conflicting stories about the Somerset colony, but all agree that two beavers from a local wildlife park settled on backwaters of the River Axe in 1969. According to some local sources they have obviously bred well, with 8 or 9 animals present up to at least Summer 1995, and they have even been constructing dams!

Unfortunately, however, it should be pointed out that all of these examples are Canadian beavers. It is feared that such escapes might prejudice any future reintroduction of European beavers to Britain by out-competing them, as has happened with the release of both species in Finland.

**It looked as if** we could be on the verge of a historic breakthrough, following Scottish Natural Heritage’s Summer 1998 public consultation over whether to reintroduce the beaver to Scotland. 60% of respondents were in favour—perhaps our countryside might once again enjoy the huge ecological benefits the beaver brings (see “No Evolution Without Revolution”, *Do or Die* No 6, p.38), after a gap of 400 years. Might this also pave the way for an ambitious rebuilding of Britain’s severely impoverished fauna through further mammal reintroductions?

But no, this is Scottish Natural Heritage we’re talking about here—the notorious lapdog of the big Scottish landowners and their feudal status quo. In this case, “interest groups[ie. forestry and fisheries] have expressed concerns”. Never mind that beaver reintroductions are now standard practice in Europe; or that there’s reams of evidence demonstrating that they have minimal impact on such “interests”—indeed, that they massively enhance river environments. So, while we will almost certainly get an initial reintroduction scheme, probably with a population from Norway, SNH are desperate to placate the groundless worries of the special interests. Hence it



will be a “very small” pilot project, it won’t start for at least two or three years, and will be “studied to the nth degree”, dragging on for years—presumably with no guarantee of a full-blown programme at the end of it, if the lairds are still terrified of rampaging furry rodents with fat tails. While careful planning and sensible protocols are necessary—badly planned programmes elsewhere in Europe have caused problems for the beavers themselves—SNH’s approach is feeble and overcautious. One can only hope the Norwegian beavers show the same initiative as their Canadian cousins: breaking out and disappearing as soon as they cross the North Sea.

**There are exciting plans** afoot to set up an interpretive centre for the beaver in Britain, highlighting its long and significant role in the past and its inspiring potential for the future. The people behind the centre already have one pair of European beavers and plan to bring more over in 2000 (from Scandinavia or Poland), with a view to establishing a breeding group for eventual release. Beavers’ activities (such as tree-felling, dam-building, ‘canal’ construction, etc.) are a potent force for the natural disturbance and succession processes that are missing in our landscape. The ultimate intention is to take advantage of these effects, placing the beavers on nature reserves and other sites.

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