

The Wilder Blean Project
Canterbury, Kent, UK
 Kent Wildlife Trust and Wildwood Trust

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: *Innovation Award*

Project overview

The Wilder Blean project uses European bison to restore an ancient woodland near Canterbury, Kent. Bison manage habitats in a way no other can, they are eco-system engineers who create habitats for different species and provide an alternative to traditional woodland management using machinery. This was completed on 31/05/23.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Before we bought the wood West Blean and Thornden Woods, it was managed commercially for timber production, which is why almost half of the wood is covered in plantations of non-native conifer trees that have little value for wildlife. Because conifer trees were planted historically as a crop, we've needed to use heavy machinery to allow light in. Bison do this naturally - they fell non-native trees, open the canopy and give nature space to recover and thrive. They are a nature based solution to woodland management.

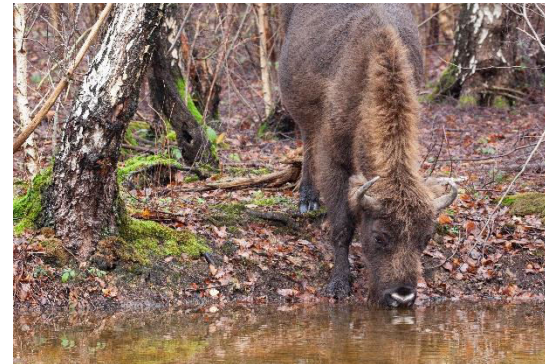
What were the reasons behind this project ?

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. We face 'ecological meltdown' and are losing wildlife at an alarming rate. We must adapt and make our landscapes more resilient.

Large herbivores like bison can change the way we manage woodland habitats, increasing biodiversity and allowing nature to thrive.

This project goes beyond site specific improvements for biodiversity and is THE case study, showing a natural way to manage our landscapes.

Through the largest ecological monitoring programme ever for a UK conservation project it will provide data to drive change in our legislature that enables wider restoration.



Bison drinking from pond at West Blean and Thornden Woods, pic by Donovan Wright



Dung beetle larvae in bison dung pic by Donovan Wright

What were the biodiversity measures taken

We designed the most extensive ecological monitoring programme ever undertaken for a re-wilding project in the UK.

The monitoring programme compares how each treatment area is impacted, considering biodiversity and bioabundance measured in a wide variety of ways working with volunteers, citizen scientists and academics from a range of universities and the Natural History Museum.

In July, three bison were released into the woodland. These are the first wild bison to roam freely in Britain in thousands of years.

Since their release the woodland has changed with bison corridors opening and rich habitats created. In September, the first wild bison calf was born and in December the herd was completed with a bull bison from Germany. In March Exmoor ponies, Iron-age pigs and Longhorn cattle were also released into the woodland.

Outcomes:

- 25 ponds created.
- The bison are healthy, dung studies have shown a drop in parasite load since their arrival, which is evidence of self-medication through the plant species they eat.
- New paths opened quickly creating light.
- Significant impacts on invasive rhododendron.
- 826 invertebrate species have been recorded in Blean.
- Discovery of 'Critically Rare' *Pistius truncates* - the first UK record in 20 years of this spider and *Walckenaeria mitrata* - dwarf spider not seen in the UK since 2004.
- 32,388 individual invertebrate specimens were identified.
- Five ecological reports produced.
- Seven new collaborations with universities contributing to research, including DNA analysis of soil, aquatic diversity in the presence of animals, pollen monitoring and bison dung analysis.

Creating a model for the rest of the UK based on international best practice has been hard-wired into this project from the start, we are already working with interested parties who wish to establish similar projects.



Bison impacting soft rush pic by Donovan Wright



Bison de-barking tree pic by Donovan Wright

Further information

We are conscious that our set up costs, for which we were awarded a grant, was largely spent on fencing as, under DWA legislation, the bison require both an electric fence to keep them in and a costly 7ft fence to keep people out.

Part of our work to make projects like this replicable has involved highlighting the legislative barriers to MPs. This has resulted in our staff giving evidence to the select committee around species reintroductions. We continue to work with MPs in a positive way to change the law to be fit for purpose with many supporting our proposed changes.

Being a pioneering project has meant it has pushed up against legislation, from protected area legislation to defining a completely new route to managing bison herds in the UK.

Project Team

- Funders - Players of People's Postcode Lottery
- Deliverers - Kent Wildlife Trust and Wildwood Trust

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Traditional conservation approaches haven't halted the alarming loss of species diversity and abundance that we continue to witness. The climate is changing and our landscapes aren't resilient enough to support the wildlife and communities that inhabit them. We need to adopt bolder, new approaches in conservation and we need to take action now. Traditionally, conservation management has been a very intensive activity, relying upon significant human effort supported by machinery. But conservation approaches are changing as we recognise that nature could actually do the job better.



Bison family by Donovan Wright



Researches from Royal Holloway