

Letter from Scotland



Re-wilding
Scotland
with the
lynx

Should the large wild cat, the lynx, be re-introduced in Scotland ? It's not an issue that is likely to feature in any of the election manifestos in the spring but this week I heard the chief executive of the Scottish Wildlife Trust Jonny Hughes put it in his manifesto. In a radio interview he admitted re-introducing the lynx might face a few "challenges" ...such as: Where exactly ? How exactly would they re-balance nature ? Would they attract tourists, or eat them ?

The Scottish Wildlife Trust has already re-introduced the beaver in a licensed experiment in Argyll, and it says the results there are promising enough for us to think about the next species, the lynx – a cat one step up from the wild cat (of which there are only 400 left in Scotland). A fully grown Eurasian lynx is about the size of an Alsatian dog. It is extremely secretive and solitary, prowling about forests at night ambushing the odd deer, fox, rabbit or any sheep foolish enough to be out at night near woodland.

The SWT's campaign is all part of a growing movement for the "re-wilding" of Scotland, allowing our forests, grouse moors and up-land farms to return to nature and re-introducing the species we have hunted to extinction, like the beaver, the lynx, the wolf, the brown bear. It would be "re-wilding" ourselves, simply knowing that a true wilderness exists, with all its beauty, excitements and dangers. One wag texted-in to the radio programme I was listening to suggesting that the SWT should start by reintroducing the lynx not to the countryside but to the cities to see how folks there took to

the idea of re-wilding !

The Prime Minister did a little bit of his own re-wilding when he came north on Thursday to unfold his legislative plan to give Scotland more devolution, as promised in the famous "vow" during the referendum campaign. But he set the wolves howling on the SNP back benches, complaining that the Scottish Parliament was still being short-changed. Nicola Sturgeon damned the plans with faint praise – "good as far as they go."

Mr Cameron said Scotland was being offered "one of the most powerful devolved parliaments in the world." It was being given powers to raise up to 60 per cent of its own spending – the power to set the rate and thresholds of income tax, half of all VAT revenues and all of air passenger duty, plus parts of the welfare budget- not, however, pensions or the new universal benefits. But the SNP say the powers will actually raise less than 40 per cent of Scottish public spending and UK ministers are being given a veto over any welfare changes.

Earlier in the week, the Chancellor George Osborne added to the pre-election flames by suggesting that further devolution to Scotland made it even more " unfair" for the SNP to talk of holding the balance of power at Westminster after May 7th. That was promptly taken as an invitation to do just that by Ms Sturgeon. She went out of her way to say the SNP would never enter a coalition with the Conservatives and furthermore, the party's MPs would no longer abstain in voting on English matters when it comes to defending the NHS from privatisation.

The Chancellor, though, had the quiet satisfaction of watching John Swinney, the Scottish finance minister, follow his lead in cutting stamp duty on house purchases to 5 per cent for properties valued between £250,000 and £325,000.

Clearly there is a lot of positioning going on for the election campaign. For the record, the latest opinion poll, Ipsos Mori for STV News, puts SNP support at 52 per cent,

Labour at 24 per cent, Conservatives at 12 per cent and the Liberal Democrats and Greens both down to 4 per cent.

Unemployment has taken a turn for the worse, a further 7,000 people are out of work in Scotland, taking the unemployment rate up to 5.7 per cent. In Peterhead, 300 workers at a fish processing factory have been laid off after the building burnt down last weekend. The flames could be seen by fire fighters as they raced there from Aberdeen 30 miles away.

The cold weather has continued this week, with temperatures going down to minus 12 C in parts of the Highlands. In Glasgow, a young teacher was killed in a sledging accident in Kelvingrove Park. Maryam Najafian was described as "a shining light" by the head teacher at her primary school in Lanark.

Re-wilding is not the only new word I learned this week. There's "re-manufacturing", which apparently means refurbishing old machinery and selling it on, with guarantees. The industry is said to be worth £2.4bn to the British economy and now there's an institute for it at Glasgow University.

I wonder if the latest portrait of Robert Burns by students at Clyde College would count as re-manufacturing. It's made out of old Irn-Bru bottle caps and Tunnock's tea cake wrappers. I guess there will be much re-manufacturing of the bard this weekend at many a Burns Supper. I think he would have been in favour of re-wilding Scotland. His address to the "wee sleekit, cowrin', tim'rous beastie" could, perhaps, be stretched to include any re-introduced lynx.

"I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken nature's social union
An' justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,

An' fellow mortal. "