Iconic golden eagles to make comeback in England

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Environment Secretary approves additional £1m of government funding to explore the reintroduction of golden eagles, restoring hopes they will return to England

One of Britain's most iconic birds, the golden eagle, is poised to make a return to England after more than 150 years after the Government paved the way for a recovery programme that could include reintroduction.

Once widespread across England and mentioned more than 40 times by Shakespeare, golden eagles were virtually wiped out by persecution during the Victorian era. Only a handful of pairs have been seen in England since and the last eagle died in the Lake District in 2016.

But a study published by Forestry England today confirms that England has the capacity to sustain golden eagle populations once more, with eight potential 'recovery zones', mostly in the north of England, identified as being the most suitable areas.

The Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds has welcomed the study's findings and approved £1m of additional funding to explore a reintroduction programme with the potential for juveniles, six to eight weeks old, to be released as early as next year.

Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds said:

"This government is committed to protecting and restoring our most threatened native wildlife – and that includes bringing back iconic species like the golden eagle.

"Backed by £1m of government funding – we will work alongside partners and communities to make the golden eagle a feature of English landscapes once again."

In Southern Scotland, golden eagle populations have recovered to record numbers thanks to the restoration efforts of the groundbreaking South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project. Satellite tracking indicates that some of these translocated birds have already begun to fly across the border and explore northern England. The funding announced today will help accelerate this re-establishment and, where appropriate, further reinforce it with targeted reintroductions. Replicating their successful collaborative approach in the south of Scotland, charity Restoring Upland Nature (RUN) will lead the pioneering project in partnership with a group of core partners, including Forestry England.

Aside from being Britain's second largest bird of prey with an impressive 2-metre wingspan, the golden eagle is a keystone species that can play a vital role in nature recovery more widely. As an apex predator at the top of the food chain, golden eagles help to keep the whole ecosystem in balance.

Mike Seddon, Forestry England Chief Executive, said:

"It is our ambition that the nation's forests will become the most valuable places for wildlife to thrive and expand in England. And we know from our successful reintroduction projects that returning lost species is vital for nature recovery across landscapes.

“The detailed findings of our feasibility study will guide us with our partners, Restoring Upland Nature, to take the next steps to explore the recovery of golden eagles in northern England. This Defra funding means we can build on the good work we have begun, taking the time to build support and engage with local communities, landowners and land managers and conservation organisations.”

Dr Cat Barlow, Restoring Upland Nature Chief Executive, said:

“This presents a truly exciting, and potentially game-changing moment for the return of golden eagles to Northern England. Our success to date is testament to the strength of collaborative working between conservationists, raptor study groups, gamekeepers and land managers, and to the incredible support of thousands of people across communities in southern Scotland.

“With the backing of Defra and Forestry England, we now have the opportunity to replicate and build on this approach in Northern England. Our priority will be to listen, to work in partnership, and to ensure that golden eagle recovery supports both nature and the people who manage these landscapes, so that everyone can enjoy the thrill of seeing golden eagles flying high once again across the uplands of the UK.”

Forestry England’s research suggests that Scottish birds could be seen across northern England within 10 years, but it will take longer for breeding golden eagles to become established in England.

With support from Forestry England, Restoring Upland Nature will now develop a programme of engagement with farming, game management, recreation, nature conservation, tourism and education interests in the region.

The move to explore reintroducing golden eagles is the latest milestone as the government’s works to achieve the statutory targets set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030 and to reduce species extinction risk by 2042 against 2022 levels.

It follows the government’s landmark decision last year to allow the legal reintroduction of another keystone species, beavers, into the wild in England for the first time in hundreds of years, and a record £60m of funding announced last week to protect threatened native species.

Additional information:

- The programme will be delivered in partnership with the pioneering charity project that helped to restore the golden eagle population in the south of Scotland.

- This follows Defra revealing a new campaign, “Wild Again: Restoring England’s Wildlife”, which will encompass the government’s existing and future work to protect and recover native species through projects including the flagship Species Recovery Programme.

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