carcasses

Carrion plays a vital role in nutrient cycling, enhancing biodiversity and restoring ecological balance. Allowing large animal carcasses to decompose naturally is essential for healthy ecosystems. Yet current UK legislation and public attitudes prevent carcasses from remaining in situ, limiting this vital resource.

Environmental Benefits

Biodiversity Boost

Natural carcass decomposition sustains a rich community of life, supporting dozens of species across trophic levels—from invertebrates and fungi to birds and large mammals.

Soil Enrichment

The decomposition of large herbivore carcasses returns nutrients like phosphorus, nitrogen, and calcium to the soil. Bones can help replenish mineral-deficient soils for decades, aiding the regrowth of pioneer plant species and increasing soil health.

Food Web Restoration

Carcasses provide an important food source for a wide range of scavengers, including foxes, badgers, birds of prey, and wild boar. As they decompose, they also support a rich community of invertebrates, which in turn offer vital foraging opportunities for insectivorous birds and small mammals.

Natural Animal Behaviours

Herd animals like cattle, horses, and deer may exhibit mourning behaviours following the loss of a group member. Leaving carcasses in place supports these responses and promotes more natural social dynamics.

Ecotourism Potential

Scavenger hotspots build nature tourism opportunities, such as attracting birdwatchers and photographers, adding economic and educational value to nature recovery landscapes.

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Managing Carcasses for Nature Recovery

Key management considerations include:

Public Education

Cultural attitudes may elicit discomfort from the public when seeing a carcass in the wild. Installing educational signage and offering talks or guided walks can help the public understand why carcasses are being left in place and their important ecological role in the environment.

Carcass Management

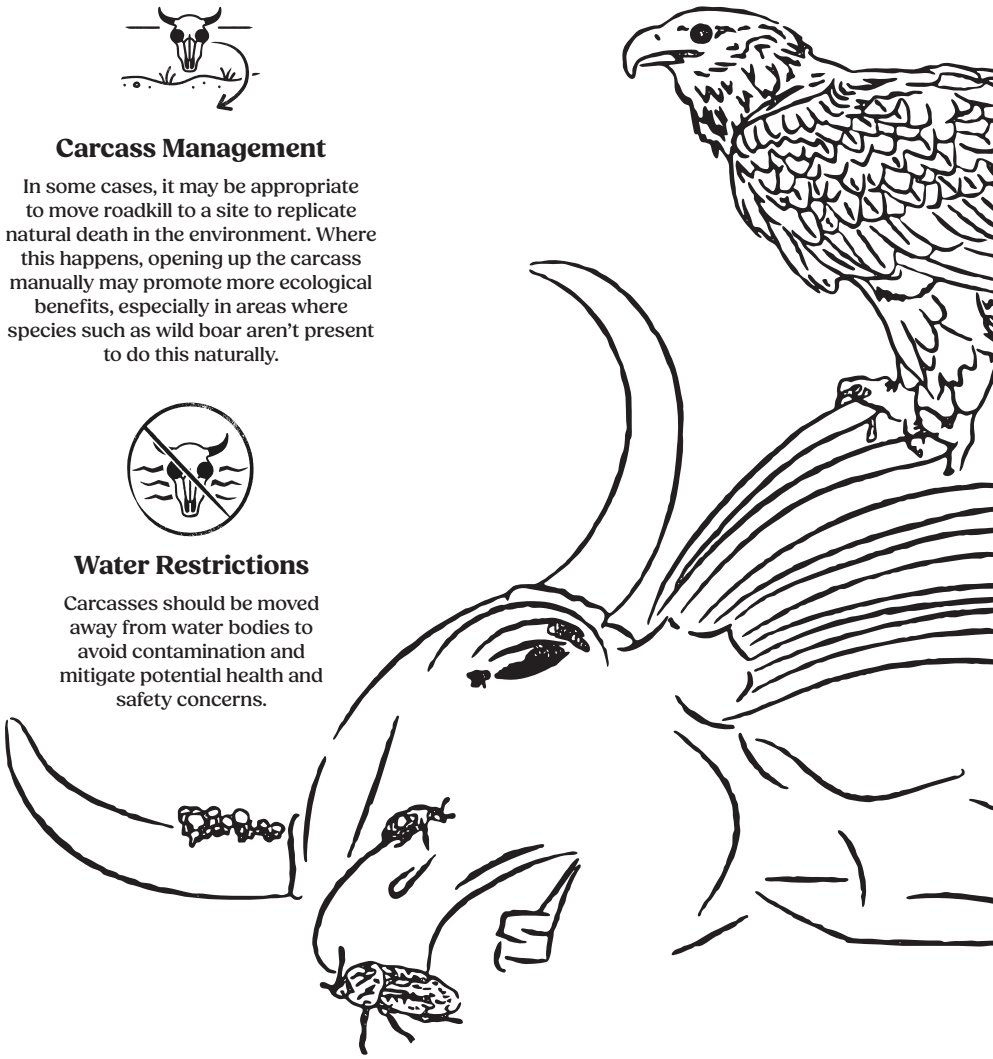
In some cases, it may be appropriate to move roadkill to a site to replicate natural death in the environment. Where this happens, opening up the carcass manually may promote more ecological benefits, especially in areas where species such as wild boar aren't present to do this naturally.

Disease Risk

Regularly monitor carcasses for signs of disease or potential public health risks. Also monitor living herbivores for any signs, and be advised that regulations may prohibit animals from entering the food chain if they are in the same area as carcasses.

Water Restrictions

Carcasses should be moved away from water bodies to avoid contamination and mitigate potential health and safety concerns.



Legal Restrictions

Fallen Stock Rule

It is a legal requirement to remove the carcasses of domesticated large herbivores, referred to as Fallen Stock, under regulation applying to animal byproducts, which categorises animal byproducts according to risk and sets out how they should be collected, transported and disposed of.

Animals Living in the Wild

Wild animals such as deer species or wild boar are excluded from the legal regime regulating animal byproducts unless disease is suspected.

Species Classification

Domesticated species such as horses, cattle and water buffalo are classified as livestock. Additionally, some wild species, such as bison, are also considered under Fallen Stock regulations, when kept in fenced enclosures.

The Large Herbivore Working Group (LHWG) is a UK-based network of experts formed in 2022 to support the restoration and introduction of large herbivores as part of nature-recovery efforts. It develops guidance, informs policy, and shares best practice across the sector. The LHWG is currently funded until 2027 and hosted by the Landscape Recovery team at The Wildlife Trusts.

Please note these species and nature recovery profiles produced by the LHWG are not legal advice and are intended to provide a high-level overview to support your understanding of considerations needed for large herbivore introductions and management for nature recovery initiatives in England.

Design and artwork by Lauren Hulbert.