



eurasian elk

The Eurasian elk is the largest of the deer family. Elk is thought to have gone extinct in Britain around 4,000 years ago as a result of excessive hunting, but their populations and range in western Europe has increased in recent years. Their association with broad-leaved woodland and wetland habitats hints at a much greater ecological flexibility than currently recognised. Their role as keystone species for riparian and wetland environments is crucial for nature recovery as they play a disproportionately large and unique ecological role compared to other herbivores in Europe.

Environmental Benefits



Browsers

Elk are obligate browsers, feeding primarily on fast-growing trees such as willow, birch and poplar, but they are also highly adaptable and will consume a wide range of locally available plants. Aquatic vegetation forms an integral part of their summer diet, providing essential minerals that help meet their nutritional needs year-round.



Underwater Foraging

Elk have the unique ability to forage while completely submerged, feeding on aquatic plants that most other herbivores cannot reach. This underwater foraging increases vegetation complexity, maintains areas of open water and supports more species-rich wetland environments. Elk play a crucial role in dispersing a variety of plant species, including between wetland habitats. They are also the most significant distributors of bryophytes, helping spread these ecologically important plants throughout the landscape.



Seed Dispersal



Nutrient Transfer

By moving regularly between terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, elk help transfer nutrients across habitats. As they travel through wetlands, their trampling disturbs soils and aquatic vegetation, increasing bioturbation and opening up dense areas of vegetation. This prevents single-species dominance and creates a more dynamic, structurally diverse wetland environment. Their activity also complements the ecosystem engineering of Eurasian beavers, supporting the restoration of nature-rich elk-beaver wetlands that once occurred throughout Britain.

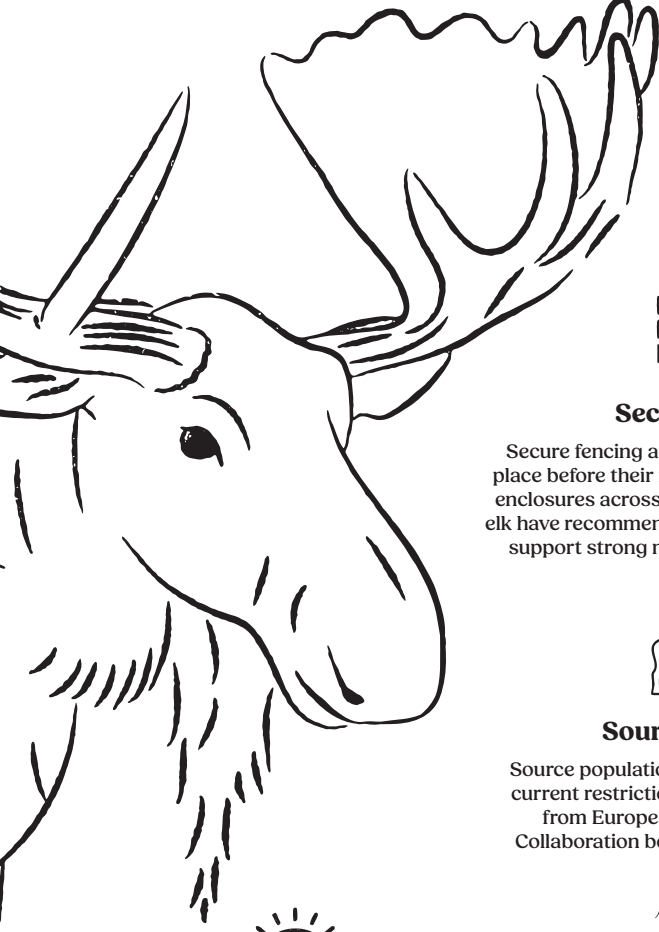


Trampling



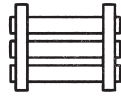
Natural Disturbance

As large animals, elk can reach higher vegetation than other browsers, break branches and create natural disturbances that open up dense areas of vegetation, which create mosaic and species-rich habitats.



Managing Elk for Nature Recovery

Key management considerations include:



Secure Fencing

Secure fencing and infrastructure must be in place before their introduction. Previous fenced enclosures across Europe that have introduced elk have recommended 2.5m telegraph poles that support strong mesh, such as Tornado wire.



GPS Collars for Tracking

GPS collars make locating elk and carrying out health and welfare checks easier, but technology to manage where they can access, such as NoFence, is not licensed for elk.



Sourcing Animals

Source populations in Britain are limited and current restrictions make importing animals from European countries a challenge. Collaboration between projects is essential.



Diseases

Disease risk analysis (DRA) must be conducted before introductions, and pre- & post-transport health checks to prevent the spread of diseases.



Emergency Plans

Emergency plans need to be in place for escape or welfare-related issues.



Population Management

Ensure appropriate social structures for each species is observed and maintain appropriate densities based on the carrying capacity of the area.



Dedicated Staffing

Ongoing monitoring post-introduction to assess health and welfare of the animal requires a dedicated team, and a veterinary team available should intervention be necessary.

Legal Restrictions

The introduction of elk in Britain must comply with specific legal and regulatory requirements:



Wild Release Licence

Although Elk are recognised as a native species, their reintroduction still requires a licence from Natural England.



DWAA Licence

Elk are listed on the Schedule to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 (DWAA), which restricts their release into fenced enclosures without a licence granted by the local authority.

A note on Diverse Herbivore Assemblages

Each herbivore has unique physical and behavioural traits that shape the environment in different ways and create habitats for a variety of species. Their combined impact supports a broader range of species and rewilding projects should therefore aim to introduce a variety of herbivore species where possible. Please refer to our other herbivore guides for more information.

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.