

The Return of Lynx, Bears, and Wolves to Austria and Beyond

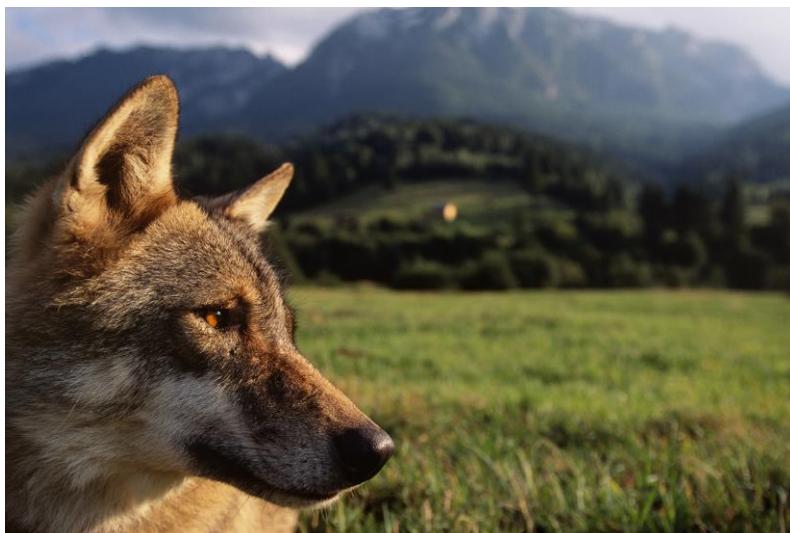
Nature protection in Europe is delivering. Species that have long been locally extinct, are reconquering their former habitats. In particular, bears, lynxes and wolves, ecologically important top predators, are spreading steadily across the continent, occasionally helped by reintroduction schemes, but mostly doing it by themselves. They can, and hopefully will, potentially play a key role in rebalancing and stabilising ecosystems. All three species were once widespread across the whole of Europe, but have been extinct in most of its centre including Austria for over 100 years: the last Austrian wolves were seen in Styria in 1882. Each species now numbers in the thousands, in groups in areas in all parts of our continent. All are strictly protected in most countries, and certainly in Austria.

Lynx, Europe's biggest cat, are extremely secretive, so sightings are rare. The Nationalpark Kalkalpen in Upper Austria now hosts a small resident population. Its officer responsible for lynx, Christian Fuxjäger, explains: “Our aim is to prevent lynxes disappearing again and to secure the ongoing viability of a population in the National Park” The first evidence of breeding was found in 2013. “Long-term, populations can only thrive if separated groups are linked so that genetic mixing is established,” explains Christian Pichler of the WWF, who has been working for some years to establish the conditions for a harmonious return of all three species wherever it's feasible.



Lynx - Photo by Fritz Pölking WWF

As regards wolves, there is evidence of their presence across the whole of Austria, but they are highly mobile and range over large distances, sometimes settling, sometimes not. Substantial populations have remained in Slovenia and northern Italy and lone animals frequently venture into Austria. Unlike lynx, they can recolonise areas very quickly.



Wolf – Photo by Staffan Widstrand WWF

Bears are also still indigenous in the lands south of Austria, and are spreading into Carinthia. A new population in Upper Austria was established in the 1990s with some help from the WWF but went extinct again due in part to illegal hunting and in part to too small a gene pool.



Brown bear - Photo by H.Heimpel

Lynx and bear, on the whole, present few problems to people, but wolves are another matter. Farmers' groups are very concerned, despite receiving significant compensation for predated animals. Defending herds of sheep against wolves is difficult and expensive, especially in mountain areas. Guard dogs can be a good option and are in widespread use in parts of Italy where wolves have never died out. They are now being tried out in Austria and elsewhere.

Here in the UK, although there has been much talk about reintroducing wolves, there are no serious proposals. But there are for lynx: a Lynx UK Trust exists (lynxuk.org), dedicated to reintroducing them into the UK. They have recently finished a major public survey and should announce the results and plans for initial reintroductions soon.

This article was inspired by articles in the Nationalpark Hohe Tauern's magazine (01/2014), and in New Scientist (09/08/2014).

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