

Bears and wolves to coexist in UK woods for first time in 1,000 years

adapted from an article by Steven Morris



- 1 For the first time in more than 1,000 years native bears and wolves are coming snout to muzzle with each other among towering oaks and ashes in a slice of British woodland. European brown bears, thought to have become extinct in the British wilds in medieval times, and grey wolves – which roamed free until the 17th century – are to coexist in a project near Bristol.
- 2 The idea of the scheme, called the Wild Place Project, is to give visitors a glimpse into life in the woods and forests that used to cover much of the UK. It is also intended to initiate a debate about rewilding schemes, which could reintroduce animals such as lynxes – and perhaps wolves and bears.
- 3 From Thursday 25 July, members of the public will be able to observe bears, wolves, lynxes and wolverines from the safety of a raised walkway as the animals pad and prowl around a large wooded paddock. For the moment, the four species are being kept apart but the idea is that within weeks or months the four bears and five wolves will be allowed to share one 10,000 square metre paddock.

- 4 Over recent weeks the bears have been getting accustomed to the woodland. From Wednesday the wolves will be brought into an adjoining paddock. It will then be up to the animal keepers to decide when to allow the wolves in with the bears. “The keepers want to be sure the bears are settled,” said Justin Morris, the chief executive of Bristol Zoological Society, the organisation behind the Wild Place Project. “They should be fine. These animals would coexist in the wild. This is their habitat. You see the bears up the trees and realise how perfectly evolved they are to live here.”
- 5 The idea of the project is that it will be good for both species to live side by side. “For them it will be enriching. It will be interesting for them to be in a space with another species. They’ll work out where they want to be,” said Morris. Another fascinating aspect to observe will be how the woodland and its current inhabitants, such as hedgehogs and birds, will react to the presence of bears and wolves. The animals will be fed by their keepers but the bears are bound to forage for leaves and berries.
- 6 Morris said he hoped it would further the discussion on reintroducing species that have disappeared. “I’m keen that the Bristol Zoological Society proactively engages with questions such as climate change and rewilding. I really hope this exhibit gives us that opportunity to do that.” He also said the project put the ancient British woodlands, which now only cover 2% of the country, centre stage, as they are often overlooked when zoos concentrate on more exotic locations such as the African savannah. “We’re giving British ancient woodland the same status as those habitats,” Morris said.
- 7 Will Walker, an animal manager at the Wild Place Project, admitted to having a few nerves as he watched a couple of the younger bears clambering up a tree. He said: “That’s given me a few scares – they weigh 100kg or more and are climbing 10 metres into the tops of these massive oaks and ashes. Obviously they are designed for that and aren’t going to fall out but that has worried me. They’ve been fine.” Walker also said it would be a tense moment when the bears and wolves came face to face. “We know they don’t compete for the same foods but putting two large species together is always going to be a bit nerve-racking.”

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