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NEWS: Should Britain's largest bird of prey be reintroduced to the Suffolk coast?

East Anglian sites are to be assessed for possible reintroduction of white-tailed eagle. Cavan Scott reports.

The white-tailed eagle may soon take to the wing over the Suffolk coast if reintroduction plans by conservationists are successful.



A three-year feasibility study of eastern England by Natural England, the RSPB and the Forestry Commission has identified Suffolk as the most favourable location for a possible release of Britain's largest raptor, also known as the sea eagle.

Experts say there is much archaeological and cultural evidence to suggest that the bird of prey was widely found in lowland England, before hunted to extinction in England in the early 19th century. In 1918, Britain's last white-tailed eagle was shot in the Shetland Islands.

Dr Tom Tew, Natural England's chief scientist, said that their analysis of the Suffolk coast had produced favourable results, due largely to a string of wetland habitats stretching from the Wash down to the Thames Estuary. The conditions found here are almost identical to areas of Europe where white-tailed eagles thrive. "The task now is to ensure an open and informed debate about whether, and how, to move forward," Dr Tew said.

The plans to reintroduce the white-tailed eagle to East Anglia have long been dogged with controversy. Local farmers have pointed to the experiences of crofters in Scotland, where the bird – successfully reintroduced north of the border in 1975 – has been blamed for taking more than 200 lambs in the Wester Ross alone. In May this year 60 lambs on two holdings in the area were electronically tagged in an experiment to see if there is truth in the claims.

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) has also raised concerns that an increase in hovering birds of prey might raise stress levels in farm animals and could conflict with wildlife targets being pursued by local farmers. The lapwing and grey partridge, potential prey for the white-tailed eagle, are often featured in Environmental Stewardship schemes.

Indeed, predation had been a major reason in why Suffolk had originally been ruled out of Natural England's plans to release white-tailed eagles. Concerns had been raised that the birds would prey on the resident bitterns. Following consultation with experts from areas in Europe where the two species coexist, the project partners have concluded that the threat to the bittern from white-tailed eagles is minimum.

Dr Mark Avery, the RSPB's director of conservation, believes that the white-tailed eagle belongs to lowlands as surely as they belong to the sea cliffs of Scotland.

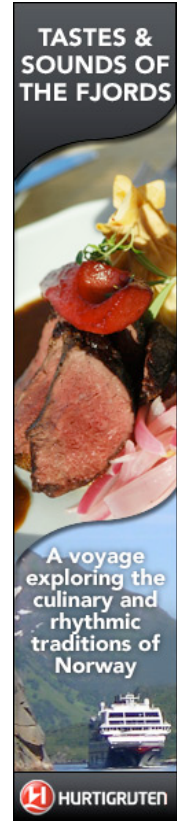
"Man is the reason they are missing and it is for us to put that right," Dr Avery commented. "It is also why we must do this properly and with regard to people and wildlife nearby. The RSPB want eagles back, but without a return to the conflicts and misunderstandings that led to their extinction."

A series of local opinion surveys will be conducted in Suffolk over the next few weeks to gauge public reaction to the plans, before consultation with landowners and stakeholders later in the year. Robin Page, a member of the National Trust Council and the Chairman of the Countryside Restoration Trust told Countryfile Magazine that Natural England should be consulting landowners first before courting public opinion: "As far as I am aware the National Trust, one of Britain's major landowners, has never been properly consulted over these plans.

"It confirms the suspicion that Natural England intend to press ahead with this ridiculous introduction regardless to the advice it has been given. It is purely a publicity stunt that flies in the face of real conservation," he said.

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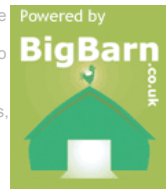
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