POLE POSITION

The white stork was once common throughout much of the UK. **James Fair** meets the conservationist on a mission to return the bird to its former prominence.

Driving through northern Spain earlier this year, Charlie Burrell – a rewilding enthusiast and the owner of the 1,400ha Knepp Castle estate in Sussex – noticed clusters of unusual, artificial structures placed at regular intervals along the side of the autoroute.

"They were pretty ugly metal posts with baskets on top, every mile or so, and if there wasn't a white stork in every single one, they were in a hell of a lot of them," Burrell recalls. "And if they weren't in the man-made nests, the storks were in the poplars – it was a lovely sight."

But why should the Spanish bother to provide these nest sites for the storks, a bird that has over the centuries amply demonstrated its ability to adapt to human-affected landscapes, particularly when it comes to nesting? "They do it because white storks are fun and it's brilliant to have them," concludes Burrell.

Nature conservationist and environmental consultant Derek Gow agrees, but wonders what our attitude in this country might be. "Can you imagine Highways England saying, 'Tell you what, shall we just stick up a few stork nests on the M25?' I just don't know what it is about us that has so wrung any joy out of our being."

Gow is an ecologist and farmer in his early 50s, originally from Biggar in South Lanarkshire but now firmly ensconced on 120ha of Devon just north of Dartmoor. He has almost single-handedly repopulated huge swaths of the British countryside with Ratty and his friends to compensate for the damage done by habitat loss and mink predation, and he has also been one ▶

Jose B Ruiz/NPL/Alamy

This photo shows white storks nesting on purpose-built poles in Malpartida de Cáceres, Extremadura. The town has one of the biggest populations of the species in Europe.

Artificial nest sites, such as this one in France, would play a crucial role in any attempt to bring the species back to the UK.

of the leading lights in the campaign to reintroduce the beaver to Britain.

Now he wants to bring the white stork back to our shores. "OK, it's not a keystone species, though many other birds – such as tree sparrows – will readily nest alongside them, and it also has the potential to have an impact on non-native signal crayfish, which is an appealing thought," Gow says. "But the real reason comes down to something very simple. It's easy to look at nature dispassionately through scientific eyes, but what we have really lost is the joy of these things. It's such a glorious, showy bird that will even come and nest on the roof of your house."

A FIRM HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Exactly what role storks originally played in the prelapsarian pantheon of British fauna is unclear, but there is little doubt that it was once a common breeding bird, at least in some parts of the country. And in fact we haven't lost it completely – roughly 20 passage migrants are recorded landing here each year (1,150 over 50 years), and there was a much-trumpeted, though ultimately unsuccessful, breeding attempt on the chimney of Thrigby Hall near Great Yarmouth in 2014.

THE WHITE STORK WAS ONCE A COMMON BREEDING BIRD IN THE UK. BUT AT SOME POINT IN MEDIEVAL TIMES THE SPECIES CEASED TO EXIST HERE IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY.

But at some point in medieval times the species ceased to exist here in any meaningful way, and exactly why is unclear. Certainly habitat loss would have played a role, as would persecution that had some surprising causes. And the fact that our summers are colder and wetter than those experienced in even Germany or Poland may have always made Britain a more marginal and less appealing place for the bird to breed.

There are a few place names in Britain that record the presence of storks, not least Storkhill, now an area of slightly raised ground just outside Beverley in East Yorkshire. Beverley, Gow points out, refers to the presence of beavers, and there may be a connection between the two species.

"When Eurasian beavers disappeared from this landscape as a common species, there would have been a trophic cascade of others following them," he says. "Big wetland birds would have been impoverished, and a whole guild of species – including tree frogs – that we can't begin to quantify would have gone, and storks were almost certainly one of them."

So, there were knock-on effects from hunting beavers to extinction, but storks had other problems, too. Throughout Europe they were associated with republicanism, and there is a reference to a short debate that took place in Parliament soon after King Charles II had been restored to the throne following the death of Oliver Cromwell. Speakers wondered whether more effort shouldn't be made to exterminate storks in the east of England because there were many communities in that part of the world sympathetic to the former government. "So you have people who go out and kill them because they are seen as a symbol of republicanism," says Gow.

SEX SYMBOL

But it wasn't just Royalists who didn't like them – the church didn't either. Go back a millennium or two, and the mid-summer solstice festival was a time of celebration and excess. As Gow puts it, "By the time you've drunk an enormous amount of beer and had lots of fun, there were lots of babies being conceived. So when the storks returned in the spring nine months later, there were lots of babies being born."

This is where the myth of storks delivering babies ▶

WHITE STORK

White storks are generally quiet, but hiss and clatter their bills loudly during breeding and nesting.

The species is associated with newborns.

Sylvain Cordier/Biosphoto/FLPA

THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF WHITE STORKS IN BRITAIN

- The most famous nesting attempt was made by a pair of white storks on the roof of St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh in 1416.
- The Saxon name for the village of Storrington, near Worthing in West Sussex, was 'Estorchestone' which translates in Old English – 'Storca-tun' – as the 'homestead with storks'. Other place names in the area, such as Storwood and Storgelond, also refer to the species' former presence.
- Other locations in England are associated with the species. In 1086, Storkhill in Yorkshire was first recorded as a settlement. It was believed to be "a stream or island frequented by storks" in 1297, and lies adjacent to Stork House and Stork Dyke.
- Some sources suggest that the Welsh name for stork was 'garan' and several place names such as Llangarron, Langaren, Langaran and Lann Garan may all allude to the former presence of the species.
- The Gaels called the bird the 'storr or corrabhan'. It is believed that this original name is derived from 'sta' meaning 'to stand', so its name literally means 'the tall stander'.
- The surnames Stork and Storke derive from 12th-century Middle English and are drawn from a large group of what were originally nicknames. Their recipients may have lived at a house where storks were nesting or had nested, or they may have been applied to individuals who were felt to resemble the species.
- Bestiaries became popular in the Middle Ages. A study of 300 medieval English manuscripts has identified about 50 species of bird that are easily recognisable, including at least 14 illustrations of white storks.
- John Skelton, who was born in 1460 in Norfolk, studied at Cambridge University. He had a reputation as a scholar and taught the young Henry VIII. He was later appointed poet laureate to the king and his poem *The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe* refers to "The stork alsó,/That maketh his nest,/ In chimneys to rest".
- White storks formed a random part of medieval diets as and when they could be obtained. They appear on the price list of the Company of Poulters in 1507 at a rate of two shillings.

A 15th-century woodcut of white storks.

Storks: Getty; illustration: Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy; woodcut: Science & Society Picture Library/Getty

EUROPEAN STORKS WINTER IN AFRICA, THEN RETURN TO THEIR BIRTH SITE TO BREED.

Above: a bird feeds at the edge of a pool. Prey items include fish, crustaceans, molluscs, snakes, insects and even rodents. Above right: Knepp Castle in Sussex could be the site of a new dawn in the white stork's history in Britain.

appears to originate. But at a time when the church wanted to control every aspect of people's lives, "the idea that you had a bird that controlled fertility was not particularly appealing".

In the middle and the second half of the 20th century, storks began to struggle in mainland Europe, too, thanks to the intensification of agriculture. The familiar story of wetlands being drained and pastures disappearing deprived them of nesting and foraging sites, and it wasn't until proper protection was introduced and reintroductions took place that they started to return. Countries including Belgium, France, Sweden and Switzerland have all 'reseeded' their populations to some extent.

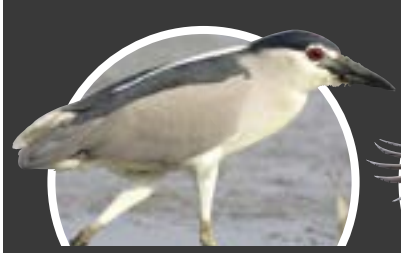
THE NEED FOR REINTRODUCTIONS

Reintroductions are important because there are two main reasons why storks fail – or at least struggle – to recolonise areas they have lost. First, the young imprint on the area where they are born; most European storks migrate to Africa for the winter, then return to their birth site to breed. The second reason is that there is a huge amount of 'inherited' knowledge associated with these nest sites – one in Europe (now not used) is reckoned to be 500 years old. "Once the wetlands have gone, nests have been destroyed and the trees have been cut down, all that inherited knowledge of good foraging sites is lost," Gow says. "The species is more or less stuffed."

That explains – at least in part – why storks that do end up here from time to time fail to breed, and why Gow feels it necessary to give them a helping hand. He hopes he can persuade Charlie Burrell that Knepp Castle – which has already given over much of its land to nature conservation – would work as the first location for any reintroduction.

The plan is pretty simple. Bring over breeding pairs – they could be injured or rescue birds that can no longer survive in the wild – from Europe and place them in aviaries on the estate. Allow them to breed, then 'soft release' their offspring into the wild. Gow is not quite sure how this ▶

4 POSSIBLE REINTRODUCTIONS



BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

Believed to have disappeared in the 16th or 17th century, the night heron would be an intriguing addition to British fauna because it is a wetland bird that hunts at night thanks to its remarkable vision. It is an occasional visitor, with about 10 sightings every year.

DALMATIAN PELICAN

A 3.5m wingspan makes the dalmatian pelican one of the world's largest flying birds, and it is regarded as Vulnerable by the IUCN. The species was found in the UK until the Middle Ages, but disappeared because of habitat loss and human disturbance. The Somerset Levels is one possible site.

EURASIAN EAGLE OWL

This species is a controversial candidate for reintroduction, because the most recent evidence for a native individual is as much as 10,000 years old. Escaped birds have bred in the UK in recent years, and there are concerns about the impact they could have on native fauna if they became more numerous.

BLACK STORK

This more solitary and woodland-favouring cousin of the white stork is a summer breeder in many areas of Eastern and Central Europe, but its distribution is patchier further west. The black stork also breeds in Southern Africa and Asia. Occasional vagrants come to Britain.

Nests: Andoni Canela/Getty; stork cutout: Joe Blossom/Alamy; St Paul's: Getty

would work yet, though it is likely to involve providing feeding platforms close to the aviaries so that the birds remain, at least to begin with, in familiar territory.

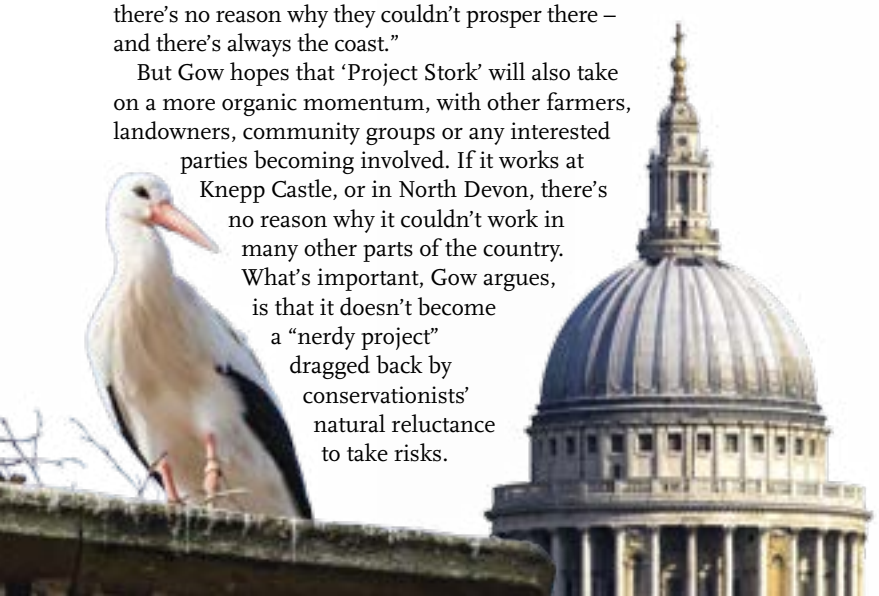
To help them survive their first winter – these birds are unlikely to migrate – they may clip their wings and keep them in adjacent aviaries to reduce mortality. Their flight feathers will regrow, of course, in the second year, and after that they're on their own.

The key, Gow says, will be to deal in numbers. If you bring only 5 or 10 storks over, then the loss of a handful of birds due to a broken leg or fox predation threatens the success of the project. If, on the other hand, you bring 30 pairs, then sheer quantity will help get the colony up and running.

PIONEER POPULATION

Gow already has four white storks (and a couple of black storks) at his Devon farm, and he may try to re-establish a small population around there. "It's no distance from Dartmoor," he points out, "and though it's not a wetland, there are plenty of dor beetles and short-tailed voles, so there's no reason why they couldn't prosper there – and there's always the coast."

But Gow hopes that 'Project Stork' will also take on a more organic momentum, with other farmers, landowners, community groups or any interested parties becoming involved. If it works at Knepp Castle, or in North Devon, there's no reason why it couldn't work in many other parts of the country. What's important, Gow argues, is that it doesn't become a "nerdy project" dragged back by conservationists' natural reluctance to take risks.



STORKS ARE A RELATIVELY UNCHALLENGING SPECIES THAT COULD HELP EDUCATE PEOPLE ABOUT THE IDEAS THAT UNDERPIN REWILDING.

These white storks (*above*) are nesting on the chimneys of a cathedral in Spain, while this bird (*below left*) is nesting on one at Thrigby Hall, Great Yarmouth – but Gow looks forward to the day we see them on top of St Paul's (*below*).

There's no reason why it should be – storks aren't apex predators such as wolves or lynx or landscape engineers like beavers, but a relatively unchallenging species for people to accept back in our landscape. And, because of this, they could help educate people about the ideas that underpin rewilding. There's too much idealism and naivety out there, Gow believes, with those who advocate the return of large predators failing to respect or even understand the arguments of those who inhabit and rely on the places being talked about.

"Bringing back white storks could enable you to establish relationships and trust," he says. "It doesn't mean we have forgotten about bringing species like sea eagles back to England. But how can we ever do that if we don't have individuals and communities who trust us and accept that what we are proposing is sane, and we don't have projects that have worked?"

Gow looks forward to a time, 15–20 years from now, when storks nesting by the side of the road will not be an uncommon sight. He can see them back in London, too, with the large expanse of RSPB Rainham Marshes providing extensive feeding grounds.

"It's not going to be our first target, but if you are going to engage people, then this is what you have to do. Remember the impact that the Thames [bottlenose] whale had – the whole of London stopped. If you had storks nesting on the roof of St Paul's, how do you think people would feel about that? It would be incredible."

JAMES FAIR *is the environment editor of* BBC Wildlife Magazine *and edits our Agenda section – see p53.*