Frequently Asked Questions
What do beavers look like?
Beavers are the second largest rodent in the world. They have thick brown fur, scaly tails and webbed hind-feet. Adults can measure over a metre from head to tail.

Beavers are known for their big, strong teeth which they use to cut through tree trunks. Iron in their tooth enamel gives the teeth an orange colour and makes them super strong. The teeth stick out in front of their lips to allow beavers to chew underwater. Even strong teeth get worn down by gnawing through trees so their teeth never stop growing.

Why do beavers have big tails?
Beaver tails have many uses. They are used like rudders in the water to steer whilst swimming. They are also used as props for balance when they are sitting and to aid them whilst carrying large branches. Beavers will also slap their tails on water to warn other beavers of potential danger.

Can beavers swim?
Beavers are excellent swimmers and can swim up to eight kilometres per hour (five miles per hour). They spend a lot of time underwater and can hold their breath for up to fifteen minutes.

They also have an extra pair of eyelids which are transparent. These are closed underwater to act like goggles.

What do beavers eat?
Many people believe that beavers eat fish. This is a common misconception. They are vegetarian preferring to eat leaves, bark, twigs, roots and aquatic plants. Despite their eagerness to cut down trees they do not eat wood. Instead they eat the cellulose underneath the bark and use the wood to build dams and lodges.

Where do beavers live?
Beavers are semi-aquatic which means they live partly on land and partly in water. Ideal habitat for beavers would be an area of fresh water surrounded by woodland.

Beavers have a good sense of hearing, smell and touch but their eyesight is poor and they are slow on land so they rarely go more than twenty metres away from water. They build dams and canals to create ideal living conditions and to provide water routes to and from food sources.

What is a beaver lodge?
Beavers build lodges out of woody debris, twigs and soil. Lodges can be found in the middle of a beaver built pond or at the side of a river.

Lodges are accessed via water-filled tunnels which keep the beavers safe from predators. Beavers eat, sleep, keep warm and raise their young in lodges. They also use them as food stores to keep them going during winter months.

Why do beavers dig burrows?
Beavers may not always live in lodges but, where possible prefer to live in large burrows dug into the banks of rivers. These can extend for several meters and contain one or more chambers. Burrows will usually have one or more entrances below the water surface.

Why do beavers build dams?
Beaver dams are impressive structures made out of wood, mud and stones usually built on shallow rivers, streams and ditches. Dams are constructed by beavers to create suitable living conditions where they are protected from predators.

The dams slow the flow of water and create areas of deep pond which are ideal for beaver lodges.

What are young beavers called?
Baby beavers are called kits. Male and female beavers are monogamous meaning they usually stay with the same partner for life. Female beavers give birth to between 1 and 4 kits per year with most born in May/June. Kits usually stay with their parents for up to 2 years before leaving the family unit to find a mate and set up a new family.

What animals prey on beavers?
People often believe beavers have no predators in Britain due the absence of the European Wolf, European Lynx and brown bear but young beavers, particularly kits, can still be predated on by red fox, domestic dogs, pine marten, birds of prey and large pike!

There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest otters, American mink and badgers may be opportunistic predators of kits.

Where in the world can beavers be found?
There are two species of beaver. Eurasian beavers (Castor Fiber) are found throughout Eurasia except parts of Portugal, central and southern Italy and the southern Balkan countries. American beavers (Castor Canadensis) live throughout North America but some can be found in Finland and north-west Russia as a result of past reintroductions.
Do we want beavers back in Britain?
Yes! With the combined threat of climate change and loss of biodiversity Britain faces some tough times ahead. We need a cost-effective way to reduce the risk of flooding, tackle drought, decrease levels of pollution and promote an abundance of wildlife. Part of the solution to these problems (and more) could lie with this humble rodent.

Why did beavers go extinct in Britain?
Beavers disappeared from Britain largely due to over-hunting. Beavers were hunted for their fur which was often made into hats. Hunters were also interested in their castoreum. Castoreum is a musk-like substance contained in the scent glands of both male and female beavers. The castoreum, which beavers use to mark their territory, was used in perfumes and medicines. Habitat loss could have also contributed to the loss of beavers.

What evidence is there of beaver presence in Britain?
Beaver fossils and other archaeological remains such as fossil wood has been discovered at 104 different sites across Britain dating from the Pliocene to the Medieval period.

There are also a number of historical texts which describe or refer to beavers. The earliest is ‘The Laws of Hywel Dda’ said to date from A.D. 940 which gives the prices of fur, including beavers.

When were beavers first reintroduced?
The first official reintroduction of beavers in Britain took place in Kent in 2002. The beavers were released into an enclosed area so that the population could be controlled and contained in one place. The license for release was granted as it was thought that the beavers could manage the area of fenland more cost effectively than heavy machinery. The project was a success and paved the way for other beaver releases.

The first licensed reintroduction to the wild took place on the west coast of Scotland in 2009, and was deemed successful in 2016. Over the same time period an unlicensed population of beavers was found living on the River Tay and Earn in Scotland. In 2019 beavers were recognised as a native species in Scotland and granted legal protection.

Who can release beavers?
To release beavers into an enclosure or the wild in Britain a licence is needed from either Natural England, Nature Scot or Natural Resources Wales.

Who manages beaver reintroductions?
In England, the Beaver Advisory Committee for England (BACE) was set up in 2010 to provide independent advice and information, as well as convening key stakeholder meetings.

In Scotland, the Scottish Beaver Forum convened by Nature Scot brings together stakeholders to review and discuss beaver management.

In Wales, The Welsh Beaver Project led by the Welsh Wildlife Trusts has been investigating bringing beavers back to Wales since 2005 but responsibility for overseeing reintroductions lies with Natural Resources Wales.

What is the population of beavers in Britain?
As of 2020 the current population in Britain is estimated to be at 550 individuals.

450 individuals are thought to reside in the Tay catchment on the East coast of Scotland with 30 at the site of the official Scottish Beaver Trial on the West coast. A further 20 are thought to be wild on the River Otter in Devon with the remaining individuals found in fenced trials across England, Wales and Scotland.

While 550 may sound like a lot in comparison to countries across Europe Britain’s beaver population is very small. France has an estimated population of 16,000 beavers, Germany 35,000 and Poland 125,000!

Who to contact if I want beavers on my land or if I own or manage land affected by beavers?
In England, contact us here at Beaver Trust on info@beavertrust.org for advice and information or alternatively contact Natural England by phone on 02080261089 or by e-mail on wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

In Scotland, contact Nature Scot by phone on 01463 725364 or by e-mail on beavers@nature.scot and ask to speak to someone about beavers.

In Wales, contact The Welsh Beaver Project by phone on 01597 823298 or by e-mail on beaver.afanc@wildlifetrustswales.org
Beaver Benefits & Impacts

How do beavers help with flood mitigation?
Beaver dams slow the flow of water through a river catchment and increase the ability of the wider landscape to absorb and retain water. This reduces peak flow downstream, which is hugely beneficial to towns and villages at risk of flooding.

How do beavers help with drought?
The same mechanism that reduces the risk of flooding also helps with drought. By slowing the flow of water through a river catchment water is retained for longer than it otherwise would be. Water held in these wetlands can then be used by land managers in times of drought.

But don’t beaver dams cause flooding?
In areas beaver dams can cause undesirable flooding in fields and areas surrounding rivers. These issues are usually small-scale and localised.

There are well-established methods for mitigating these conflicts. Flow devices can be installed (which lower the water in a pond behind a beaver dam whilst allowing beavers to continue dam building) or dams can be notched or even removed depending on the site.

How can beavers help reduce pollution?
Studies have shown that sediments containing agricultural run-off become trapped behind dams and in beaver ponds preventing the run-off travelling down the watercourse. Once trapped the sediment settles at the bottom or get absorbed by the plants which favour the environment created by the beavers.

This environmental clean up of our waterways is hugely beneficial to our health and to the health of other animals. It might also result in significant financial savings towards water quality management as the beavers are doing this work free of charge.

How do beavers contribute to a rise in biodiversity?
Beavers are what is known as a keystone species. This is a scientific designation used to describe a species which has “a disproportionately large effect on its natural environment relative to its abundance”.

Beavers are defined as a keystone species as they create unique, complex freshwater ecosystems which provide opportunities for many insects, amphibians, birds, fish and mammals. Beaver wetlands have been found to be home to 50% more species than wetlands not created by beavers.

Can migratory fish get past a beaver dam?
Beaver dams can form temporal barriers to fish movement when flows are low, and in man-made canalised channels fish passage can be limited. In such cases flow devices fitted with fish boxes can provide permanent passage but where these can not be installed dam-notching can be employed to temporary facilitate passage without affecting the beavers.

During periods of high flow though beaver dams can be passable. Fish may leap or swim over dams if the water level is high enough, smaller individuals may wriggle through the gaps in the dam and where the river is given a sufficient buffer from intensive land use it can cut around the dam creating side channels which migrating fish can use.

Do beavers kill trees?
Native tree species like willow or alder which have evolved alongside beavers over millions of years do not die when felled. They coppice, re-rooting from felled stems or debarked cuttings and grow rapidly. Non-native species such as beech and cedar will die if felled but they are not preferred species of choice for beavers. If felled the deadwood will provide a home for over 2000 species of invertebrates, a shelter for fish to rest or hide from predators and perches for many species of birds including Kingfishers.

Individual trees can be easily protected from beaver browsing. The tree can be simply wrapped with wire mesh or painted with a mix of exterior based latex paint and fine sand.

How do beavers help us in a climate emergency?
Wetlands are known as carbon sinks and have been found to store up to 5 times more carbon than dry areas.

By building dams on areas with small streams, channels and burns, beavers turn areas that were mostly dry into wetland which increases the level of carbon stored in the area. If allowed to return to their former range across Britain beavers would undoubtedly increase the amount carbon stored in our land.

Do beavers carry disease?
Like all animals beavers can carry a range of pathogens and host-specific parasites but a disease risk analysis carried out in 2019 found that the risk of introducing significant disease to humans, domestic animals or wildlife from captive bred or wild beavers in Britain was low.