# Howgill Fells’ rewilding project revives lost woodlands and upland biodiversity



The Howgill Fells, a striking, treeless cluster of hills within the Yorkshire Dales National Park, present a stark landscape shaped over centuries by relentless sheep grazing. Often likened to a herd of sleeping elephants due to their rounded topography, the Fells conceal beneath their soil the ancient roots of lost “ghost woodlands”, remnants of a bygone era when lush forests thrived.

In a significant conservation effort, a rewilding project has taken root over the past 12 years, leading to the planting of 300,000 native trees across 64 acres in designated sheep-free enclosures. The early signs of ecological recovery are promising; the melody of birdsong now fills the valley, with various species like meadow pipits and stonechats reclaiming their former habitats. Ecologist Mike Douglas from South Lakes Ecology, monitoring bird activity in these enclosures, reported an increase from just four breeding species before the project began to fourteen in the previous year alone. “I’m surprised by how quickly birds have colonised, and the diversity of species,” Douglas stated, highlighting the rapid transformation of this once barren land.

The rewilding initiative marks a pioneering collaboration between farmers and conservationists, uniting around the common goal of ecological restoration in a landscape long dominated by agriculture. Peter Leeson from the Woodland Trust described this project as groundbreaking, explaining that such extensive tree planting on common land, accessible to the public, had never been attempted at this scale in upland areas before. “Farmer and conservation collaboration is the real joy,” he reflected, emphasising a shared vision for a more diverse and resilient ecosystem.

The success of this project offers a compelling blueprint for similar initiatives across the UK, where over one-third of land is classified as upland, often subjected to practices that stifle natural woodland growth. Research from the Wild Ingleborough project further supports this notion, revealing that the absence of sheep grazing allows for natural colonisation of woodlands, suggesting a vital absence of human interference could restore biodiversity more effectively than solely relying on human-led planting.

Additionally, emerging models across Europe showcase the potential of integrating farming with conservation. The Wildlife Trusts, for instance, recently acquired the extensive Rothbury estate in Northumberland, where they plan to reduce sheep populations and introduce cattle to facilitate natural regeneration of trees and scrub. This dual approach not only seeks to enhance biodiversity but also to maintain sustainable livestock farming.

Importantly, the economic implications for farmers involved in conservation efforts cannot be overlooked. Traditionally, several farmers in the area had feared that such projects could threaten their livelihoods by removing sheep from their lands. However, the payments associated with the Tebay project—averaging £25,600 a year for maintaining tree enclosures and compensating for grazing rights—have proven to be a vital lifeline. For many farms faced with declining subsidies and rising operational costs, conservation partnerships bring new financial prospects while fostering ecological recovery.

Looking towards the future, as the trees within these enclosures mature, it is anticipated that a more diverse avian population will flourish, further enriching the upland ecosystem. Douglas envisions a time when common species like great tits and blackbirds will nest in the newly formed woodlands. The profound effect of these ghost woodlands on the environment serves as a poignant reminder of what has been lost and what is still possible. “This was a leap in the dark for the farmers, as much as anyone else,” Leeson remarked, commending their bold steps towards a sustainable future aligned with nature’s needs.

As conservation strategies evolve to embrace the lessons learned from initiatives like those in the Howgill Fells, the landscape of UK farming could witness a transformative shift, balancing agricultural practices with the urgent necessity for biodiversity restoration and climate resilience.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/30/un-managing-the-land-the-hill-farmers-helping-to-rewild-britain-aoe)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe), [[2]](https://www.forestryengland.uk/creating-wilder-forests), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/23/the-wildlife-trusts-rothbury-estate-purchase-woolly-maggots-sheep-farming)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://leaf.leeds.ac.uk/news/sheep-removal-could-allow-woodlands-to-self-plant-in-uk-uplands/), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/30/un-managing-the-land-the-hill-farmers-helping-to-rewild-britain-aoe)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/23/the-wildlife-trusts-rothbury-estate-purchase-woolly-maggots-sheep-farming), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/30/un-managing-the-land-the-hill-farmers-helping-to-rewild-britain-aoe)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe), [[3]](https://www.fellponysociety.org/grazing.htm), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/30/un-managing-the-land-the-hill-farmers-helping-to-rewild-britain-aoe)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe), [[2]](https://www.forestryengland.uk/creating-wilder-forests), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/23/the-wildlife-trusts-rothbury-estate-purchase-woolly-maggots-sheep-farming)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe),[[7]](https://futurewoodlands.org.uk/ghost-woodlands/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/ghost-woodlands-rewilding-sheep-fells-yorkshire-uk-aoe> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.forestryengland.uk/creating-wilder-forests> - Forestry England is transforming over 8,000 hectares of land across four forests into wilder areas to support nature's recovery. This initiative includes expanding native woodlands, restoring peatlands, and reintroducing native animals to enhance biodiversity. The project aims to create fully functioning ecosystems while continuing sustainable timber production and welcoming visitors. The approach is inspired by the Wild Ennerdale partnership in the Lake District, which has been restoring a wild valley for 20 years to become more resilient and diverse.
3. <https://www.fellponysociety.org/grazing.htm> - The Fell Pony Society reports on the successful use of Fell ponies in conservation grazing at Haweswater in the Lake District. In December 2022, four new Fell ponies joined the RSPB team to help manage vegetation and support the growth of rare plants like devil’s bit scabious, crucial for the endangered marsh fritillary butterfly. This initiative is part of a broader effort to restore the landscape, improve biodiversity, and enhance water quality through regenerative farming practices.
4. <https://leaf.leeds.ac.uk/news/sheep-removal-could-allow-woodlands-to-self-plant-in-uk-uplands/> - Research from the Wild Ingleborough project in the Yorkshire Dales indicates that removing sheep grazing could enable natural colonisation of woodlands in UK uplands. The study found that sheep grazing severely limits natural tree establishment, but in areas where sheep were removed, natural colonisation was successful. This suggests that allowing natural processes to restore tree cover could be a viable method for woodland restoration in upland areas, complementing traditional tree planting efforts.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/23/the-wildlife-trusts-rothbury-estate-purchase-woolly-maggots-sheep-farming> - The Wildlife Trusts have acquired the 3,850-hectare Rothbury estate in Northumberland, marking the largest land purchase in England in 30 years. The acquisition includes 4,000 sheep, which the trusts plan to manage as part of a land restoration project. The initiative aims to restore nature on the estate by reducing sheep numbers, introducing cattle, and allowing scrub and trees to regenerate on grassland, creating a wood pasture. This approach seeks to balance nature restoration with sustainable farming practices.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/30/un-managing-the-land-the-hill-farmers-helping-to-rewild-britain-aoe> - Farmers in the Howgill Fells of Cumbria are collaborating with conservationists to restore ancient woodlands by reducing sheep grazing. Over 150,000 native trees have been planted in the fells as part of an agreement between Natural England, the Ravenstonedale Common Graziers Association, and the Woodland Trust. Inside sheep-free enclosures, an increase in scrub, hawthorn, and tussocky grass provides foraging and shelter for birds and red squirrels, boosting the vole population and supporting predators like short-eared and barn owls.
7. <https://futurewoodlands.org.uk/ghost-woodlands/> - Future Woodlands Scotland defines 'ghost woodlands' as remnants of ancient woodlands where less than 20% of the canopy cover remains, often due to overbrowsing. Despite appearing degraded, these woodlands hold high ecological and conservation value. The organization works with landowners, farmers, and crofters to restore these woodlands by reducing browsing pressure, aiming to revitalize ecosystems and preserve biodiversity. They offer advice, support, and funding to naturally regenerate woodlands, emphasizing the importance of these habitats in Scotland.