

An aerial photograph of a coastal dune landscape. A dirt road winds through the dunes, with a dark-colored car driving away from the viewer. The dunes are covered in low-lying, scrubby vegetation in shades of green and brown. In the background, a city skyline is visible under a cloudy sky. The title 'The wild ones' is overlaid in large, white, serif font.

The wild ones

On the windswept sand dunes of the Dutch coast hides a relic of the Ice Age - a herd of some of the last European bison. **Sean Thomas** visits an innovative rewilding project in search of these captivating beasts

Photography: Joe McGorty





To be honest, it's not the most obvious place to see the largest, and perhaps shyest, land mammal in Europe. From just beyond the oak trees, I can hear the ceaseless fizz of the Zandvoort racetrack. Directly left of the F1 circuit, the pubs, herring shacks, Ferris wheels and yellow-painted tower blocks of Bloemendaal beach resort are clearly visible. Meanwhile, high above us, the multiple chalk-white vapour trails show that we are just 20 minutes' drive from Schiphol Airport.

Yep, 20. If you were 20 minutes out of Heathrow Airport in London you'd still be in Heathrow. But this is the Netherlands, one of the most densely populated countries on Earth. This is a land where they have to pack it all in and, boy, do they do that in the compact Zuid-Kennemerland national park.

The essence of this park – the emotional core of the place – is a sequence of rugged, wind-scoured, grey-gold sand dunes, created over countless centuries by complex North Sea tides. The sands are secured by shrubs, spindle trees, and the odd stand of imported pine. Lavish rain, ample seaside sun and a mild coastal



Two watchful denizens of the Kraansvlak bison herd. Left: biologist Esther Rodriguez; Zuid-Kennemerland national park

climate have aided the dusty soil: the reason that, for many decades, Zuid-Kennemerland was given over to small-scale farming, private game reserves and water management. Buried metres under the wheels of our Land Rover Discovery (which is eating up the dunes with an impressive appetite) is a treasure trove. Half of North Holland's drinking water is filtered through the northern dunes and their underlying mini-aquifers.

So what is the animal lurking – somewhere – out there? In two words: European bison, a species that has been just-about-dodging extinction for centuries. These particular bison have been placed in Kennemerland as part of a larger European rewilding movement that aims to restore classic wilderness and reintroduce old species across the continent, from ibis in Austria and wolves in Castile, to remaking the Caledonian forests of Scotland. This is, in turn, part of a global movement to return areas of land to their natural balance before humans began terraforming through hunting and clearing.

This particular rewilding project is, we have to remind ourselves, taking place just three short miles from the centre of the Dutch city of Haarlem. Our guide in

Kennemerland is Esther Rodriguez, a young Spanish biologist who is heavily pregnant but still buzzing with energy and enthusiasm. She suggests we try another route as we keenly scan the drizzly horizon for The Big Beast. While we search – tensely inching our way through the dunes – Esther explains the recent history.

“In the 1990s, the whole area was legally conserved as a national park, but nitrogen deposition, forestation and declines in the numbers of rabbits due to epidemic diseases meant the dunes started to become encroached by grasses and shrubs, which reduced their dynamic nature.” She turns, and gestures; we all squint eagerly out of the car, through the pines. But no. It's another fallow deer, pronging through the marram grass.

Esther concludes her story. “To manage the shrubs, large grazers like the Scottish Highland cattle, Konik horses and Shetland ponies were introduced to Zuid-Kennemerland,” she says. “And we also looked east. To the European bison... One of which, by the way, is standing right over there.”

You what? Joe the photographer abruptly swings his zoom lens round in the car, nearly concussing me. >

**“... rugged, wind-scoured,
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The Discovery warms up to the task of bison tracking. Below right: park ranger Ruud Maaskant

Can it be true? Yes it can. It was just a brief glimpse, of big black horns and tawny fur, but we have just seen one of the rarest big mammals on the continent. For a quarter of a second.

The quest for a better view continues, as I ponder our quarry. The story of the European bison is, in its own way, the story of all European fauna. And it is a story that came perilously close to a tragic end.

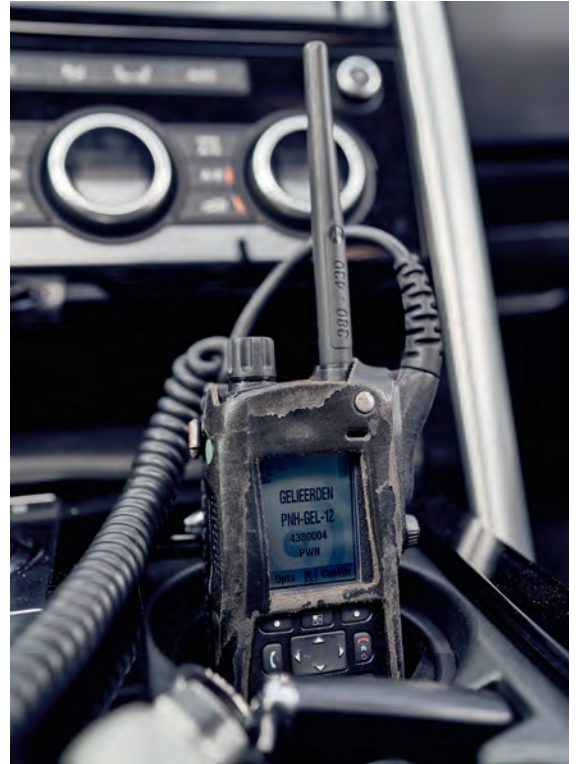
European bison – official Latin name, *Bison bonasus*; poetic English name, the wisent – are a hybrid descendent of the primitive steppe bison and the fairy-tale auroch, or giant cattle. Back in the day, the wisent roamed freely across Eurasia, from northern Spain, through France, Benelux, Germany, north Italy, and out into Eastern Europe. Slightly smaller than their famous American cousins, they are, nonetheless, magnificent. With their classic hunchback shoulders, great for charging, and menacing, they can stand up to six feet and weigh the best part of a tonne.

Of course, 800kg is a lot of potential shoes, steaks and Viking drinking horns, so these beasts were always eagerly and expertly hunted. Poignantly, one of the first depictions of European bison, from 15,000BC, is in the beautiful cave paintings at Lascaux, France. It shows a wisent speared to death, its intestines tumbling.

Despite some precocious conservation laws in the 16th century (preserving the creatures for royal bloodsport), bison hunting continued into the 1900s, by which point the poor wisent was reduced – bar a few outliers – to a limited range in the so-called ‘Great Wilderness,’ a remote and wild tract of southern Lithuania and eastern Poland. And then came World War I, and regiments of cold, hungry German soldiers, who barbecued the bulk of the great Polish herds. The last wild wisent was shot after the war, in Bialowieza Forest, in 1919.

Game over? Not quite. Miraculously, a few European bison had been preserved in zoos across the world. Using the genes of these captive animals, the Polish government began a reintroduction programme, one of the more successful of its kind. It is thought that around 4,000 bison now live, once again, in Bialowieza Forest.

But as Esther explains: “Recent research suggests that forests are not a permanent environment for bison. The bison only sheltered in the trees so they could be safe >





from man.” And this is where Zuid-Kennemerland National Park comes into the picture.

The clouds rapidly rolling in from the North Sea are the same grey hue of the Discovery’s flanks, so we speed over the dunes back to the visitor centre, where Esther goes on: “Therefore, when we were looking for a grazing animal to restore dune dynamics, we thought, ‘Bison would be well-suited here, and might do a good job!’ Everyone told us we were crazy. But in 2007 we imported a few from Poland, and now they live here successfully.”

There are 13 wisents in the park – a herd of females and youngsters, and three detached males who keep mostly out of the way of the main group except during mating season. The project relocates any further bison that are born to other rewilding projects because one herd of 11-15 is optimal for the size of the reserve.

“We barely ever handle them,” Esther continues. “We never feed them, we let them live, breed and die like the wild things they are, in one of the old game reserves that was never opened to the public.”

The next day dawns promisingly sunny and warm. Our guide for the day is ranger Ruud Maaskant, an

impressively Viking-looking man, just turned 50, with hair and beard the same colour as the sand dunes and an easy, confident air.

“I cannot promise bison!” he exclaims. “They come and they go. Like the wind and the rain.” He looks completely at home up front in the car, battered walkie-talkie standing to attention in the cup-holder, eyes scanning the horizon as we head back out over the shifting sand. A few minutes later, he opens the doors and leads us out. We’re going to do this properly, on foot, like ghillies stalking a stag.

In the slants of morning sun, the enclosed reserve, the Kraansvlak, looks exquisite. Violets sparkle in the dewy grass; a fox barks at the wheeling swifts. Ahead of us, a spinney of buckthorn shadows a scoop of yellow sand. “The bison make these pits, by sandbathing,” explains Ruud. “It’s a crucial part of the dune ecosystem. They are keeping the dunes beautiful and dynamic, and rich with insects, in a natural way.”

But where are the bison today? Some of the animals, we learn, are collared with GPS devices that send a signal every four hours. The creatures cannot be

The Kraansvlak bison herd thrives among the dunes



perpetually tracked, but the rangers do have a vague sense of where they might be. Ruud signals. Keep low. We are virtually crawling now, parting the prickly burnet rose. And then Ruud silently points. There! Almost the whole Kraansvlak bison herd is staring at us, a short stroll away, with the steelworks at IJmuiden incongruously silhouetted against the sky.

The bison's dark, lashed eyes are sombre and reproachful. With a shudder of mixed emotions – sadness, delight, guilt, exhilaration – I realise that I am staring at a face from the Ice Age, staring at something from Deep Time, staring at an animal revered by early Holocene man. I am also gazing at something that, by rights, should not exist. The last surviving species of the noble European megafauna. And yet, here it is, about three miles from the nearest Aldi.

Ruud waves a hand. Come closer. We edge nearer, but a twig snaps, and the oldest bull starts, and then they are gone, cantering into the woods and dunes, leaving just a cloud of silvery dust and rejection hanging in the air. And I feel as if I have woken from a dream. A wounding yet beautiful dream. ■