Though we tend to think of the Scottish Highlands as a barren, desolate place today, it was not always like that. Much of the land was covered by thick pine forest called the Caledonian Forest which developed after the last Ice Age. Many people lived in the region in those days—and they all spoke Scottish Gaelic—until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when a large proportion of the population in many areas were exiled by the landlords to make way for foreign sheep, because there was more money in sheep than in tenants. But before that the inhabitants were gradually clearing the forest for pasture, land to live on and wood for building and fuel.

After the people had been banished in this way and the wolves completely wiped out, there was no natural limit on the deer (the landlords let them multiply for hunting), and they destroyed what was left of the forest by over-grazing which prevented new trees from growing. Today you can see tree-stumps here and there in the moor where there are no living trees visible, or only very old trees. Small areas of the forest still remain though, especially in Perthshire, where there is a yew which is said to be the oldest tree in Europe. It could be between two and five thousand years old, and according to legend Pontius Pilate was born under it.
There were wolves in Scotland until the seventeenth century, and a thousand years ago there were bears too. The Romans considered Scottish bears to be the strongest and fiercest for Gladiatorial contests. Now some wish to reintroduce wolves to Scotland, claiming they would control the deer, and, since there are not many people living in the Highlands now, that they would do little harm. However the sheep farmers are opposed, unless they would get reimbursement for lost livestock. Sea eagles and red kites have been successfully reintroduced, so why couldn’t the same happen with wolves?