

An 'Arctic' safari in the Scottish Highlands

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The temperature is below zero and a bitter wind is tugging at our clothes. In the distance, the Grampian hills are catching the early sunlight but it's dark in the shadows of the wood. Curious eyes are trained on us from beneath the trees – a pack of grey wolves are just metres away. It's rare to see these beautiful creatures at such close quarters: wolves are naturally wary. The privilege of the moment is lost on six-year-old Nelly. Her toes are aching with cold.

We've come to Scotland to seek out some of her favourite polar animals, creatures she's so far enjoyed only in books and wildlife shows on TV – but wolves are not on her list.

With a polar explorer as a father, I feel drawn to all things Arctic. This area of the Highlands has a particular resonance, as it was where my dad spent his final years. It reminded him of north-west Greenland, where we had spent happy years living with a remote Inuit community. Our visit is an opportunity for me to show Nelly this special place and introduce her to the kind of animals I grew up with.



I'm not normally one for zoos, but the Highland [Wildlife](#) Park is unique. It's run by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), which also operates the zoo in Edinburgh, and its focus is on threatened species usually found in northerly locations.

In winter, this can feel like an Arctic landscape. The Cairngorms national park has some of Britain's harshest weather and the heaviest snowfall in Scotland, creating snowfields that stretch to the horizon. Lochs, lochans and waterfalls can be frozen solid. Blizzards are common and temperatures frequently dip below -10C. Hurricane-force winds can blast through the glens, making them feel as wintry as the summits. In the higher altitudes, blizzards, fog and snow can produce white-out conditions, where ground and sky merge in a swirling, disorientating, mass. The plants and animals that live here have adapted to this microclimate.

Thankfully on our visit, the sky is clear. “Just leave your car by the polar bear and get your boots on,” one of the keepers calls as we drive up. The polar bear in question is a huge sculpture in the main car park. We’re the first to arrive, and the place seems deserted.



Morag – “just call me Mo” – is the keeper of hoofstock and guide on our Land Rover tour. First up is a small herd of musk ox. “Hello my beauties,” Mo soothes as we approach. Shaggy and bright-eyed, the prehistoric-looking beasts step forward, their warm breath billowing in the cold.

We make our way slowly through a herd of European bison. They are taller and leaner than their American cousins, though still the heaviest animal in Europe. “They are gentle creatures,” Mo says, “but they don’t know their own strength.”

A herd of red deer sweep down the hill towards us. Cattle grids separate the enclosures so vulnerable species are not bothered by more feisty neighbours, such as the territorial vicuna, or the towering European elk. An elk calf rubs up against the truck and Mo looks him over. Every morning, she tells us, she and the other keepers check on each of the animals, gauging their general wellbeing.

Over the next few hours, we wander along the walkways, encountering Turkmenian markhor (wild goats with corkscrew horns), snowy owls, Arctic foxes, yak, wolverines, forest reindeer, northern lynx and two astonishingly beautiful snow leopards. We watch as a wild Bactrian camel is given medicine for her arthritis, and meet Monty the Amur tiger, who follows my daughter’s every move.

But the highlight is still to come. Ahead of us are two male polar bears, watching as a group gathers by their large enclosure. It’s feeding time. Although I’m not comfortable with wild animals in captivity, I am reassured by the respect the keepers have for the animals. They seem genuinely concerned for their welfare.

Una, the head keeper, calls cheerily to the bears: “Arktos ... Walker ... come and say hello ...” My heart pounds as the bears stroll casually our way. I’m thankful for the steel mesh between us.

I've travelled many times to the Arctic and have been privileged to see polar bears in their natural habitat, but you'd never get this close in the wild. These "boys", as Una calls them, are immense. The size of their paws alone is astonishing. "I work with them every day, so I tend to forget how big they are," she says.



Hunks of fresh meat have been put out, along with fruit and vegetables. This is just one of many meals the bears will have today – they have prodigious appetites – and favourite treats: "When Arktos arrived, we had to promise his previous keeper to give Arktos an apple a day," Una smiles. Born in captivity, each bear has been given access to a wide variety of food. Lacking fresh seal meat, the bear's favourite treat appears to be their daily dose of cod liver oil.

Highland Wildlife Park is now home to some 30 species, native Scottish plus rare animals from other mountain and tundra regions. There was initial concern that the park would be filled with exotic animals purely to attract more visitors, but the RZSS says the new animals are for the most part severely endangered due to habitat loss, invasive species and hunting. Their presence here will, it says, help safeguard the future of their species, as well as demonstrating the Highlands' place in the global ecosystem.

Scotland was once home to brown bear, wild boar, lynx and wolves. Giant elk roamed here too. They are lost to another time, but there's hope for others. The wildlife park participates in breeding programmes and is at the forefront of new rewilding projects. Eurasian beavers, extinct in Scotland for around 400 years, have recently been successfully reintroduced.

Of course, a Scottish "safari" needn't be confined to a wildlife park. The Cairngorms are a stronghold for rare species, including golden eagles, red deer, osprey, pine martens and the Scottish wildcat – the UK's only remaining native cat. But you'd be lucky to see them in the wild.



By the time we leave, the weather is closing in. We're staying on the Rothiemurchus Estate near Aviemore – the location, we discover, of the annual [Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain sled dog rally](#). Campervans pull over in laybys and happy visitors line the trails to enjoy the races. Excited yelps and barking fills the air as dog mushers from across the UK, along with their 1,000 huskies, gather in the forest.

As we drive south, sleet turns to snow. The hills of the Drumochter Pass are drained of colour. Walk far enough from the A9 here and you'll find a place more reminiscent of the polar regions than anywhere in the British Isles.

"Are there polar bears out there, Mum?" Nelly asks from the back seat.

"No, darling," I reply.

"What about wildcats then?"

"Hopefully..."

Way to go

The trip was provided by [RZSS Highland Wildlife Park](#) and [Visit Scotland](#). Entry to the park costs £15.40 adult, £11.55 child. Guided Land Rover tours are free (nine people at a time) and take around 40 minutes. New "keeper for a day" and photography experiences start at £150pp, for over-18s only. The nearest station is Kingussie, five miles away. Two-person lodges at Hilton Grand Vacations in Coylumbridge costs from £200 for three days (higvc.co.uk).

• Kari Herbert is co-author of *Explorer's Sketchbooks: The Art of Discovery and Adventure* (Thames & Hudson, £29.95). To buy a copy for £25.46 including UK p&p go to bookshop.theguardian.com