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Meet the animals that are defying odds by escaping extinction

Against a backdrop of wide-scale extinctions some animal species have survived a close shave with extinction and are recovering

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By **Olive Heffernan**



Oryx: Born to rewild
Ira Block/Getty

TALK about second chances: Sahara oryx are about to get a first-class ticket back to their natural mode of existence. Come March, the first 25 of a planned 500 animals will be flown from enclosures in Abu Dhabi to be released into their native habitat in Chad. It's an example of an endangered animal making a recovery – and it's not the only one.

Estimates [suggest that up to 100,000 species](#) are lost each year. That rate is thought to be at least 1000 times what it would be in the absence of the deforestation, poaching and pollution we are responsible for.

But despite this gloomy outlook, prospects are improving for some species that have narrowly escaped extinction. That's partly thanks to ongoing success in breeding species that are extinct in the wild, and reintroducing them.

The last wild oryx to roam the grasslands of what is now the Ouadi Rime-Ouadi Achim game reserve in Chad was shot dead by a hunter in 1998. Since then, the only surviving oryx have been those in captivity, mainly in the Middle East and in North America.

Hindering the hunters

The project to reintroduce them into the wild is managed by the Sahara Conservation Fund, and by a joint venture of the Chad and Abu Dhabi governments. For it to succeed, the oryx will also have to be protected from poachers.

In the 1980s, a similar programme to re-establish the Arabian oryx in Oman failed at first because of hunting. Since then, the Arabian oryx has made a remarkable recovery, becoming the [first species to be reclassified](#) from extinct in the wild to vulnerable. "There's always going to be the odd bandit," says conservation biologist John Newby, who is leading the Sahara oryx programme. But, he adds, Chad is well prepared to deal with poachers.

A growing number of species are being successfully reintroduced, says Mike Hoffmann of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission. "They've been rescued and are doing well," he says. "They're not out of the woods by any means, but their status is no longer critical."

Then there are the so-called Lazarus species (see "[Not as dead as we thought](#)"), such as the black-footed ferret of the North American Great Plains. By the 1950s it was apparently extinct, largely a result of cattle farmers poisoning prairie dogs, the ferrets' favoured food. What is more, the ferrets were susceptible to plague, which arrived in the US on East Asian trading ships during the early 1900s.

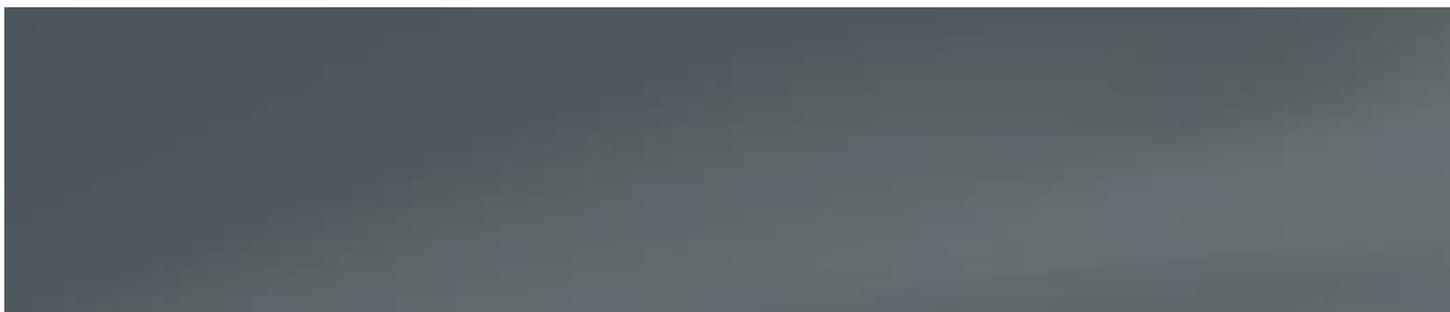
"Some species reintroduced to the wild may not be out of the woods, but their status is no longer critical"

But in 1981, near Meeteetse, Wyoming, a dog brought home a surprising kill: a black-footed ferret. The US Fish and Wildlife Service subsequently captured 18 ferrets and bred them in captivity. So far, the FWS, together with several NGOs, has successfully reintroduced 300 at six sites in the wild. The goal is to establish 3000 breeding adults at 30 locations throughout their former range, says Kristy Bly, who works on ferret conservation in Montana with WWF.

For their efforts to bear fruit, they will have to ensure the ferrets remain free of the plague. Bly and her colleagues hope to do this using an oral vaccination programme, kicking off this summer and with peanut butter as bait. It follows a three-year field trial which showed that vaccine taken up in this way is effective.

Bringing the ferret back is part of a larger plan to rewild the plains, one that also involves the reintroduction of prairie dogs. "Without the Great Plains, we don't have the equivalent of our Serengeti," says Bly.

Another challenge is that when species thought to be extinct turn up again, they are typically found clinging on in inaccessible regions and – unlike the black-footed ferret – they are ones that never had a wide range in the wild.





No longer extinct: the blue-eyed lemur (top) and the back-footed ferret (below)

Joel Sartore/NGS/Getty



Andrew Harrington/naturepl.com

The blue-eyed black lemur is a case in point. For over a century, we presumed it was a myth, or a taxonomic error: the only non-human primate with blue eyes. But in 1985, more than 100 years after it was first described, it was found in a remote part of the Sahamalaza peninsula in Madagascar. Its population was in the low thousands, and declined rapidly as slash-and-burn agriculture decimated forests. By 2008, it was facing near-certain extinction.

But just a few years ago, the blue-eyed black lemur came off the IUCN's list of the world's 25 most endangered primates.

But just a few weeks ago, the blue-eyed black lemur came on the IUCN's list of the world's 25 primates most in peril. Primate specialist Christoph Schwitzer, one of the list's compilers, says it is the only species from the previous list – drawn up in 2012 – whose prospects have improved. That's thanks to a research and monitoring programme in Madagascar's Sahamalaza-Iles Radama National Park that helps protect some lemur populations from habitat loss and hunting for bushmeat. At around 3000 individuals, the population is now at least stable if not increasing, says Schwitzer. "This species isn't safe yet in the wild, but it is safer than before," he says.

"Success takes many, many years to achieve," says Hoffmann. "And all the major conservation success stories, whether it is the black-footed ferret or Arabian oryx, have taken decades of hard conservation work on the ground and continued effort."



Not as dead as we thought

I am not dead! "Lazarus species" are those that appear to have risen from the grave. Such was the case with two venomous species of sea snake, thought extinct. Then, after 17 years with no live sightings, they were unexpectedly [rediscovered off the coast of Western](#)

[Australia](#) (*Biological Conservation*, doi.org/10.1016/j.bioc.2021.03.001).

Listed as critically endangered under Western Australia’s Wildlife Conservation Act, the snakes, *Aipysurus foliosquama* and *A. apraefrontalis*, will now automatically be afforded some protection under the law.

“Future activities in these areas will need to take stock of their impacts now before they go ahead with development,” says Blanche D’Anastasi of James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, one of the biologists who identified them.

The flip side of stories like this is that an erroneous presumption of extinction can be damaging from a conservation viewpoint, because we end up giving up on the species, says Mike Hoffmann of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. “You don’t look for it and you don’t put money into it,” he adds.

This article appeared in print under the headline “Back from the brink”

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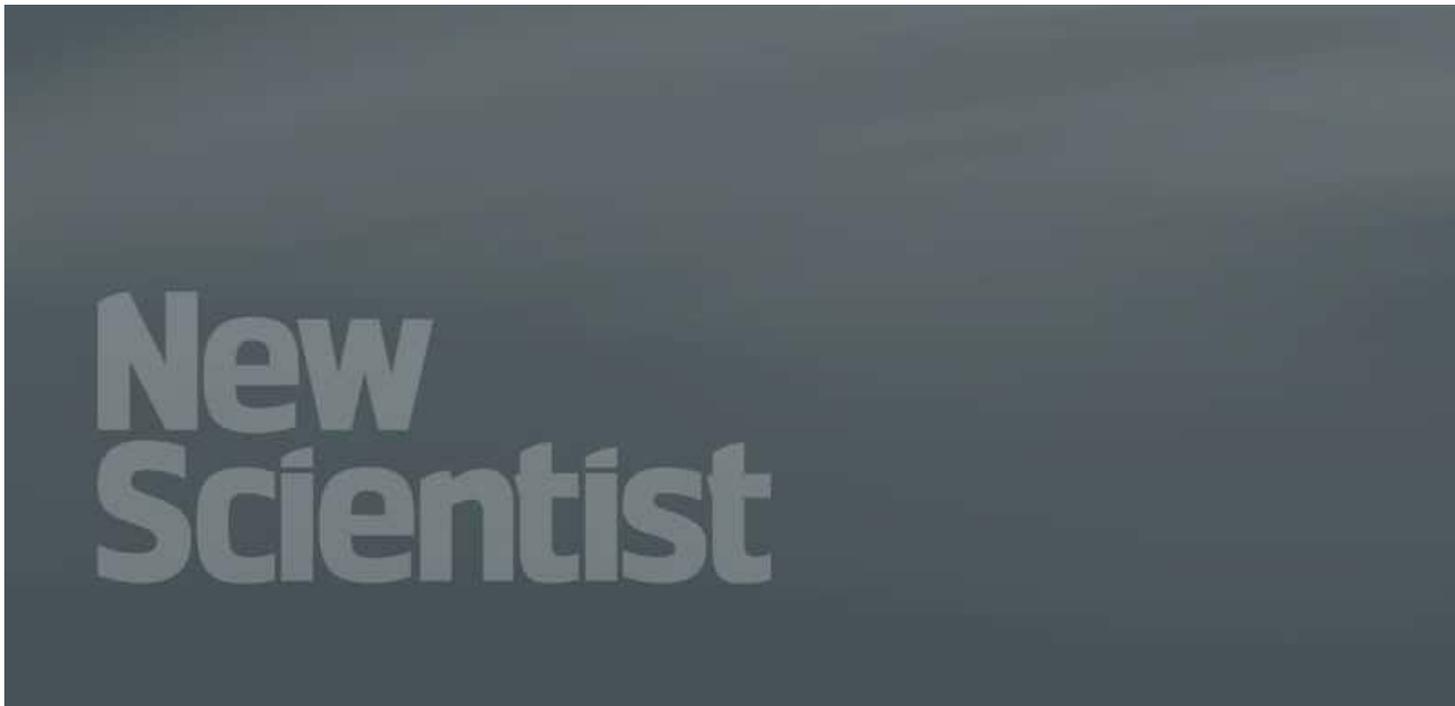
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