

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Autumn Meeting**

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan
Thursday, 27 October 2022**

Present

Sir Michael Wigan	MW	- Chair / Borrobol	Holly Deary	HD	- NatureScot
John McMorran	JM	- Balnacoil	Grant Symmers	GS	- Balnacoil
Brian Lyall	BL	- Badanloch	Alex Plommer	AP	- Badanloch
Robbie Rowantree	RR	- Gordonbush	Blair Colvin	BC	- Kintradwell
Steve Wheatley	SW	- NatureScot	Tom Chetwynd	TC	- Facilitator / Secretary

1.0 Welcome

TC welcomed those present to the Autumn Meeting.

2.0 Apologies

Andrew Nicholson	- <i>Clebrig</i>	Dr & Mrs Ryan	- <i>Dalnessie</i>
Robbie Milne	- <i>West Garty</i>	Andrew Mackay	- <i>Dalnessie</i>
Pieter Bakker	- <i>Altnaharra</i>	Robert Flett	- <i>Crackaig</i>
Lorne MacNicol	- <i>Tressady</i>	James Urquhart	- <i>Ben Armine / Dalreavoch</i>
John Billet	- <i>Kintradwell</i>	Martin Grant	- <i>Kildonan</i>
P Nissen	- <i>Borrobol</i>	John Macdonald	- <i>Borrobol</i>
Megan Bregazzi	- <i>FLS</i>		

3.0 Minutes

The Minutes of the Spring Meeting held on Tuesday, 3 May 2022 were approved with no changes, proposed by John McMorran and seconded by Brian Lyall.

4.0 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising from the last meeting or minutes.

5.0 Deer Management Plan

5.1 Stag Cull – 2022-23 Season

TC invited those present to make comments on the 2022 stag season. Reports followed of a rut of two halves, with stags in good condition all season. Average weights on some estates were up with BL reporting that Badanloch averaged 15st 3lbs and 10 years old with good quality beasts on the ground. Everyone present reported that they had sufficient mature stags over the course of the season and discussion followed that mortality had been low for Winter / Spring 2021-22 and that the hill was generally in better condition.

TC reported the stag cull data received to date as follows:

ESDMG Proposed & Actual Culls 2022-23			
Estate	Proposed Stag Cull	Actual Stag Cull	Stag Difference
Dalchork - Open Hill	35	30	-5
Altnahara	4	0	-4
Clebrig	25	27	2
Loch Choire (North)	20	0	-20
Loch Choire (South)	50	0	-50
Dalnessie	30	28	-2
Ben Armine	25	38	13
Badanloch	20	20	0
Syre	0	0	0
NW Sub-Group:	209	143	-66
Borrobol	60	63	3
Kildonan	80	88	8
Balnacoil	45	47	2
Dalreavoch	30	30	0
Tressady	45	40	-5
Dunrobin	35	36	1
Gordonbush	40	38	-2
Kintradwell	25	27	2
Morvich	15		-15
SE Sub-Group:	375	369	-6
West Garty	10	0	-10
Crackaig	20	19	-1
Torrish	10		-10
Gartymore	10	20	10
E Sub-Group:	50	39	-11
ESDMG Open Hill:	634	551	-83

Discussion followed on the short fall of stags culled in the NW Sub-Group which was identified as partly attributable to the lack of culling undertaken at Loch Choire. TC confirmed that notice had also recently been received from the owner of Loch Choire that the estate had withdrawn from the DMG.

Some members expressed concern on this in relation to possible impacts on designated sites and peatland at which point HD stated that NatureScot had ongoing concerns about the lack of management and the lack of communication from the estate regarding their proposed culls. HD also reported that NatureScot were considering next steps in terms of making use of current powers of regulation if no proposals or meaningful communication was received. Some members asked whether action may be taken during the current season and HD responded to say that given that no meaningful cull had been taken last season it was likely that intervention would be taken during the current season, possibly pre-Christmas.

HD also confirmed that the NatureScot focus would be on Loch Choire in isolation given the progress that had been made by other members in terms of protected areas in recent years. HD also confirmed that non-engagement by a landowner does not prevent NatureScot taking appropriate intervention and that the due process would be followed with every effort made to engage with an owner. The discussion then covered the potential for recouping costs incurred with undertaking intervention and welfare issues related to sheep flocks, with HD confirming that

NatureScot have a close working relationship with SGRPID and that a joined up approach in dealing with areas of concern is undertaken wherever possible.

The question was asked whether regulatory action would cover all deer and HD confirmed that no matter what the outcome, NatureScot communicate and be transparent with the DMG over any proposed actions and that hinds were the critical element of the deer population in the case of Loch Choire. It was recognised by members present that they had possibly benefitted from the short fall in the stag cull at Loch Choire and that a build-up of hinds on the property may be contributing to the movement of stags off the property.

The question was also asked whether letting natural processes take their course, with natural mortality taking the place of an arranged cull may be an alternative approach to which HD stated that where there are issues around welfare it is also NatureScots role to intervene and that their regulatory function extends to welfare.

5.2 Proposed Hind Culls

The proposed hind culls for 2022-23 were noted as follows:

ESDMG Proposed & Actual Culls 2022-23	
Estate	<i>Proposed Hind Cull</i>
Dalchork - Open Hill	6
Altnahara	20
Clebrig	75
Loch Choire (North)	70
Loch Choire (South)	180
Dalnessie	40
Ben Armine	60
Badanloch	100
Syre	0
NW Sub-Group:	551
Borrobol	60
Kildonan	120
Balnacoil	80
Dalreavoch	45
Tressady	100
Dunrobin	85
Gordonbush	100
Kintradwell	45
Morvich	20
SE Sub-Group:	655
West Garty	40
Crackaig	40
Torrish	40
Gartymore	40
E Sub-Group:	160
ESDMG Open Hill:	1,366

Comments were made that Summer 2022 had been a good calving season and that as hind numbers drop across the DMG area, calving rates are expected to rise leading to better recruitment. Reference was also made to densities across the group area and comment was made that given the density for Torrish exceeds the group average, this may bring a focus on the East Sub-Group area, given the NatureScot focus on 10 deer/km².

Discussion followed on difficulties experienced in terms of uplift of stag carcasses by game dealers towards the end of the stag season, particularly in Argyll. HD reported that at a meeting held last week it was recognised that a number of factors had caused issues but nothing indicated that there should be any ongoing issues. All present felt that they had been well served by Ardgay Game with regular uplifts when required.

5.3 Population Model – 2022-2027

TC reported that the starting figures (Spring 2022) within the new population model were based on the average of the population model figures and foot count figures, for Spring 2022, subject to slight adjustments based on local trends, as summarised in the table below:

East Sutherland Deer Management Group (ESDMG)						
Population Model:		2022 - 27				
Calving:		36%				
Recruitment:		33%				
Mortality:		2%				
Calf Sex Ratio:	Stags	45%				
	Hinds	55%				
Starting Population:						
Average of Population Model & Spring Count - 2022						
		Stags	Hinds	Calves	Totals	Density
2022	Spring Population	3,645	4,698	1,688	10,031	9.7

RR asked whether the density had been adjusted following the planting of new woodland schemes and TC confirmed that it had for some of the more recent schemes, such as Loch Choire and Kildonan, but not others. Discussion followed on the point that areas planted for woodland were normally the areas frequented by deer and there is no correlation between density and available wintering ground.

HD asked whether there had been any deduction in planar area for Loch Choire given their withdrawal from the DMG and lack of management over the last 12 months. TC confirmed that the only deduction for Loch Choire was in terms of the woodland areas post planting in 2020 and open water and that the estate continued to be included with a deer count undertaken this Spring, prior to the estate withdrawing from the DMG.

Discussion followed on performance of the population model and how it may interact with ground categorised as utilised by deer as produced by the Macauley Institute for ESDMG approximately 20 years ago. HD suggested that any HIA information that a DMG has is informative in discussions about population models and how that population has an impact on that ground.

TC also reported that most forest properties within the DMG area continued to report culls and that there appeared to be a significant number of stags being shot within these properties, which

appeared to contain very few, if any hinds. This would suggest that in some cases, fences were becoming more porous. TC confirmed that this cull data was not used within the population model.

TC then compared the current population model with the original 5 year population model prepared by Victor Clements in 2016, which showed that the current population showed that stag numbers were probably down and hinds numbers were up against the target population set for 2022, although the target density of <10 deer/km² had been achieved over the last 5 – 6 years. The decline in stag numbers could therefore be connected to the cull of up to 150 stags per annum within forest properties as well as deer strikes on Network Rail land. It was generally felt that there are also unreported culls of stags on croft land and possibly higher mortality amongst young males within the wider DMG area, leading to an ongoing leakage / loss of stags from ESDMG.

It was also suggested that there may be movement of stags between ESDMG and NDMG, across the Helmsdale but it was felt that this was not significant.

5.4 Proposed Foot Count – Spring 2023

It was proposed that a foot count for the whole DMG count should be undertaken between 20 - 25 March 2023 with the same count co-ordinators as in previous years.

TC confirmed that he would co-ordinate the East Sub-Group count between Gartymore, Torrish, West Garty and Crackaig.

5.5 Habitat Monitoring – Summer 2022

BL confirmed that Badanloch undertook further HIA in Summer 2022, across the whole estate and that impacts were no greater than in previous surveys. He also confirmed that surveys were being undertaken for peatland restoration.

MW confirmed that Borrobol had also undertaken HIA with more cranberry and bog asphodel identified than in previous years, but little bog cotton.

There was reluctance from some members to expand HIA surveys with JM confirming the no further surveys would be undertaken on Balnacoil given the habitat had improved noticeably over the last 5 years. He felt that the direction of travel with deer recovery is leading to a marked recovery in habitat. HD responded to say that NatureScot had a strong view given that they had raised the importance of HIA at DMG for many years and that they expected DMGs to have a co-ordinated programme of HIA so that they are able to demonstrate the picture across the DMG area as to how the impacts are looking. HD also said that in the case of properties such as Balnacoil that improvements identified by managers should be captured through HIA, given it supports discussion with outside agencies and informs management on the ground and that NatureScot expected HIA to be undertaken at DMG level moving forward, so that there is a level playing field across all DMGs. HD confirmed that in some DMGs 95% of members undertook HIA whereas in some DMGs the uptake was poor and these were generally where NatureScot focused attention given their concern over the lack of information. HD also explained that the Best Practice methodology is a light touch version which enables and informs adaptive management and provides managers with a quick sense check of what is happening on the ground as well as helping to understand trends over a number of years. HD also explained that when NatureScot undertook the last DMG Assessments in 2019, HIA was a critical part of the response to ScotGov on how the sector was performing. In moving forward, HD suggested it would be acceptable to consider approximately 10 plots per habitat per property so long as this approach is adopted by the whole

DMG rather than 30 plots per habitat per property. TC suggested that this could be rationalised to 30 plots per habitat type per sub-group to make it more manageable for the respective properties to which HD responded, after discussion, that if there is a clear demonstration that the DMG is gathering information on the impacts that deer are having, that may be acceptable to NatureScot, even if they are along a transect.

TC proposed that a schedule of habitat monitoring will be prepared prior to the next meeting, building on the HIA already undertaken by Badanloch, Borrobol, Kildonan and Gordonbush so that it is more manageable and an organised approach can be taken over a three year cycle.

6.0 Deer Management Plan Review

TC reported that following previous discussions regarding a DMP review / renewal, the only consultant who had expressed an interest in becoming involved was Victor Clements, the previous plan author. TC suggested that it may be sensible to keep a review / renewal on hold given the wider changes that may come in to play with the DWG report and legislation and to maintain the programme of two meetings a year with the circulation of minutes and reports as appropriate. This view was supported by RR and other members present.

TC also suggested that a GIS / mapping project is undertaken prior to undertaking a review to enable the classification of land more clearly within the DMG, to show the extent of open hill, enclosed woodland and standing water as key components. TC asked whether members may be prepared to share SAF shape files, which he can already see on the Rural Payments mapping portal. It was agreed that so long as this was kept simple and cost effective it would be a sensible exercise to undertake. HD stated that the key point is to keep the practical element of the DMP is kept up to date to enable and demonstrate effective management.

7.0 Woodland Creation & Expansion Schemes

No one present was aware of any new proposals.

8.0 Peatland Restoration Schemes

TC had been informed prior to the meeting that Badanloch were considering a PRS.

9.0 Financial Report

TC reported that the majority of invoices for 2021-22, sent out in September 2022 had now been settled in full. There was one debtor, who TC continues to chase.

TC reported that Loch Choire had withdrawn from the DMG after the invoices had been sent out, which would have an effect on DMG finances. He confirmed that he would ask ADMG for a discount on the 2021-22 levy as this had taken into the 5 year average cull for Loch Choire (note: Following a request ADMG issued a credit note for £605.49 in November 2022 to reflect the withdrawal of Loch Choire from ESDMG).

TC confirmed that the 2022-23 invoices would be circulated in the Spring and that a full financial report would be circulated prior to and discussed at the Spring 2023 meeting.

10.0 Venison Update

This had previously been discussed under s.5.2 – Proposed Hind Culls and it was agreed that all present had benefitted from a good collection service throughout the season.

Discussion followed on the use of non-lead ammunition, and TC recommended speaking to suppliers before the season to ensure that they can secure sufficient supplies of ammunition.

11.0 NatureScot Report

HD provided an update as follows:

- ScotGov have set up the Strategic Deer Board to take forward the recommendations of the DWG report. It has been recognised that the DWG recommendations were published before the Biodiversity / Climate Change declarations so the Board will have to consider how the recommendations sit with the declarations. This has led to four work streams:
 - Legislation
 - Regulation
 - Incentivisation
 - Operational Delivery
- Around all of this the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy has a target of preventing damage by 2030 and restoration by 2045.
- Stakeholder engagement for the changes and recommendations is being undertaken via the Deer Management Round Table.
- Density of 10 deer/km² is being used as a broad target above which deer are likely to have a detrimental impact on the natural environment, areas above this are likely to form the focus for NatureScot scrutiny.
- Counts by helicopter are continuing with work ongoing with other companies offering alternative solutions.
- NatureScot have been involved, along with ADMG and Scottish Environment Link in the Finding Common Ground project undertaken by Centre for Good Relations.

Steve Wheatley (SW), as the new Operations Officer for East Sutherland, introduced himself and provided a brief update as follows:

- Area Officers role is to deal with SSSIs and SACs with case work focusing on woodland creation and riparian planting.
- Peatland Restoration is an increasing area of work
- Wind developments and new telecoms masts remain significant areas of work undertaken
- SSSI consents are dealt with by SW, as well as monitoring of SSSI and other features
- Blanket bog and peatland is surveyed on a 10 year cycle with the next cycle due shortly, with visits scheduled for Badanloch and Loch Choire

12.0 ADMG Report

TC provided an update as follows:

- ADMG have been involved with various consultations, including Scottish Biodiversity and Land Reform / Net Zero Emissions
- Scottish Venison Association – work ongoing with streamlining SQWV and SVA with SVA publishing an SOI in July 2022 focused on achieving carbon net zero across Scottish Venison sector by 2035.
- Key messages – maintain momentum in delivery of deer management; provide support for capacity building through provision of information and training; identify opportunities to strengthen collaboration.
- Current projects:
 - DMG Assessments to be undertaken in 2023
 - DeerMap to help better understanding of deer movements across landscapes
- Events
 - Regional Meeting via Zoom - 6 December 2022,
 - ADMG AGM provisionally booked in Inverness for 22 March 2023, details to follow
- Meetings held with Lorna Slater on two occasions, as well as the Moorland Forum

13.0 AOCB

BL raised concern with increasing public access, HD mentioned worth speaking with Access Forum.

BL asked about the poor attendance at the meeting, TC reported that five apologies were received that morning and suggested that the Autumn Meeting could be held slightly later.

TC requested that information is supplied quickly, even by text if that is easier.

14.0 Date of Next Meeting

Tuesday 2 May, 10:30am at Kildonan Hall.