

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Practitioners Meeting**

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan
Friday, 25 February 2022**

Present

Sir Michael Wigan	- <i>Chair / Borrobol</i>	Robbie Rowantree	- <i>Gordonbush</i>
Andrew Mackay	- <i>Vice-Chair / Dalnessie</i>	Lorne MacNicol	- <i>Tressady</i>
John McMorran	- <i>Balnacoil</i>	Alex Plommer	- <i>Badanloch</i>
Brian Lyall	- <i>Badanloch</i>	Grant Symmers	- <i>Balnacoil</i>
James Urquhart	- <i>Dunrobin</i>	Richard Bain	- <i>Torrish</i>
Martin Grant	- <i>Kildonan</i>	Nicholas Bruneau	- <i>Badanloch</i>
John Macdonald	- <i>Borrobol</i>	Ruaridh Waugh	- <i>Ardgay Game</i>
Blair Colvin	- <i>Kintradwell</i>	Tom Chetwynd (TC)	- <i>Facilitator / Secretary</i>

1.0 Welcome

The Secretary welcomed those present to the AGM.

2.0 Apologies

Pieter Bakker	- <i>Vagastie</i>	Robert Flett	- <i>Crakaig</i>
Andrew Nicholson	- <i>Clebrig</i>	Robbie Milne	- <i>West Garty</i>
Ian Smith	- <i>Gartymore</i>	Derick Macaskill	- <i>FLS</i>

3.0 Minutes

The Minutes of the AGM held on Friday, 9 September 2021 were approved with no changes 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 Actual Culls – 2021-22

TC confirmed that cull data had been submitted by every estate within ESDMG and thanked everyone for submitting their cull data when requested. He confirmed that several estates and FLS were still culling under authorisations / general licences and that the cull information would be further updated at the beginning of April.

TC confirmed that the total cull figures for the 2021-22 season as follows:

ESDMG Actual Culls: 2021-22								
Estate	Red Deer				Proposed	Stag	Proposed	Hind
	Stags In Seas.	Hinds In Seas.	Calves	Total	Stag Cull	Difference	Hind Cull	Difference
NW Sub-Group:	158	350	111	619	209	-51	366	-16
SE Sub-Group:	393	719	255	1,367	375	18	770	-51
E Sub-Group:	63	100	25	188	50	13	150	-50
ESDMG Open Hill:	614	1,169	391	2,174	634	-20	1,286	-117

(Please note these figures have been updated following receipt of further information post meeting)

TC confirmed that the proposed cull targets were agreed at the meeting in September 2021, when they were all an increased marginally to take into account the increase in numbers shown in the working population model, and he thanked everyone for achieving a cull so close to the overall target.

Discussion followed on additional culling within the ESDMG area, particularly by crofters in the Rogart area and how these cull figures are reported. It was felt that given that culling is undertaken by non-members with no figures provided to ESDMG, it is difficult for estates in those areas to plan their annual culls accurately. TC reported that most forestry interests now report their culls to the group and that NatureScot may be able to provide cull information from other interests. It was suggested that greater confidence could be placed on the cull and count figures entered in the population model for the last five years in that if there has been little change in the overall figures the population model is probably already accounting for the additional cull element shot by crofters as marauders. It was also suggested that given the group tends to under cull stags, the main animals shot as marauders are probably stags and these may be being displaced by higher hind densities in certain arrears.

TC reported that he had a reasonable degree of confidence in the population model given that the spring count data returned over the last 3 years reflected the cull data and recruitment / mortality estimates put forward by members prior to the count. It was proposed that a greater understanding was needed of stag recruitment, the number of stags that were moving out of the group area and where they are being shot.

It was pointed out that in terms of the 2021-22 culls, the overall shortfall in terms of stags and hinds shot could partly be attributed to the lack of culling undertaken at Loch Choire, who were without a stalker after September 2021. Discussion followed on the provisions currently in place to encourage landowners to undertake culls under the Deer Act and provisions that may come forward under new deer legislation resulting from the Deer Working Group report, including statutory cull setting. It was recognised that action is probably more likely to be taken where there is a public interest aspect, such as in connections with DVC hotspots and environmental designations.

Some members reported that public access is increasing noticeably, particularly close to settlements, with dog walkers and cyclists now sometimes encountered on a daily basis. Mild weather early in the New Year also made hind culling tricky.

5.2 Spring Count – 2022

It was agreed that the foot count would be undertaken between 14 – 16 March 2022, weather permitting. Count co-ordinators were agreed as follows:

North-West - Andrew Mackay

South-East - John McMorran

East - Richard Bain

5.3 Habitat Monitoring

TC reminded members that HIA should continue to be undertaken, wherever possible. Several members suggested that they would undertake some monitoring in 2022 although some suggested that they may now leave it to the agencies to undertake HIA if they felt it was required, given that it was set up to look at impacts in the past, the goal posts being discussed by Scottish Government appear to be regularly changing and there was little apparent consideration and confidence in HIA data collected by deer managers. It was felt that greater weight was being placed on deer densities and that may be the best guidance for cull setting moving forward.

The Chair reported that he felt HIA could be of use to deer managers and that he been discussing HIA results with NatureScot recently, particularly regarding hoof prints in peat in 2021 during dry conditions. He pointed out that prints can last up for over four months during dry periods or disappear within 48 hours during period of heavy rain. From his experience, he suggested that if habitats are being monitored by estates habitat interpretation from other sources can be challenged and it was suggested that with this in mind it was worth continuing with the programme.

Gordonbush and Badanloch confirmed that they would undertake HIA in 2022.

Discussion followed on the overall area available to deer following the expansion of new native woodland areas across the DMG and the fact that some areas of over-wintering ground have now been enclosed by fencing. It was suggested by the Chair that the net area for each sub-group as well as for the DMG should be updated to show these changes.

5.4 Population Model

The relevance of foot counts and the likelihood of an aerial count were discussed and it was suggested that despite issues in some areas, ESDMG was performing in terms of managing deer numbers and densities. Loch Choire was mentioned as a potential problem area if sufficient culling is not undertaken in the 2022-23 season, particularly on the designated site areas.

The difference in numbers between the Spring 2022 population model and the original DMP population model is as follows:

Population Model - Comparison - Spring 2022			Whole Group				
DMP Target Population / Estimated Population / Foot Count			Stags	Hinds	Calves	Totals	Density
Spring 2022	DMP Target Population	Victor Clements - DMP-2017-22	4,148	4,200	1,405	9,753	9.6
Spring 2022	Estimated Population	Population Model	4,114	4,305	1,526	9,945	9.8
		Variance:	-34	105	121	192	

5.5 Public Interest

TC made members aware that DVCs were allegedly increasing on the A9 and several members confirmed that they had noted carcasses in the Culgower area. TC asked members to maintain a record of carcasses seen beside roads wherever possible.

Some members raised concern over the height of the newly installed fencing beside Network Rail land with more deer strikes identified on some sections of line. TC confirmed that he had met a local Network Rail rep and that advice had been offered on fine tuning the FOI for strike information in future. TC confirmed that he would continue collecting the deer strike information.

5.6 Training Requirements

RR confirmed that he had a requirement to organise an EFAW+F course run by Stewart Richardson, and he kindly agreed to notify members of when it may be held.

6.0 Woodland Expansion Schemes & Peatland Restoration Schemes

Kildonan confirmed that work on their new native woodland scheme was complete. TC mentioned that he had been informed that work was complete on the Loch Choire scheme and that he was aware that work was ongoing with a scheme at Clebrig.

The Chair asked BL about his observations on the peatland restoration work on Badanloch, and he confirmed that stags were using the rewetted areas for wallowing, particularly during dry periods, without any noticeable impacts. The point was made that whereas peatland areas were still “open” to deer, a standard requirement within restoration scheme contracts is that densities are reduced to 6 deer/km².

Discussion returned to the overall area enclosed within woodland and forestry schemes within ESDMG and the implications of fences beginning to fail at 15 – 25 years.

7.0 Venison Update

Ruaridh Waugh, Ardgay Game, attended the meeting and provided a snapshot of the market as follows:

- Demand is up, export is getting easier and frozen stocks are diminishing
- Market is more settled although prices are still at an all-time low
- More venison now being sold within UK, especially England, Ardgay now only export 35%
- Retail sales across Scotland are up 20% and London are up 30%
- Carcass volumes are currently relatively stable over Highland region although some estate culls have been increased in light of new native woodland schemes
- Venison has a good story and is being actively promoted by SG and SVP
- Reduction in deer numbers across Scotland is a concern to game dealers
- Now less game dealers present in UK, which is not good for competition
- Accreditation is attractive to consumers but not really available for venison
- 35% of meat arrives at Ardgay in 8-week period over red stag rut period, with rut getting later each year.
- General condition of deer appears to be getting better compared to 10 years ago, particularly with hinds.
- New regulations proposed by Europe are still a hurdle for exported meat
- Environmental Health and Police Scotland now more involved with game dealer premises

- Game dealers will only be asking for confirmation letters that non-toxic ammunition is used
- Ardgay Game are increasing production and have approx. 10% of the Scottish market
- Sustainability is key and the North of Scotland is key to carcass supply for Ardgay
- Prices for 2022-23 should increase but will be dependent on demand, frozen stocks in Europe, production numbers in Spain, Poland and New Zealand and stable economic conditions

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8.0 ADMG Report

TC reported that the next ADMG meeting will be held in Inverness on 23 March 2022 at Kingsmills Hotel.

9.0 NatureScot Report

No report was available.

10.0 AOCB

TC confirmed that invoicing for the DMG would be undertaken during the Spring.

11.0 Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed to move to a cycle of three meetings annually with a pre-count meeting, AGM in late Spring and a September to discuss stag and hind culls. The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 3 May 2022 at 10:30am at Kildonan Hall.