

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group  
Practitioners Meeting**

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan  
Tuesday, 3 May 2022**

**Present**

Sir Michael Wigan	- <i>Chair / Borrobol</i>	Grant Symmers	- <i>Balnacoil</i>
Andrew Mackay	- <i>Vice-Chair / Dalnessie</i>	Leigh Hague	- <i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>
John McMorran	- <i>Balnacoil</i>	Neil McCorquodale	- <i>Torrish</i>
Andrew Nicholson	- <i>Clebrig</i>	James Urquhart	- <i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>
Anna Nicholson	- <i>Clebrig</i>	Steven Andrews	- <i>Flow Country Partnership</i>
Brian Lyall	- <i>Badanloch</i>	Holly Deary	- <i>NatureScot</i>
John Macdonald	- <i>Borrobol</i>	Tom Chetwynd (TC)	- <i>Facilitator / Secretary</i>
Lorne MacNicol	- <i>Tressady</i>		

**1.0 Welcome**

TC, as Secretary welcomed those present to the Practitioners Meeting.

**2.0 Apologies**

Sir Algernon Heber-Percy	- <i>Badanloch</i>	Dr & Mrs Ryan	- <i>Dalnessie</i>
Lady Heber-Percy	- <i>Badanloch</i>	Richard Bain	- <i>Torrish</i>
Pieter Bakker	- <i>Altnaharra</i>	Derick Macaskill	- <i>FLS</i>
Ian Smith	- <i>Gartymore</i>	Martin Grant	- <i>Kildonan</i>

**3.0 Minutes**

The Minutes of the Practitioners Meeting held on Friday, 25 February 2022 were approved with no changes, proposed by John McMorran and seconded by Andrew Mackay.

**4.0 Matters Arising**

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

**5.0 Financial Report**

A copy of the financial report was circulated to all members prior to the meeting.

TC confirmed that the bank balance as at 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021 was £14,632.16, following which further subscriptions totalling £3,833.55 were received in late September and early October 2021.

Since then, two payments have been issued, the first two ADMG to cover two years of ADMG Levy and Subscription and the second to Chetwynd Rural to cover two years of facilitation and secretarial costs.

There is one outstanding debtor for the two year period 2019-20, 2020-21 amounting to £751.74, which is regularly chased.

The bank balance as 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022 stands at £960.11.

Invoicing for the current year will be undertaken shortly, in accordance with the budget circulated at the September 2021 meeting. TC confirmed that the financial year runs from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30 June to tie in with the stag season and ADMG.

## 6.0 Deer Management Plan

### 6.1 Spring Count

TC thanked everyone for undertaking the spring count and confirmed that all members undertook a count, with most counting between the agreed window of 14 – 16 March 2022.

A total of 9,981 deer were counted, as summarised in the following table:

	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Unclass.	Total	Density (deer/km <sup>2</sup> )	Est.Recruitment (%)
<b>NW Sub-Group</b>	929	1,107	402	881	<b>3,319</b>	8.6	36.3
<b>SE Sub-Group</b>	2,243	2,722	977	99	<b>6,041</b>	10.6	35.9
<b>E Sub-Group</b>	133	358	130	0	<b>621</b>	11.8	36.3
<b>Total:</b>	<b>3,305</b>	<b>4,187</b>	<b>1,509</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>9,981</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>36.0</b>

It was recognised that the extended count window of 5 – 30 March for the group as a whole is not ideal and that this needs to be narrowed in future counts.

TC confirmed that since the aerial count in Spring 2017, which returned 15,000 deer and the subsequent reduction cull in 2017-18, the population appears to have been maintained at around 10,000 deer for the last 3 – 4 years. This is in accordance with what was agreed within the DMP. The density has been maintained at approximately 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> for the last 3 years.

There was recognition from Holly Deary (HD), NatureScot, that the population model and the culls are delivering what was set out in the DMP and that there will be ongoing discussions in terms of what the appropriate densities will be for the DMG. The Chair asked HD what sort of densities Scottish Government ministers are indicating they would like in future. HD responded that SG aren't involved in that level of detail and that there will be a lot of focus on the Deer Working Group Report recommendation of 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> as an upper limit. HD also mentioned that whereas 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> is useful in determining what appropriate densities may be, but the impact data approach is always going to be more important in terms of what is an appropriate level of sustainable deer management is. HIA is the key measure in terms of determining appropriate densities and it is important that the group has confidence in the count information collected and entered in the population model so that it matches reality on the ground.

HD reported that the helicopter count programme is being reduced and that NatureScot will continue to collect HIA data from designated sites. Any HIA collected over the wider area unless NatureScot have concerns over a particular area.

Andrew Nicholson (AN) referred to his experience at Clebrig in that they have collected HIA data for several years showing low to medium impact whilst maintaining up to 14 deer/km<sup>2</sup>, and his concerns of how his approach and records could be interpreted by outside agencies. HD responded that so long as HIA continues to show low impacts and the densities are maintained at 8 - 9

deer/km<sup>2</sup>, a reasonable approach is likely to be taken. The Chair mentioned that he refers his HIA data to NatureScot and that a detailed judgement is provided by the Area Officer.

A discussion followed on HIA data with HD mentioning that the most useful way for NatureScot to receive data is through a whole DMG report based on their HIA annual cycle and that HIA data collected should continue to be a discussion point at DMG meetings.

Returning to the deer count data, TC pointed out that stag numbers appear to be dropping and that hind numbers increasing slightly, reflected both in conversations at the previous meeting and within the count data. TC also pointed out that 980 “unclassified” were returned between Clebrig, Dalnessie and Borrobol with the estates concerned confirming that these were predominantly hinds and calves. TC confirmed that these would be allocated between hinds and calves based on 36% recruitment being the average recorded for both the NW and SE sub-group areas.

TC reported that he had a feeling that the count was 300-500 stags short of what he expected numbers to be and both Dalnessie and Clebrig reported counting far higher numbers than they expected to, even after a significant hind cull in the case of the latter. Discussion followed on the lack of a cull at Loch Choire during the 2021-22 season and the levels of recruitment identified over the whole group.

The question was asked where the compulsion will be for people to be to manage deer on a property where deer management stalls for whatever reason. NatureScot confirmed that the compulsion will come from them where the collaborative approach fails to work properly. Concern was shown that the hard work undertaken by all over the last five years could be threatened by stalled management on a single property and a request was made to NatureScot to bring pressure to perform on Loch Choire, particularly in terms of avoiding animal welfare issues.

## **6.2 Population Model**

TC reported that the population model has now been running for 5 years, since the last aerial count undertaken in March 2017. The DMP target within the current plan is 9,700 deer with the population model and foot counts both indicating approximately 9,900 deer in the DMG as a whole. A new, revised population based on observations recorded over the last 5 years will be prepared this autumn at the same time as the review of the DMP.

## **6.3 Habitat Monitoring**

Following the earlier discussion on HIA (recorded in s.6.1 above), TC requested that those members undertaking HIA in Summer 2022 submit their data to the group so that a DMG level report can be prepared for discussion at an Autumn meeting and submission to NatureScot.

## **6.4 Proposed Culls**

Most members are proposing to undertake similar culls in 2022-23 to previous years. It was agreed that these would be discussed in more detail at the next meeting.

John McMorran (JM) asked what the target populations were intended to be in Year 10 of the DMP and whether further reductions were an objective after the Year 5 review. TC confirmed that the original objective was to front load the reduction cull in the first two years of the DMP (2016 – 2018) and thereafter maintain the densities achieved in Year 5, subject to adjustments in areas following the fencing off of new native woodland schemes, etc, and following collection and assessment of appropriate HIA data through to Year 10. HD mentioned that there may be

adjustments to appropriate densities within hotspots within the next five years to mitigate public interest issues such as agricultural damage and to avoid DVCs, etc.

## **7.0 Deer Management Plan**

The review of the DMP was discussed and TC agreed to circulate a list of contractors to all members with a summary of their specialisms and a short brief outlining what he felt may be required.

The Chair emphasised that any contractor should be familiar with the North of Scotland and have capacity to undertake the work satisfactorily.

## **8.0 Woodland Expansion & Peatland Restoration Scheme**

No members indicated that there were any new woodland expansion or peatland restorations projects under consideration.

TC emphasised the importance of undertaking an analysis of the net open range area of DMG as part of the DMP review process. The Chair pointed out that any woodlands now open to deer should be recorded as such, particularly where deer fencing is not being repaired or replaced.

The question was asked whether the IACS summary for each property could be used to determine the relevant areas of open hill, enclosed agricultural land, woodland and forestry as part of the DMP review. TC agreed to include this within the brief for the DMP review.

HD pointed out the review of the DMP should be straight forward and that it may be worthwhile to identify woodland expansion and peatland restoration opportunities within the DMG to inform future discussion. HD also pointed out that GIS mapping information is available on SiteLink (<https://sitelink.nature.scot/home>) to assist with this process which shows peat extent, depth and condition.

## **9.0 Flow Country Partnership**

Dr. Steven Andrews, The Highland Council, delivered a short presentation on The Flow Country and its bid for UNESCO World Heritage Status, the key points as follows:

- Project funded by The Flow Country Partnership, with background dating back to 1988 following concerns over forestry ploughing and planting in The Flow Country.
- Technical evaluation undertaken in 2020 and nomination to UNESCO prepared by Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport area.
- World Heritage is based on Outstanding Universal Value based on the criteria, protection and management of the feature.
- Flow Country nomination is based on natural rather than cultural criteria with focus on the blanket bog and its relevance for science with carbon studies – peat is up to 7m deep and formed over 12,000 years.
- Carbon sequestration, water quality, biodiversity and integrity are all vital characteristics.
- UNESCO require protection to be in place, through designations, they don't impose it.
- The management plan will contain policies which will be consulted with DMGs, etc.
- UNESCO supports low intensity grazing which is important for habitats but would wish to avoid damage to sensitive habitats / OUV and manage it down, there should not be any changes to current situation.
- UNESCO encourage communication between land managers and work with local business to support added value inscription can bring.

- Access for visitors would be encouraged but recognised that given sensitivity of The Flow Country this would require careful discussion.
- Technical evaluation accepted in 2020 and mapping and briefing now underway with consultation about to start before submission of bid at end of 2022.

Contact details: [steven.andrews@highland.gov.uk](mailto:steven.andrews@highland.gov.uk)

## **10.0 NatureScot Report**

HD provided the NatureScot report, the key details of which were as follows:

- Scottish Government have ambitious targets in terms of Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and in some areas that will be a reduction in deer numbers.
- There will be more focus on opportunities such as woodland and peatland restoration and hitting biodiversity targets which will lead to NatureScot taking a bolder and firmer approach.
- The drivers of public interest remain peatland, woodland, agricultural damage, public safety and deer densities.
- Trials of thermal imaging sights ongoing and results will be fed in to review of all DWG recommendations.
- Public consultation will be undertaken before legislative change.
- Drone trials ongoing with significant boosts in technology coming forward. There is no requirement to request consent on using airspace so long as drones are in line of sight.
- ESDMG is unlikely to have a further aerial count within next three years and drones are unlikely to be in a position to operate at DMG level. TC requested an indication of potential timescales for next count.
- If statutory cull setting comes in to play it may be implemented across Scotland but only after legislative change.
- Use of copper bullets is being led by consumers who are leading the game dealers although there are recommendations within the DWG report for a new firearms order. Discussion followed on Ardgay Game's approach to lead v non-lead and the signing of declarations.

## **11.0 ADMG Report**

TC provided an ADMG update, key points as follows:

- AGM held in Inverness on 23 March 2022, with update from NatureScot on plans for deer management. Clear message from Scottish Government: they want fewer deer and a reduction in habitat loss. NatureScot recognises that they need deer managers to help deliver SGs ambitious targets for climate change mitigation and avoiding habitat loss. It is recognised that DMGs are playing a valuable part in this process.
- Venison demand should increase with corresponding increase in price. ADMG advise all members to speak to their game-dealer to clarify ammunition and collections.
- The ADMG Assessment Process and Health Checks are going to be rolled out to DMGs to continue monitoring progress.
- The development of DeerMAP by JHI for the predictive modelling of deer movements is still underway.
- Project underway to assess greenhouse gas emissions and carbon emissions from deer and deer management.

- ADMG and Scottish Environment Link are meeting in August as part of the Common Ground project being undertaken by the Centre for Good Relations. This is about breaking down the barriers between conservation interests and deer managers when discussing deer management at landscape scale.

## **12.0 AOCB**

None

## **13.0 Date of Next Meeting**

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2022 10.30 am at Kildonan Hall