

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Spring Meeting & AGM**

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan
Tuesday 2 May 2023**

Present

Sir Michael Wigan	MW	- Chair / Borrobol	Jamie Hammond	JH	- NatureScot
John McMorran	JM	- Balnacoil	Grant Symmers	GS	- Balnacoil
Brian Lyall	BL	- Badanloch	Andre Mackay	AM	- Dalnessie
Robbie Rowantree	RR	- Gordonbush	Blair Colvin	BC	- Kintradwell
Andrew Nicholson	AN	- Clebrig	Pieter Bakker	PB	- Altnaharra
Anna Nicholson	AN	- Clebrig	Martin Grant	MG	- Kildonan
Richard Bain	RB	- Torrish	James Urquhart	JU	- Dunrobin / Ben Armine
John MacDonald	JM	- Borrobol	Emily Claydon	EC	- Forestry Land Scotland
Jon King	JK	- Loch Choire	Megan Bregazzi	MB	- Forestry Land Scotland
Duncan Bentley	DB	- Achentoul	Lorne MacNicol	LM	- Tressady
Steve Wheatley	SW	- NatureScot	Tom Chetwynd	TC	- Facilitator / Secretary

1.0 Welcome

TC welcomed those present to the Spring Meeting & AGM.

2.0 Apologies

Dr & Mrs Ryan	- Dalnessie	
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3.0 Minutes

The Minutes of the Autumn Meeting held on Thursday 27 October 2022 were approved with no changes, proposed by Sir Michael Wigan and seconded by Martin Grant.

4.0 Matters Arising

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

5.0 Chairmans Report

Sir Michael made mention of the wintery conditions experienced within East Sutherland and the implications that this may have had for mortality, particularly stags and recruitment. He emphasised the importance of the DMG spring count in assessing these factors and asked that in all members continue to bear in mind the importance of undertaking a co-ordinated count on the nominated day. Discussion followed on the benefits of a rigorous count utilising the technology now widely available, including thermals, better optics and machinery and unless there was a whiteout there should be no change from the nominated day. It was recognised that ultimately, it was within the members interests to try and ensure that the foot count data collected annually by the DMG corresponds as closely as possible with any future helicopter counts undertaken by agencies.

6.0 Deer Management Plan

6.1 Actual Culls – 2022 – 23 Season

Although the 2022 stag cull had been discussed at the October 2022 meeting, further discussion was held for the benefit of those who were not present at the last meeting.

Comments were made about the disruption following the pylon line to Creag Rhiabach wind farm and the movement of stags into Dalchork Forest following a section of fence being left open by peatland restoration contractors. TC asked MB to try and ensure that the eastern march fence to Dalchork is properly maintained.

Hind culls had been completed by all members as planned, some with the normal challenges such as weather conditions during the winter months. The final cull returns provided by members for the 2022-23 season were as follows:

ESDMG Actual Culls: 2022-23				
Estate	Red Deer			
	Total Stags	Total Hinds	Total Calves	Total
Dalchork - Open Hill (FLS)	31	20	5	56
Altnahara	0	13	7	20
Clebrig	31	85	25	141
Loch Choire - North	5	157	46	208
Loch Choire - South				0
Dalnessie	28	31	12	71
Ben Armine	38	35	14	87
Badanloch	22	79	36	137
Syre	0	0	0	0
NW Sub-Group:	155	420	145	720
Borrobol	70	64	16	150
Kildonan	89	108	28	225
Balnacoil	50	83	29	162
Dalreavoch	34	37	12	83
Tressady	48	96	56	200
Dunrobin	36	53	15	104
Gordonbush	42	102	35	179
Kintradwell	27	39	13	79
Morvich	25	18	9	52
SE Sub-Group:	421	600	213	1,234
West Garty	0	26	7	33
Crackaig	22	28	13	63
Torrish	20	34	7	61
Gartymore	20	0	0	20
E Sub-Group:	62	88	27	177
ESDMG Open Hill:	638	1,108	385	2,131

Jamie Hammond (JH), NatureScot, provided an update at this point on the process they had undertaken at Loch Choire over the previous year as well as the s.10 emergency control measures undertaken in Winter 2022 and Spring 2023.

An aerial count was undertaken by NatureScot in November 2022, which showed 1,656 deer on Loch Choire, representing a density of 13/km².

Following this count a s.10(2) emergency measures notice was served on Loch Choire in December 2022 which progressed to a s.10(4) in early January 2023, following which a NatureScot team, led by JH visited the estate and met with Jon King, who had just started working there.

Over the course of the next month, the estate and NatureScot undertook a co-ordinated cull of predominantly hinds and calves across the open range on Loch Choire, resulting in an overall cull of 5 stags, 157 hinds and 46 calves, a total of 208 deer.

JH confirmed good communications has been maintained with the estate team throughout the operation and that the cull had been undertaken across all parts of Loch Choire, with a focus on the designated sites. The cull had incurred 45 NatureScot staff days in total, incurring a cost of £16,000 and the venison from the cull had been retained by NatureScot, the sale of which covered 50% of these costs.

JH confirmed that the next step was for NatureScot to secure a s.7 control agreement with Loch Choire, ideally from July 2023, which would provide an agreed 5-year deer management plan for the estate. Once this agreement was in place, a further helicopter count of Loch Choire and possibly the whole ESDMG area would be undertaken.

Various members expressed concern over the costs incurred with the s.10 and felt that it rewarded poor performance in terms of landowners meeting their responsibilities in terms of deer management. JH mentioned that this issue had been identified by the Strategic Deer Board, who were being kept updated on the Loch Choire operation and that the experience there was likely to inform proposed changes to deer management across Scotland so that future legislation is better aligned to close loop-holes evident in cost recovery, cross compliance and grant funding issues surrounding deer management from both Scottish Forestry and SGRPID.

JH went on to state that if the owner of Loch Choire declined to enter a s.7 control agreement it was likely that NatureScot would progress to a s.8 control scheme to ensure that deer management was undertaken satisfactorily across the estate in future, which would also enable NatureScot to recover costs and could lead to a criminal record for the owner, and that there was a political will to follow this route.

At this point, AN welcomed JK from Loch Choire to the meeting and recognised that he was attending the meeting on a voluntary basis given that the estate was no longer a member of ESDMG. AN also pointed out that whatever happened on Loch Choire had potential knock-on effects across a wider area and that ESDMG were incurring significant costs in dealing with Loch Choire and that these should also be recoverable if a control scheme was implemented. TC stated that if a deer count was to be undertaken of Loch Choire, rather than the wider DMG, which was preferred, NatureScot should ensure that this is undertaken across those properties forming part of Ben Klibreck SSSI so that sight is not lost of the designated site and the work already undertaken to secure its condition.

6.2 Foot Counts – Spring 2023

Most members had managed to undertake a foot count in Spring 2023, with the majority counting during April. It was noted that an aerial count of Loch Choire and the surrounding ground had also been undertaken by NatureScot on 24 November 2022, as a pre-requisite of proposed regulatory action. This data had already been provided to the DMG. Given gaps in the count data and the staggered approach to counting, the key message to be taken from the group data was that recruitment, as at mid-April ranged from 29% - 34% for the group as a whole.

The count data collected and provided by members for Spring 2023 was as follows:

ESDMG										
Red Deer Count - Spring 2023										
Ref	Estate	Area ha.	Count Date	Stags	Knobbers	Hinds	Calves	Total	Est. Density deer/km2	Est. Recruit %
1	Dalchork	1,950							0.0	0.0
2	Altnahara	1,212							0.0	
3	Clebrig	4,689							0.0	
4	Loch Choire	11,700	24-Nov-22	629	0	779	248	1,656	14.2	31.8
	Loch Choire	11,700	Spring 2023**	624	0	622	202	1,448	12.4	32.5
5	Dalnessie	5,029							0.0	28.0
6	Ben Armine	8,708	01-Apr-23	231	0	107	30	368	4.2	28.0
7	Badanloch	5,160	01-Mar-23	57	64	414	168	703	13.6	40.6
8	Syre									0.0
	NW Sub-Group:	38,448		912	64	1,143	400	2,519	9.9	35.0
9	Borrobol	8,819	10-Apr-23	451	0	241	74	766	8.7	30.7
10	Kildonan	7,885	10-Apr-23	384	40	533	110	1,067	13.5	20.6
11	Balnacoil	7,409							0.0	
12	Dalreavoch	5,748	01-Apr-23	203	0	121	36	360	6.3	29.8
13	Tressady	8,745	14-Apr-23	187	29	498	187	901	10.3	37.6
14	Dunrobin	7,609	01-Apr-23	245	0	286	132	663	8.7	46.2
15	Gordonbush	5,687							0.0	34.0
16	Kintradwell	3,200	10-Apr-23	240	27	223	68	558	17.4	30.5
17	Morvich	1,970	17-Apr-23	65	14	50	32	161	8.2	64.0
	SE Sub-Group:	57,072		1,775	110	1,952	639	4,476	10.2	32.7
18	West Garty	1,179							0.0	
19	Crackaig	1,514	21-Apr-23	54	0	98	28	180	11.9	28.6
20	Torrish	1,163	24-Apr-23	12	0	104	31	147	12.6	29.8
21	Gartymore	1,411							0.0	
	E Sub-Group:	5,267		66	0	202	59	327	12.2	29.2
	Total:	100,787		2,753	174	3,297	1,098	7,322	10.1	33.3
			Spring 2023**	November 2022 count data less culls undertaken to 15 February 2023						

Following the Spring Meeting, a request was received from the owner of Loch Choire to show the count data collected by NatureScot in November 2022 with an adjustment to show the culls undertaken during the 2022-23 Season by both the estate team and NatureScot under s.10. Both sets of count figures have now been included within the table.

The importance of undertaking a co-ordinated Spring Count for the DMG was re-emphasised by the Chair.

6.3 Population Model

The population model for the group, as circulated prior to the meeting was discussed in detail by those present.

TC stated that the DMG as a whole was broadly in line with both the estimated and target population for Spring 2027, shown in the population model, both showing 9.5 – 10 deer/km².

The modelled population for Spring 2023 compared to the estimated Spring 2027 population and the Target Population for Spring 2027 for the group as a whole is currently as follows:

East Sutherland Deer Management Group (ESDMG)						
Population Model: 2022 - 27		Stags	Hinds	Calves	Totals	Density
2023	Spring Population - as per Pop Model	3,691	4,428	1,591	9,710	9.3
2027	Estimated Spring Population - as per Pop Model	3,749	4,070	1,475	9,295	8.9
2027	DMP Target - Spring Population	4,260	4,079	1,432	9,771	9.3

6.4 Proposed Culls – 2023 – 24 Season

Following discussion on the population model, members confirmed their provisional culls and bookings for the 2023-24 season, which were broadly in line with the previous season. Several members suggested that they would be looking to increase their hind culls marginally based on what they had counted on the ground this Spring and JK confirmed that the cull undertaken at Loch Choire would be based on proposals put forward by NatureScot. The proposed culls put forward for 2023-24 were as follows:

Estate Proposed Culls 2023-24	Proposed Stag Cull	Proposed Hind Cull
Dalchork - Open Hill	35	20
Altnahara	0	10
Clebrig	25	80
Loch Choire - North	0	0
Loch Choire - South	40	100
Dalnessie	30	35
Ben Armine	30	60
Badanloch	20	100
Syre	0	0
NW Sub-Group:	180	405
Borrobol	60	65
Kildonan	70	100
Balnacoil	45	85
Dalreavoch	30	45
Tressady	45	100
Dunrobin	35	85
Gordonbush	37	100
Kintradwell	27	40
Morvich	20	20
SE Sub-Group:	369	640
West Garty	10	30
Crackaig	20	20
Torrish	10	30
Gartymore	10	20
E Sub-Group:	50	100
ESDMG Open Hill:	599	1,145

TC mentioned that it was clear from the population model that stags were continuing to be “lost” to ESDMG in terms of emigration and from being culled on non-member properties and within forest properties, where deer are not always present, as evidenced through NatureScot cull returns. This was leading to the drop off on stag numbers within the population model, over and above members culls.

6.5 Habitat Monitoring

Discussion followed on the range of plans showing the various habitat types across the DMG, prior to the meeting. This showed the DMG comprises approximately 20% dwarf shrub heath, 50% blanket bog as the key habitats.

TC suggested that the DMG adopt a monitoring programme based on 10 plots per habitat per estate to ease the workload and possibly extend the monitoring programme. Following discussion it was decided that each estate should continue with the programmes that they currently they are and it was evident that no members were currently submitting HIA data to NatureScot. RR asked that ADMG look for a methodology for HIA which is far more responsive in terms of providing feedback on habitat condition to deer management. Some members felt that given the DMG had reduced from 14 deer/km² to under 10 deer/km² in the last 5 years, this was sufficient evidence, maintained through the cull and count data and the population model that the DMG was heading in the right direction, even if it was based on political opinion than science.

6.6 Administrative Calendar

TC referred to the administrative calendar circulated with the meeting papers, which outlined when the key DMG actions would arise.

7.0 Deer Management Plan

7.1 Habitat Cover & Deer Densities

TC referred to the landcover map prepared by Space Intelligence which was circulated prior to the meeting in response to requests by members at previous meetings who wanted to better understand the habitat composition throughout the DMG.

BL pointed out that the data was incomplete given that it did not show the latest woodland schemes on both Loch Choire and Kildonan. RR raised the point that with an increase in woodland cover it was likely that there would be an increase in Sika numbers across the DMG, which were already present in much of the existing woodland.

Discussion followed on riparian woodland and the complexities of planting and establishing areas.

7.2 DMP Review & Update

Discussion was held on the detailed minutes recording the count and cull programmes undertaken by the DMG, combined with the information prepared for each meeting and it was felt that this was possibly a better approach to maintain rather than incurring cost on redrafting the Deer Management Plan at this stage.

8.0 Woodland Expansion & Peatland Restoration Schemes

There were no details provided for proposed new woodland expansion and peatland restoration projects within the DMG.

9.0 Financial Report

TC reported that the majority of subscriptions had been paid for 2022-23 and asked that those that were outstanding could be brought up to date by the end of May 2023. The financial statement circulated prior the meeting showed that the bank balance as at 28 April 2023 stood at £16,654.87 and that following receipt of the outstanding subscriptions all creditors could be paid.

The anticipated bank balance following receipt of all subscriptions and payment of all outstanding accounts would be £332.34.

10.0 ADMG Report

TC reported that ADMG have been involved with various consultations, including the Forestry Grant Scheme, Land Rights and Responsibilities and Biodiversity Strategy.

In terms of venison, Scottish Venison Association (SVA) had launched a statement of intent to achieve carbon net zero across the Scottish venison industry.

ADMG have met with the Strategic Deer Board on various occasions.

An ADMG health check was proposed for 2023 and the DeerMap project and The Finding the Common Ground project were both ongoing, with ADMG involvement in both.

ADMG will be holding an open day at Glenfeshie on 28 June 2023, providing an opportunity to view some of the work undertaken by Wildland Ltd.

Key messages from ADMG included to maintain an eye on deer densities, particularly where they are over 10 deer/km², which ESDMG has achieved and to continue to collaborate in deer management.

The Deer People book written by Richard Cooke and Ian MacGillivray was helping to fund placements abroad for people involved in deer management and applications are invited.

11.0 NatureScot Report

JH reported that the Strategic Deer Board are reflecting on the 99 recommendations made by the Deer Working Group report approved by Scottish Government. The NatureScot focus is currently on deer management within the National Parks, the West Coast rainforest and sites where regulatory action is current or pending. Generally, the focus was off the open range except in areas of higher densities and higher impacts or in agricultural areas or within designated sites.

In terms of legislation the Deer Working Group recommendations these are due to be taken forward, either in primary or secondary legislation in due course with recommendations for image intensifying, night sights, minimum bullet weights and the male deer seasons already being carried forward as new orders, possibly in Autumn / Winter 2023.

NatureScot continue to review methods for deer counting including the use of satellites, fixed wind imagery, AI technology, drones, with work ongoing.

SW mentioned that he was currently undertaking surveys of SSSIs focusing on blanket bog, starting with Loch Choire and moving on to Skinsdale Peatlands before looking at Ben Kilbreck later in the year.

12.0 AOCB

RR mentioned a report prepared by Ben Harrower, a drone operator, for Natural England which showed fallow densities of 55/km² and Muntjac at 200/km² in England, which puts Scottish deer densities into perspective.

13.0 Date of Next Meeting

Monday 6 November 2023 at Kildonan Hall at 10:30am