

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan**  
**Tuesday 7 May 2024**

**Present**

Sir Michael Wigan	MW	<i>Chair/Borrobol</i>	Martin Grant	MG	<i>Kildonan</i>
Daniel Logie	DL	<i>Balnacoil</i>	Jon King	JK	<i>Loch Choire</i>
Blair Colvin	BC	<i>Kintradwell</i>	Lorne MacNicol	LM	<i>Tressady</i>
James Urquhart	JU	<i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>	Anna Nicholson	AN	<i>Clebrig</i>
Robbie Rowantree	RR	<i>Gordonbush</i>	Andrew Nicholson	AN	<i>Clebrig</i>
Leigh Hague	LH	<i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>	Megan Bregazzi	MB	<i>FLS</i>
Andrew Mackay	AM	<i>Dalnessie</i>	Jamie Hammond	JH	<i>NatureScot</i>
Pieter Bakker	PB	<i>Altnaharra</i>	David Patterson	DP	<i>NatureScot</i>
Brain Lyall	BL	<i>Badanloch</i>	Tom Chetwynd	TC	<i>Facilitator / Secretary</i>

**1.0 Welcome**

TC welcomed those present to the Spring Meeting - 2024.

**2.0 Apologies**

Sir Algernon Heber-Percy	Badanloch	Lady Heber-Percy	Badanloch
John MacDonald	Borrobol		

**3.0 Minutes**

The Minutes of both the Spring Meeting – 2023 (2 May 2023) and the Practitioners Meeting – 2024 (21 February 2024) were circulated prior to the meeting.

It was noted that David Patterson, NatureScot, was present at the Practitioners Meeting – 2024 and his name had been omitted and no other amendments were proposed.

The Minutes of the Spring Meeting – 2023 were proposed by MG and seconded by AM.

The Minutes of the Practitioners Meeting – 2024 were proposed by RR and seconded by MG.

**4.0 Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

## **5.0 Chairmans Report**

The Chair provided an update on changes in the political scene, the proposal to introduce Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders, the two-day forum arranged by Kate Forbes to discuss Muirburn with invited practitioners, responses to proposed legislation, particularly by ADMG, which he supported.

The Chair felt it was important to recognise the employment maintained by deer management, that deer management costs money and that deer managers should be supported financially more widely to undertake the work required by Scottish Government through the habitat budget rather than venison incentives.

The Chair made mention of the Common Ground Forum promoted by ADMG, which he supported, the James Hutton Life Cycle analysis of the carbon footprint of deer, which showed that wild deer had a lower carbon footprint than other livestock and protein sources and the spread of plantation of forestry in the uplands, the budget for which has been reduced.

## **6.0 Financial Report**

TC referred to the financial position and annual budget for the DMG circulated prior to the meeting and reported that following the receipt of outstanding subscriptions and the settlement of outstanding invoices in 2023 the bank balance remained at £342.35 as at 30 April 2024. He confirmed that subscription invoices for 2023-24 had not been issued and would be issued shortly.

The proposed annual budgets for 2023-24 and 2024-25 were then discussed and TC explained how they had been prepared, the elements included and why costs to the DMG were increasing. AN commented that continuity of TC as facilitator was important given his long-term involvement in the DMG and involvement in other DMGs and the budget was accepted by those present, with no further comments.

A comment was raised by RR about updating the DMG website on the ADMG portal, which was noted, with no objection raised by those present to estate count and cull information being published on the website.

## **7.0 Deer Management Plan**

### **7.1 Final Culls – 2023-24 Season**

There were no further comments regarding the 2023-24 season discussed previously at the Practitioners Meeting in February 2024.

### **7.2 Foot Count – Spring 2024**

TC explained that all estates had managed to count on the agreed dates and had reported their data to the DMG.

The overall figures were as follows:

NW Sub-Group:	3,004
SE Sub-Group:	5,796
E Group:	531
<b>ESDMG Total:</b>	<b>9,331</b>

Discussion followed on possible movements of deer between count areas, the figures for Loch Choire and how the overall figures for each sub-group were generally reflected within the population model. Based on the March 2024 count for the DMG area overall the density is estimated to stand at 9.3 deer/km<sup>2</sup>.

Further discussion followed on DVCs on the A9 section and JH commented on a project being undertaken by NatureScot with Local Authority and Police Scotland input which has identified the A9 stretch south of Helmsdale as one of the top 10 blackspots for DVCs on the trunk road network within Scotland.

TC mentioned that West Garty had prepared a deer management statement in support of a proposed woodland expansion scheme which highlighted the increased risk of DVCs in light of new fencelines adjacent to the A9, which will be mitigated by a reduction / compensation cull across the property should the scheme proceed.

### **7.3 Population Model**

The population model circulated prior to the meeting was discussed, with TC noting that the E Sub-Group was showing an increase in numbers against the model whereas the other two groups were consistent with the model.

The Chair asked JH what the NatureScot view of the proposed DMG target density for Spring 2027 at 9.3 deer/km<sup>2</sup> was, and he responded that although the 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> density published by ScotGov was not a target expectation by remaining below that figure the DMG was, from a NatureScot perspective, not of high concern.

### **7.4 Habitat Monitoring – Spring / Summer 2024**

The HIA survey programme had previously been discussed at the February 2024 meeting with no further comments made.

RR mentioned that he had attended a WHIA-Lite training day and he was aware of a recent drone count of a woodland property where greater numbers of Sika were identified than expected. The continuing focus on reducing red deer on the open range is, in his opinion, creating ideal habitat for the spread of non-native species such as Sika, which must be taken into account by NatureScot. He also mentioned the spread of Sitka regen across peatland restoration areas was an issue and an additional, unforeseen cost in addressing.

Discussion followed on the value of continuing with HIA surveys and TC encouraged all to continue with surveys, even if it is only used to inform estate level management decisions. The Chair reiterated his point that in his view any future funding directed to deer management is likely to be linked to habitat management which in turn will be dependent on HIA survey data as well as cull returns, which is already the case with AECS schemes.

#### **7.5 Proposed Culls – 2024-25 Season**

Proposed culls for the season ahead were discussed with most present suggesting that were going to proceed at similar levels to last season, with some indicating that they may increase hind culls to take into account rising numbers.

#### **7.5 Deer Management Plan – Review & Update**

The current deer management plan runs to 2025. TC proposed continuing to use the minutes as a form of annual update to the working plan and to review the situation again in Spring 2025.

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

JU mentioned that Sutherland Estates were considering a further PRS.

RR mentioned that SSEN were investigating routes for the Spittal – Beaully infrastructure project, which would lead to disruptions to deer management at some point.

### **9.0 NatureScot Report**

JH delivered the update, including recognition of concerns around DMNROs and extensions to female seasons, changes in government ministers while emphasising that mitigating climate change and biodiversity loss will remain on the political agenda. Changes to deer legislation will continue to proceed within the current parliament, with a bill to be published at some point when greater detail will become apparent.

JH mentioned the proposed incentive schemes to be delivered through pilot schemes further south, effectively paying people to shoot deer. One will be in the lowlands and one focused on Sika, primarily female deer, which will provide a guide on how future incentives may be delivered.

Further funding may also be available for capital infrastructure and larders, which is likely to be focused on the Cairngorms and lowland areas.

The update on Loch Choire covered the process followed by NatureScot since the February 2024 meeting which included a further approach to secure a s.7 agreement in March 2024. No response was received by the deadline so the NatureScot Board have approved progression to a s.8 control scheme, which now requires ministerial sign-off. If this is signed off by the Minister, the proposed scheme will be circulated to statutory interested parties, including the DMG, with a 28-day period for objections. If no further objections are received within this period the s.8 will go live, and this will seek a Spring density on Loch Choire of 7.5 deer/km<sup>2</sup> within a specified time frame.

A deer count of Loch Choire will be built into the programme and it has been identified by NatureScot that it would be appropriate to count the wider ESDMG area as part of that programme.

The appeals process to the Scottish Land Court was outlined as well as the ability for NatureScot to recover costs from the estate if matters do progress to a s.8 control scheme. It was also explained that all culls undertaken on Loch Choire will be based on the November 2022 aerial count, population models, any new count data and the proposal under the Deer Management Plan to reduce the density to 7.5 deer/km<sup>2</sup>.

Discussion followed on deer numbers and culls on ground adjoining the south-west end of Loch Choire, particularly on the open hill section of FLS Dalchork where numbers culled have been consistent in recent years. MB responded that the open hill cull is intended to keep deer groups moving in order to avoid impacts to the SSSI, whereas the main FLS culling effort was predominantly focused on Sika within Dalchork Forest.

AN stated that Clebrig, as a neighbour of Loch Choire, with the shared population of deer was delighted that JK was present at the meeting and that he would support any actions he was undertaking and asked that in the event of regulatory action that the focus was extended to all deer on Loch Choire and not just on stags on the most accessible and best areas of grazing.

TC referred to the population model for the NW Sub-Group and suggested that consideration should be given to reducing the stag cull within that area. TC also asked JH how the contributions to costs of a proposed aerial count for the whole DMG may be treated by NatureScot. JH responded that counting will be essential for informing any control scheme and given that ESDMG are due a further aerial count it was likely that NatureScot will meet the full costs of the count, given it would also continue to support the objectives of the wider DMG membership and enable an equitable way forward in the event of any control scheme.

TC delivered the ADMG report, including their concerns over proposed DMNROs, venison subsidies, the Deer People project offering overseas placements for people involved in deer management, the volunteer mountain hare scheme being run by GWCT and Leigh Hague's research dissertation into deer stalkers attitudes on developing Scotlands deer policy and rural identity. LH provided a brief update on this with a request to complete the survey which will be circulated to members via the DMG.

## **11. AOCB**

RR mentioned Professor Rory Putman's new book – British Deer and their Management – A Personal Reflection, which is available online.

BL mentioned that Badanloch have had issues with tourists operating drones from the roadside and moving deer. JH said that drones are an issue with deer generally and an update to BPG is being prepared, although this will not apply to tourists.

## **12. Date of Next Meeting**

Tuesday 18 February 2025 at Kildonan Hall at 11:00hrs