

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Practitioners Meeting**

**Kildonan Hall, Kildonan
Wednesday 21 February 2024**

Present

Sir Michael Wigan	MW	• Chair / Borrobol	Jamie Hammond	JH	• NatureScot
Brian Lyall	BL	• Badanloch	Alex Plommer	AP	• Badanloch
Daniel Logie	DL	• Balnacoll	Andrew Mackay	AM	• Dalnessie
Robbie Rowantree	RR	• Gordonbush	Blair Colvin	BC	• Kintradwell
Richard Bain	RB	• Torrish	Pieter Bakker	PB	• Vagastie
Jon King	JK	• Loch Choire	Martin Grant	MG	• Kildonan
Duncan Bentley	DB	• Achentoul	Ali Grant	AG	• Gartymore
James Urquhart	JU	• Ben Armine	Leigh Hague	LH	• Ben Armine
David Walker	AW	• Forestry & Land Scotland	Andrew Robinson	AR	• Forestry & Land Scotland
Megan Bregazzi	MB	• FLS			
Ian MacDonald	IM	• Clebrig	Tom Parker	TP	• Torrish
Anastasia Young	AY	• Sutherland Estates	Tom Chetwynd	TC	• Facilitator Secretary /

1.0 Welcome

TC welcomed those present to the Practitioners Meeting.

2.0 Apologies

Lorne Macnicol	• Tressady	John Macdonald	• Borrobol
Dr & Mrs Ryan	• Dalnessie	Robert Flett	• Crackaig
Donald Sherwood	• West Garty	Andrew Nicholson	• Clebrig

3.0 Minutes

No minutes were presented for approval.

4.0 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5.0 Chairmans Report

Sir Michael made mention of the weather during the winter months and challenging conditions when culling deer over the winter months.

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6.0 Deer Management

6.1 Actual Culls – 2023-24 Season

TC reported that all members had provided responses to the survey and that the overall culls for the 2023-24 season were as follows:

Estate Actual Culls 2023-24	Red Deer			
	Total Stags	Total Hinds	Calves	Total
Dalchork - Open Hill	23	10	7	40
Altnahara	4	14	9	27
Clebrig	22	40	14	76
Loch Choire - North				0
Loch Choire - South	138	110	42	290
Dalnessie	34	40	8	82
Ben Armine	36	56	18	110
Badanloch	15	86	34	135
Syre	0	0	0	0
NW Sub-Group:	272	356	132	760
Borrobol	49	70	10	129
Kildonan	72	99	30	201
Balnacoil	38	76	15	129
Dalreavoch	35	45	21	101
Tressady	56	107	72	235
Dunrobin	41	106	42	189
Gordonbush	36	93	33	162
Kintradwell	28	39	8	75
Morvich	24	20	5	49
SE Sub-Group:	379	655	236	1,270
West Garty	24	45	16	85
Crackaig	29	35	9	73
Torrish	10	33	9	52
Gartymore	23	53	10	86
E Sub-Group:	86	166	44	296
ESDMG Open Hill:	737	1,177	412	2,326

(**Note:** this schedule was updated following the meeting to reflect further information)

RR thanked all the stalkers within ESDMG for an exemplary effort, having culled far more hinds than stags, which was helping with managing stag:hind ratios across the DMG. Yeld hinds were in good condition and milk hinds were poor over the season. This was echoed by a number of other members who reported a good stag season with exceptional weights for stags in some areas and a good start to the hind season, with condition dropping off from mid-January onwards.

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Discussion followed on culls in the East Sub-Group where increased culls on Gartymore (GACI) and West Garty have possibly reduced issues with deer on the A9.

RR pointed out that the target density within the population model, which is based on targets within the Deer Management Plan, had now been exceeded and asked whether the cull would level off. TC suggested that perhaps culls could level off in 2024-25 but the Spring 2024 count data should be the determining factor in that decision.

There was some discussion on hinds forming larger groups and the trickiness of selecting the calf following the hind, especially with guests. It was identified that sometimes, when involving guests, the hinds that should have been selected are sometimes passed for this reason.

RR asked JH whether 10 deer/km² or less should be a figure that DMG should be aiming at to which JH responded that where regulation is being used at 10 deer/km² or above there are other impacts that are coming into play rather than the figure providing the basis for the intervention and that local circumstances and factors generally come into play rather than a focus on density figures.

6.2 Spring Count – 2024

It was agreed that the Spring Count would be undertaken on 14 – 15 March 2024 with the following as count co-ordinators:

NW Sub-Group:	Brian Lyall
SE Sub-Group:	Robbie Rowantree
E Sub-Group:	Richard Bain

Collection of count data would be undertaken via a survey link circulated afterwards.

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6.3 Population Model

Discussion followed on the updated population model and it was recognised that it provided a base for good discussion over densities, trends and distribution of deer numbers over the DMG.

It was agreed that a discussion would be held at the Spring Meeting as to what the target within the population model should be in terms of culls following the Spring 2024 count. The current whole group population model discussed at the meeting is set out below:

East Sutherland Deer Management Group (ESDMG)						
Population Model:		2022 - 27				
Actual						
		Stags	Hinds	Calves	Totals	Density
2022	Spring Population	3,645	4,698	1,688	10,031	9.6
2022	Summer Population	4,405	5,626	2,025		
2022-23	Actual Cull	638	1,108	385	2,131	
2023	Mortality	75	90	49		
2023	Spring Population - as per Pop Model	3,691	4,428	1,591	9,710	9.3
2023	Summer Population	4,407	5,303	1,909		
2023-24	Actual Cull	737	1,177	412	2,326	
2024	Mortality	73	83	45		
2024	Spring Population	3,597	4,044	1,452	9,093	8.7
2024	Summer Population	4,250	4,842	1,743		
2024-25	Proposed Cull	610	860	284	1,754	
2025	Mortality	73	80	44		
2025	Spring Population	3,568	3,903	1,416	8,886	8.5
2025	Summer Population	4,205	4,681	1,685		
2025-26	Proposed Cull	610	860	284	1,754	
2026	Mortality	72	76	42		
2026	Spring Population	3,523	3,745	1,359	8,627	8.2
2026	Summer Population	4,134	4,493	1,617		
2026-27	Proposed Cull	610	860	284	1,754	
2027	Mortality	70	73	40		
2027	Estimated Spring Population - as per Pop Model	3,454	3,560	1,293	8,307	7.9
2027	DMP Target - Spring Population	4,260	4,079	1,432	9,771	9.3

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6.4 Habitat Monitoring

The following properties indicated that they were planning to undertake HIA surveys in Spring / Summer 2024:

- Dalnessie
- Vagastie
- Sutherland Estates
- Torrish

TC offered to arrange assistance for any members who felt they needed it through freelance contractors, particular for vegetation surveys.

JH confirmed that Scottish Government are keen to encourage as many groups as possible to undertake HIA surveys to inform decision making around deer management at a local level and to defend such decisions if required.

Mention was made that there were now a range of regular habitat surveys being undertaken by surveyors using different methodologies for different purposes, including vegetation, hydrology and bird surveys across ESDMG but it was agreed that generally the Best Practice methodology for HIA was the most relevant and practical for deer managers, albeit that it is sometimes adapted in some cases.

7.0 NatureScot Report

JH provided a brief update on developments at Loch Choire since the last update in May 2023. NatureScot maintain regular communication with JK at Estate Manager/ Stalker level and are looking at a long term resolution for the delivery of deer management in the wider objectives aligned with the DMG, including DMP target densities. As part of this a s.7 control agreement process started in July 2023 and by Autumn 2023 it was apparent that this was not possible and, in terms of the Deer Act, this led to progressing a s.8 control scheme which was approved by the NatureScot Board and the Minister in December 2023.

Various attempts have been made to engage the owner of Loch Choire throughout with no response which has led to a structured legal mechanism commencing. Currently, there is no s.8 scheme in place but the legal process is underway which will include engagement with various consultees, including the Deer Management Round Table, the DMG and the local community council in due course with an opportunity for objections over the consultation stage. The process will follow various stages with multiple potential outcomes which will become clearer in Spring 2024. The clear message is that the estate is delivering culls that are in line with what is expected under the DMP and the cause for concern 18 months and the progression to s.8 now is based on the Deer Act and failure to secure the s.7 and the long term commitment from the owner that they will deliver sustainable and effective deer management in line with neighbouring management objectives.

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The proposed control agreement includes provision to protect designated features and deliver culls over a 5-year period to achieve to 7.5 deer/km² and this will involve counts and HIA as part of the process.

Questions followed, including relating to costs to which JH responded that failure to deliver the actions set out under a s.8 scheme enables NatureScot to enter the property to deliver these deer management actions before recovering costs from the owner, which is the ultimate measure but that will be avoided if the owner engages with NatureScot. Questions were also raised in connection with FGS and Agri-environment payments and cross-compliance and the receipt of public money and whether it is possible for SG to withhold payments to cover costs, which is not currently possible under existing schemes.

JH emphasised that communication is good with JK at Loch Choire and that culls are being delivered which is different from 18 months ago and has alleviated some of the previous concerns. There will be an opportunity for the DMG, as part of the consultation process to support the proposed s.8, remain silent or to object to the proposals put forward by NatureScot. This part of the process is due to commence in late Spring 2024.

JH mentioned that as part of the measures of the s.8 scheme a programme of monitoring will be undertaken over the 5-years of the scheme, some undertaken by NatureScot and some by the estate and this will include a deer census, which is likely to include a helicopter count for the whole DMG. JH also made it clear that culls can be adapted over the course of a scheme to take into account changes in deer populations and a request was made that the outline proposals are available to the DMG for the May 2024 meeting.

8.0 ADMG Report

TC reported that ADMG are very involved with the deer legislation consultation – Managing Deer for Nature and Climate – which contains proposals for Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs) under enhancing the natural environment, compulsory powers and compliance, deer welfare, changes to close seasons, venison and kept and farmed deer. The deadline is 31 March 2024 with anticipated progression of the bill over an 18-month period from thereon.

ADMG are concerned by many of the proposals and details of their response to the consultation will be circulated in due course. They will also be discussed in more detail at the AGM on 13 March 2024. JH emphasised that ScotGov are keen to hear all views on the proposals put forward under the consultation.

Details of the Common Ground Stalkers event being held at Glenquoich on 8 March 2024 were provided.

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9.0 AOCB

BL asked whether the price of venison will increase in 2024 and discussion followed on the proposed increased culls which have been put forward by ScotGov without consultation from game dealers as well as the lack of availability of venison in institutions. JH mentioned that Scottish Venison are taking forward various initiatives to enhance the venison market and discussion followed on the various issues and challenges facing the product.

David Walker, FLS, provided a brief update on the Long-Term Management Plan for Dalchork, which is currently out for consultation. The focus is shifting to the peatland element and expansion of native broadleaf planting in riparian zones, which will bring forward fresh challenges in terms of deer management and establishment of these areas.

10.0 Date of Next Meeting

Tuesday 7 May 2024, at Kildonan Hall at 11:00am