

East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Minutes of Meeting
Kildonan Hall, Kildonan
Friday 9 May 2025

Present

Present	Initials	Estate	Present	Initials	Estate
Sir Michael Wigan	MW	<i>Chair/Borrobol</i>	George Stephenson	GS	<i>Kildonan</i>
Daniel Logie	DL	<i>Balnacoil</i>	Martin Grant	MG	<i>Kildonan</i>
Brian Lyall	BL	<i>Badanloch</i>	Jon King	JK	<i>Loch Choire</i>
Blair Colvin	BC	<i>Kintradwell</i>	Duncan Bentley	DB	<i>Achentoul</i>
Neil McCorquodale	NM	<i>Torrish</i>	Lorne MacNicol	LM	<i>Tressady</i>
Richard Bain	RB	<i>Torrish</i>	Ali Grant	AL	<i>GACI</i>
Robbie Rowantree	RR	<i>Gordonbush</i>	Anna Nicholson	AN	<i>Clebrig</i>
Leigh Hague	LH	<i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>	Andrew Nicholson	AN	<i>Clebrig</i>
Andrew Mackay	AM	<i>Dalnessie</i>	Jamie Hammond	JH	<i>NatureScot</i>
Andrew Robinson	AR	<i>Forestry & Land Scotland</i>	David Shaw	DS	<i>NatureScot</i>
Rachel Sutherland	RS	<i>Sutherland Estates</i>	Tom Chetwynd	TC	<i>Facilitator / Secretary</i>
Anastasia Young	AY	<i>Sutherland Estates</i>			

1.0 Welcome

Sir Michael welcomed those present to the Spring Meeting – 2025.

2.0 Apologies

Lucy Kenyon	<i>Badanloch</i>	James Urquhart	<i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>
John MacDonald	<i>Borrobol</i>	Willie Lamont	<i>NatureScot</i>
David Patterson	<i>NatureScot</i>	Donald Sherwood	<i>West Garty</i>
Pieter Bakker	<i>Alltnaharra</i>		

3.0 Minutes

The Minutes of the Spring Meeting – 2024 (7 May 2024) and the Practitioners Meeting – 2024 (21 February 2024) were circulated prior to the meeting.

The Minutes of the Spring Meeting – 2024 were proposed by AM and seconded by RR.

4.0 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

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5.0 Chairmans Report

The Chair reported an observation on deer health in good Spring weather, which are not looking well given the lack of feed resulting from low rainfall in the hills and he looked to hearing stalkers views in the body of the meeting.

6.0 Deer Management Plan

6.1 Actual Culls – 2024 - 25 Season

TC reported that members had reported culls of 872 stags 1,204 hinds and 430 calves, a total of 2,506 deer. This did not include culls from private forestry properties within the DMG which are recorded separately.

Discussion followed on the cull and observations on deer health, distribution and behaviour made over the course of the season.

All sub-groups had held a discussion on Teams before the Spring Meeting to discuss culls and the data collected from the aerial count in more detail.

In general, it was felt to be straight forward season with the focus on hinds proposed in Spring 2024 feeding through in terms of the increased cull.

6.2 NatureScot Aerial Count – Spring 2025

Count maps had been circulated prior to the Spring meeting and discussed by the three sub-groups prior to the Spring Meeting.

DS explained how the count was undertaken and stated that more deer were counted than expected, which could have been due to a variety of factors.

Discussion followed on enclosed areas and the net area of the DMG, which have generally already been taken into account; the inclusion of Rimsdale Forest and areas around Lairg (Challenger Estate); the route map showing helicopter flights; classification of hind groups with yearlings and knobbers; the exclusion of Rosal Forest from the count area and the presence and identification of sika in the count.

The members present confirmed that they were happy to take the data collected by NatureScot through the helicopter count as a true reflection of red deer numbers across the open range of the DMG, with no objections raised. Sir Michael thanked NatureScot for their efforts.

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6.3 Population Model – 2017 – 2025

TC explained how the data collected through the Spring 2025 aerial count had been back modelled to the Spring 2017 aerial count within a population model, a copy of which had been circulated to members prior to the meeting. He reminded members that they had signed up to Deer Management Plan showing a reduction in the population of approx. 14 deer/km² in 2017 to 10 deer/km² in 2025, whereas the density shown in the 2025 count stood at 12 deer/km². He recognised that members had done a lot of hard work to get to this point but that there was probably more to do and that the population model would help guide this direction in travel. TC identified that the most recent count figures showed that stag numbers were probably where they should be and that the focus should remain on hinds.

The back model for the DMG showed that recruitment for the group as a whole was probably in the region of 31-33%, with the NW sub-group at 28-30%, the SE sub-group at 32-34% and the E sub-group at 38-40%. The recruitment rates proposed for the population model moving forward was 33%, for the DMG as a whole, based on the back model.

Discussion followed on recruitment changes in harsh winters, following changes in culling and the stag : hind calf ratio, spread of non-native forest species, spread of sika, loss of habitat for waders, variances between foot count and aerial count data and the population model for 2025-30.

Discussion also followed on whether the density for ESDMG could be reset to 12 deer/km² overall, with appropriate recognition of designated sites and local sensitivities surrounding habitats and public interest and individual property objectives. JH mentioned that it was unlikely that NS would regulate DMGs that exceed 10 deer/km² where the impact data collected is communicated and can clearly demonstrate that negative impacts are being avoided or mitigated.

The members present confirmed that they are happy continuing with the Spring foot count programme to support the population model.

The members also confirmed that they were happy with the proposed recruitment rates for each sub-group within the population model for 2025-30.

6.4 Proposed Culls – 2025 - 2026 Season

The proposed culls for the 2025-26 season were discussed, including the proposed culls for Loch Choire as stated within the s.8 notice and the importance of recording Loch Choire counts and culls separately between the north side and the south side.

Most members indicated that they would maintain their stag culls and increase their hind culls to take into account the helicopter count data.

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6.5 Habitat Monitoring – Spring / Summer 2025

Clebrig, Badanloch and Ben Armine indicated that they would be undertaking HIA in Spring / Summer 2025.

Discussion followed on collecting HIA data via mobile devices, continuing and expanding the HIA programme and HIA training.

6.6 Administrative Calendar – 2025 – 26

It was agreed to continue with a Practitioners Meeting in February / March, a Spring Meeting in May and periodic meetings for each sub-group via Teams.

7.0 Deer Management Plan

TC confirmed that the DMP prepared by Victor Clements in 2015 would come to an end in 2025 and asked whether members would like to continue with that plan supported by annual reports or a review and update of the existing plan.

Sir Michael suggested that there had been no significant changes within the DMG so it did not warrant a new plan at this stage and discussion followed on expected changes in deer legislation, the relevance of data collection and habitat monitoring. JH suggested an updated DMP plan showing the route map for the DMG at a regional level should be considered alongside the data recorded within the minutes, articulating what is proposed so that it is readily evident to outside observers.

It was agreed to progress with a review of the existing DMP, to cover a 5-year period in an abbreviated format, making references to the previous DMPs prepared by Professor Putman and Victor Clements.

8.0 Woodland Expansion & Peatland Restoration Schemes

Balnacoil and Sutherland Estates confirmed that they were considering woodland expansion schemes.

9.0 Financial Report

TC reported that subscription invoices for the previous two years had been issued.

TC also confirmed that there was no change to the bank balance of £342.35 reported in May 2024.

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10.0 NatureScot Report

DS provided a brief update on:

- DVCs research on the A9 undertaken by BEAR Scotland
- Ongoing work with ADMG and SG over FLS involvement in DMGs
- Pilot incentive schemes for sika and lowland deer management areas
- Changes to Muirburn licensing
- Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and registration of approved persons

JH provided a brief update on Loch Choire, outlining the following:

- Reasons behind progression to s.8 control scheme
- Objections received to the proposed control scheme
- The Land Court process and Ministerial involvement
- Operations undertaken by NS to date and those undertaken by JK
- Current status of the s.8 control scheme and optimum outcomes
- Culls required under the s.8 control scheme and monitoring of outcomes
- Possible routes from July 2025 onwards

Discussion and questions followed on news coverage and publicity surrounding the control scheme, damage recorded within the designated site and the proposed target density of 7.5 deer/km² for the control scheme. JH also confirmed that in the event that Loch Choire did not have its own deer management team, NS would deploy staff or appointed persons to undertake the role under s.8 provisions, with the ability for NS to recover costs.

10.0 ADMG Report

TC delivered the ADMG report, including the following:

- The Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, including the consultation period
- ADMGs concern over the proposed s.6ZB
- ADMG meetings with Jim Fairlie, Minister with responsibility for deer
- The lack of incentivisation schemes for deer management
- Common Ground meeting proposed for North of Scotland in Autumn 2025
- Scottish Venison Association amalgamating with Scottish Quality Wild Venison

11. AOCB

Sir Michael noted the input provided by TC and thanked him for helping organise ESDMG which was also noted by BL.

JH noted that Willie Lamont and Mark Jamieson will be covering the North area for DMG matters.

12. Date of Next Meeting

Practitioners Meeting – Thursday 19 February 2026 - Kildonan Hall at 10:30hrs