

North Ross Deer Management Group

Group Deer Management Plan 2019-2024



Photo: Calum Campbell

Deer Management Plan produced for North Ross DMG by Land Consultancy Services Ltd

Introduction and Executive Summary

The North Ross deer management group (NRDMG) is a voluntary association of land managers, owners & public agencies working collaboratively to protect, promote and sustainably manage the wild deer populations found within a land area of approximately 1,300 sq. kilometres touching both the east & west coasts across the northern highlands.

The fundamentals of collective deer management are underpinned with the following elements;

- Wild deer Population Models.
- Environmental and habitat monitoring of wild deer habitation areas.
- Public benefits derived from wild deer.

Therefore, individual and collective components of sustainable management objectives for wild deer within the group area are based on ensuring that the population levels are managed to ensure best welfare practises for deer are met whilst enhancing the natural environment by providing protective support to the special areas identified within the group. This is all done whilst ensuring delivery of direct and indirect economic benefits in an area of Scotland where population retention and economic stimulus are wider public objectives.

The principle indigenous deer species found within the group geographical area is the red deer which are widely recognised as an iconic species and recognised globally with the upland highlands of Scotland. There are also regionally scattered population bases of Sika and Roe deer established within the boundaries of the group. Sustainable management in the context used for this deer management plan means the management of a wild deer population at a level which ensures the welfare of the deer, delivers direct and indirect economic benefit to the area, protects the natural environment, particularly but not exclusively within the designated sites, and minimises conflict with other land uses (e.g. agricultural and forestry) and the areas rural communities.

Wild deer on the open hill land which characterises much of the NRDMG range widely and across property boundaries therefore deer management is thus necessarily a collaborative exercise. Whilst each member of the group has their own specific interests and concerns, and is responsible for the management of deer on their land, they are also committed to working collaboratively with each other, Scottish National Heritage, local communities and all other interested parties to ensure that deer are managed sustainably.

The group geographical area hosts a significant number of land areas recognised as especially important in connection with their ecological values and rare habitat along with numerous special features. These include a number of designated sites which include 11 Sites of Special Scientific interest (SSSI), 5 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and 4 Specially Protected Areas (SPA).

From these, two are of particular concern to the group, Ben Wyvis and Beinn Dearg. Both have been subject to a prolonged and significant period of collaborative working between group members and SNH, within the context of a number of voluntary control agreements, with the aim of improving habitat conditions. The results have been positive on Ben Wyvis but despite significant increased deer culls by land managers surrounding Beinn Dearg further work is still required to ensure that the habitat on is moving to a favourable condition.

This strategy sets out the shared objectives which have been agreed across the group. A full set of objectives are set out elsewhere. But at the heart of the objectives is a commitment to ensuring the group manage deer numbers at a sustainable level across the group area and in particular on and around the SACs. Linked to that commitment is a further commitment to measure habitat condition and to adjust deer numbers as required whether those measurements indicate a problem.

Through the implementation of this plan the DMG hope to deliver for both the wild deer they manage and the habitat in which they exist in a balanced and public facing way while enhancing the bio diversity and quality of life found in the Scottish environment.

The plan will be utilized as a baseline tool for the effective management of wild deer across the Deer Management Group (DMG) and will undergo annual review from within the group membership to reflect any changes in industry guidance, changes in Government policy or changes in the statutory provisions for the protection and promotion of wild deer in Scotland.

In 2015, the open range wild red deer winter population was assessed at 14,348 red deer. However, the winter of 2017/18 was particularly harsh for deer with a late winter snow storm which resulted in very high levels of deer mortality, substantially reduced recruitment in 2018 and, most likely a further impact on recruitment in 2019. Indeed, the total open hill red deer population amounts to 11,969 based on a helicopter count in late January 2019. This represents an average deer density of 10.3 deer per km sq.

The land conditions on which deer exist varies significantly across the group. This means that different land holdings may be able to support a wide range of deer densities, from commercial forestry interests who wish to minimise deer numbers through to mixed estates with good grazing and woodland cover who can support high numbers. The strategic objective is to reach a position where deer densities close to Ben Wyvis and Being Dearg are at a level where habitat conditions can attain favourable condition. The current view is that this will require an average

annual red deer open range cull across the group of between 1600 & 1900 but this figure will be subject to adjustment in light of assessments of habitat condition, natural mortality and recruitment.

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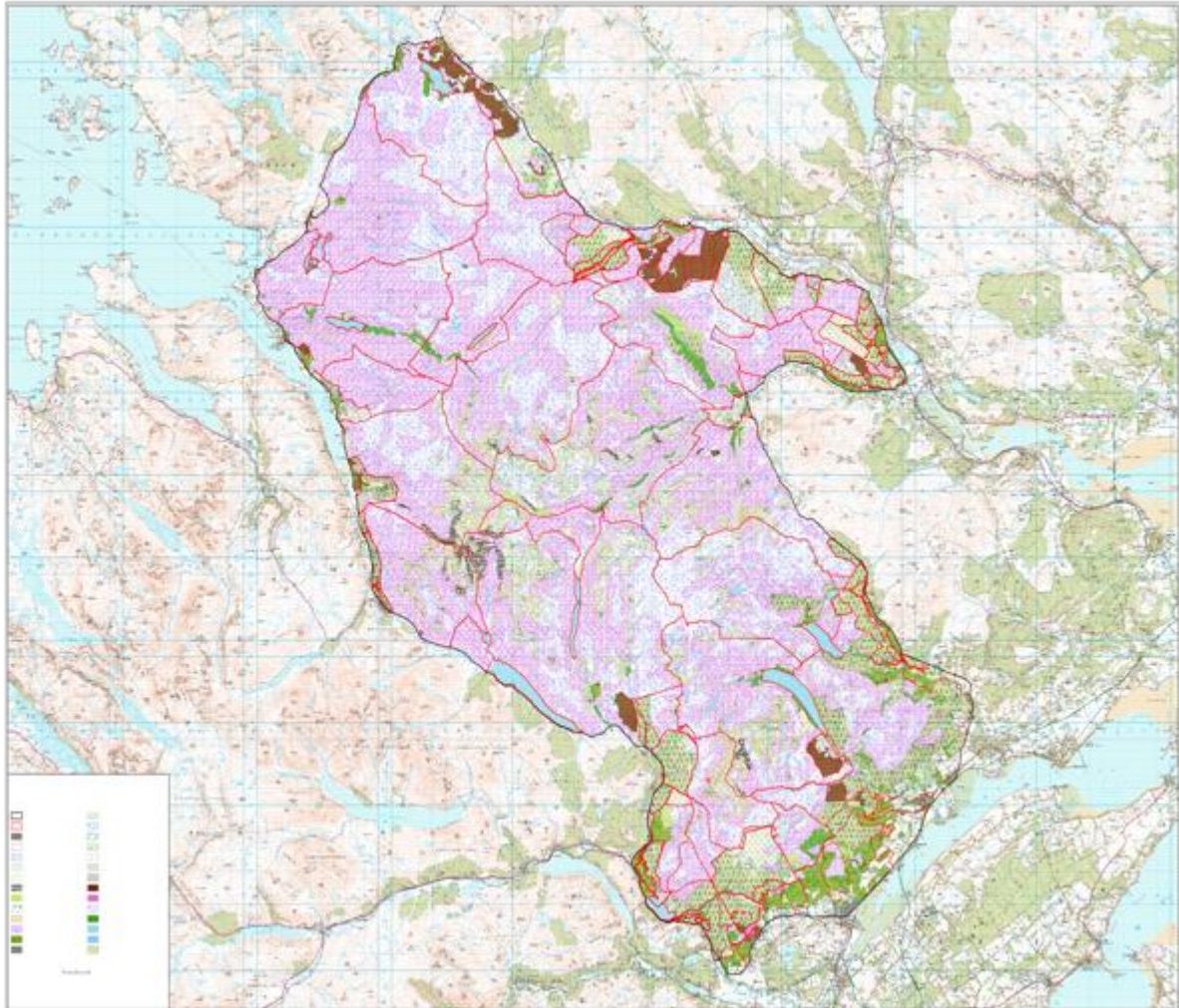
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North Ross Deer Management Group Geographic Area

Figure 1.0 North Ross Deer Management Group Geographic Area



Purposes of a Group Deer Management Plan

Wild deer in Scotland have an intrinsic link to strong cultural and historical values of upland Scotland. Red deer have also been identified as one of Scotland's five iconic species by SNH, the public body with primary responsibility for the guardianship and promotion of wild deer and the public benefits that they bring to both the national identity and the ecology of the landscape, but also through recognition of the economic benefits that wild deer bring to the wider rural economy in Scotland.

This plan is designed to be a living document to assist with the management of the wild deer in tandem with the habitat and environment to which they are intrinsically linked. The plan will cover the period from 2019 to 2024 and supersedes the existing plan which the group had adopted in 2014.

Within the plan document there is recognition of the evolving nature of both wild deer and more prominently the habitat and environment in which they are found. This is reflected in many of the action points that are found in the accompanying working plan document which the deer managers within the group will use as an ongoing management tool.

The plan will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that it reflects the current objectives relating to the primary management of wild deer within the group boundaries to ensure that it delivers the best outcomes for all stakeholders including the landholders, the general public, the public bodies connected to wild deer and their environment but most importantly the plan should fundamentally deliver for wild deer and their sustainable place in the Scottish environment and landscape.

The North Ross deer management group area is set within the heart of the northern highlands. The geographic open hill range covered by land stewardship via this plan extends to an area of approximately 115,693 hectares of mixed and varied terrain. The group area spans the width of the country, touching both the west and east coasts, including some of Scotland's most productive agricultural land on the eastern boundary to the rugged and barren rocky mountains and crags to the west.

The construct of the group is formulated by its 27 members who hold a broad range of base layer land use including a mix of upland farming, commercial and habitat focused forestry, environmental management objectives, commercial deer management, renewable energy production and tourism enterprises. Many of the land holdings have similar aims objectives and all share a common objective of providing a professional approach to the management and care of the wild deer that populate the group area.

Whilst the group operates as one with regard to strategic objectives there has been a movement to create 3 distinct sub groups for assessment and population modeling

purposes. This has been carried out with the aim of improving data collection and greater communication to ensure that the group's objectives can be met.

This plan gives an outline of each group members principal aims & objectives for their land holding and how that interlinks with the objectives set before the group in its collective management of the wild deer population in a manner that is sustainable to all members interests but also to the wider communities found within the group area.

The principal species to be considered in relation to the plan are wild red deer found on the open hill range and also within woodland environments. There are also population pockets of both roe and sika deer and the plan will give consideration to their needs and management within the wider strategic considerations of the important role they may be able to contribute to in the delivery of a sustainable land use model for wild deer.

The tools for measuring the management of wild deer have become multi-faceted by nature in relation to the collective approach now adopted to deer management and this plan will give consideration to the needs of this wider interests in land including environmental and habitat issues, natural capital values, public benefits from wild deer and the landscape whilst also ensuring that for the purposes and objectives of this plan are met.

Statistical evidence used in this plan such as annual count data, culling information, natural deer recruitment and mortality records for wild deer populations, is a significant contributor in the plans' modeling and specifically in the production of population model, which along with habitat assessment, underpins the plan. Much of this information whilst sourced from group members, is collaborated by SNH.

Whilst the group recognises the needs and benefits of an active and working wild deer management plan, they are also acutely aware that the successful management of the wild deer found within the group area does not come without financial investment by members. Principally this comes in the form of committed, motivated and highly skilled staff who will ultimately adopt much of the responsibility for the practical delivery of the deer management plan.

It is therefore incumbent on the DMG that this is also achieved whilst adopting the industry Best Practice Guidance – Guidance which has been developed by SNH and the industry over a number of years and is now adopted and recognized as the minimum benchmark for individuals actively operating in the management of wild deer within Scotland.

It is intended that this plan will provide the following:

- To provide a strategic overview of the management of wild deer within the group boundaries, and a platform for more detailed discussion and planning within the NRDMG on an ongoing basis for the effective delivery of the management of the wild deer herd for the benefit of the members, the natural environment and the wider public interest and safety.
- Ensure that there is a collaborative and sustainable approach to all of the elements aligned to the management of wild deer within the group geographic boundaries.
- Ensure that full engagement and interaction takes place wherever necessary between the DMG and communities, businesses, organisations and individuals who reside in, and are active within the group geographical area.
- A set of realistic actions which enable delivery of the DMG objectives.
- A strategy that reflects the aspirations that group members hold in respect of the management of wild deer within the wider natural environment and habitats of the DMG area.
- Assist in maintaining and strengthening the economic benefits of wild deer to the local communities that interlink with the DMG.
- A working document that is available in the public domain for inspection and comment by interested members of the wider public within the DMG area.
- Enables the DMG to enable delivery of the maximum level of public benefit from deer which are a wild natural resource.

About the group

The Group Area

The North Ross Deer Management Group extends from the East coast on the shores of the Cromarty firth to the West coast on Lochbroom, rising across the centre of Ross Shire to beyond 3000ft and encapsulating seven Munro mountains within the group boundary, along with a number of other popular walking and climbing routes. The expanse of the group extends to a land mass of circa 148,000 hectares of a varied mix of land types. Group member details are found at Appendix 1

The southern extremities of the group are shadowed by the highland industrial heartland of the Cromarty firth and it's towns of Invergordon, Ainess, Evanton & Dingwall (*population circa 19,000*) close to the highland capital Inverness, where productive arable farming and commercial forestry production are the prominent rural land uses. As the landform moves north and west the landscape changes to open moorland and rugged mountain terrain. Within the centre of the group there are significant water masses which form part of the historical hydro system created to help power the nation in a clean and renewing way.

The group's western boundaries are predominantly that of sea lochs and croft land which is formed around the former fishing village of Ullapool (*Population 1500*) which is the gateway to the western isles via the ferry terminal.

The remainder of the group's boundaries are principally made up of the A835 Tore to Ledmore junction public road, and the A837 Ledmore junction to Oykel bridge public road. From this point until the boundary returns to the Cromarty firth it follows the county boundary between Ross & Sutherland, before then following the Ainess river from Kildermorie to the sea.

As the group boundary travels its route it passes through a number of small communities and crofting townships such as Garve, Inverlael, Strathkanaird and Elphin where the management of wild deer has some positive impacts relating to employment and economic benefits for those living there. Within these communities deer can also at times be a point of conflict where they impact on improved land used for livestock rearing and cropping, along with the known impacts from deer related vehicle collisions.



With the group boundaries panning the breadth of the highlands there are significant climatic differences experienced within the group. The east of the group sits within the inner Moray firth and experiences approximately 50% of the annual rainfall of that recorded on the western seaboard, and is often protected from significant snowfall. Whereas the central and western group area will often see a frequency of snowfall of circa 50 days, and on higher parts of the wild deer range can have significant snow cover for up to 150 days.

The NRDMG area supports a characteristic range of those plant communities typically found in Northern Scotland. Large expanses of the deer range are primarily made up of slow growing and reasonably unproductive wet heath and blanket bog. The diversity of habitat supports a number of plant species considered to be rare, but there are no known examples of extreme rarities being present within the group boundaries.

Within the DMG boundaries can be found a number of environmental designations with SSSIs, SPAs & SACs which are significant in how they impact with the wild deer that inhabit the areas of these designations. (Appendix 2)

Section 2 –Plan Aims & Objectives

Constitution

North Ross DMG operates to an agreed constitution which defines the area of the Group, sets out its purpose, its operating principles, membership and procedures, in addition to providing for appointing office bearers, voting, raising subscriptions and maintaining financial records.

Code of Practice on Deer Management

North Ross DMG endorses the [Code of Practice on Deer Management](#) and the terms of the code are delivered through the deer management plan.

Principles of Collaboration

North Ross DMG have adopted the following Principles of Collaboration, developed by the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), and aim to work to these in our business:

We:

- Acknowledge what we have in common – a shared commitment to a sustainable and economically viable Scottish countryside.
- make a commitment to work together to achieve and maintain that.
- Accept that we have a diversity of management objectives and respect each other's objectives.
- Undertake to communicate openly with all relevant parties.
- Commit to negotiate and, where necessary, to compromise in order to accommodate the reasonable land management requirements of neighbours.
- Where there are areas of disagreement we undertake to work together to resolve them.

Collaboration is essential to meet the standards set by the Code of Practice for Deer Management.

Best Practice Guidance

North Ross DMG agrees that all deer management activity should be carried out in accordance with Best Practice standards. All members subscribe to these standards.

Objectives for Collaborative Management

All participating members of the NRDMG will individually and collectively take a measure of responsibility for the welfare and management of the wild deer population within the boundaries of the group area. This should be done in a sustainable way and in consideration of the natural environment and habitat that forms the base of the deer hefting areas.

The group's topography and ground cover are primarily a mix of commercial forestry, native woodland cover and the majority as open hill, and a range of mixed heather moorland, blanket bog, peatlands and localized use of growing native woodland cover, providing shelter and mixed environment as longer term habitat improvement for the wild deer and domestic herbivore where they are present. (Appendix 2)

These types of habitat are naturally favorable land types for all 3 species of deer found within the group area. The landscape of the group covers a broad spectrum from low arable ground to the south, rising through the group to heights of over 3000 feet, before dropping back down on the north west of the group to sea level. The climatic conditions also change dramatically as the group runs from south east to north west, where the conditions that prevail within in the Inner Moray Firth area with a low average rainfall and lower than average periods of snow cover on the land are mixed with higher than average rainfall to the west of the groups range. Seasonal snow cover can be prolonged through the centre of the group where the higher peaks are found. The deer population cover is spread across the mix with density not being significantly affected by altitude.

Given the above, members of the group recognize that the management of the group wild deer population requires commitment in terms of resource, to ensure that the population is maintained at a level which allows the continuing habitat conditions and levels of bio-diversity to be maintained or improved, whilst not impacting negatively on other land uses and users who share the open group range, whilst also ensuring that there are no significant failures to the private or public interest within the group boundaries.

The average annual cull within the group area over the last 5 years is 3862 deer made up of 2485 red deer, 1018 sika deer and 359 roe deer. This equates to a deer cull of 2.9 animals per 100 hectares of land.

Proactive and positive deer management has a direct bearing on the provision of local employment and economic stimulus to the communities bounded by the group. Employment provided in the management of wild deer both directly and indirectly makes an extremely valuable contribution to the local economy.

A large proportion of the economic benefits are derived from the letting of a significant amount of the deer stalking on a commercial basis, often along with accommodation and other services offered by the provider, with more than half of the group members recognizing that the income derived from deer is of strategic importance to the success of their rural business.

The income derived from the sales of venison is also an important contributor to the rural economy within the group, and this benefit is also shared locally as one of Scotland's larger game dealers is located on the fringe of the group.

For many of the group's members wild deer is the fundamental underwriter of staff costs in relation to the sustainable management of their rural businesses, and it therefore follows that wild deer have a significant impact on the wider community economics in some geographical areas of the group.

Sustainable Deer Management

Sustainable Deer Management

Sustainable Deer Management may well be best described as the management of wild deer to obtain the optimum mix of benefit, economically and environmentally whilst giving full regard to the people and communities along with the habitat range impacted by deer.

The overarching aim of the NRDMG is to ensure that the populations of wild deer found within the group area are managed sustainably for the economic, cultural and ecological benefit, which should be combined with delivery of public benefit.

This will be done by all members of the group who will ensure that proper management of the wild deer is undertaken to ensure the health of the deer, the protection of the local ecology and natural environment, and to deliver continuity for jobs and services which are linked to the management of wild deer.

All persons engaged in deer management within and through the group will undertake proper recognized training wherever it is required, and all persons charged with culling deer will possess a recognized industry qualification with the minimum requirement being Deer Management Qualification Level 1(DMQ1).

Annual culls will be carried out efficiently and professionally, whilst taking due regard for the welfare of the deer and for the safety of the general public. This will be guided by use of the Scottish Government approved Code of Deer Management, along with the use of best practice guides produced by SNH or other organisations as statutorily authorised.

The deer management plan for this group will be made available on a group web page, with a link to the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) website. It will also be circulated to the community councils along with other community and public interest groups connected to the geographic group area.

High standards of competence in Deer Management

Training Policy

The group recognizes the need for high standards of competence within the deer management sector and accordingly within the North Ross DMG. This ensures that the group contributes to delivering higher standards of competence in deer management

The minimum qualification to meet “Trained Hunter” status is the updated Deer Stalking Certificate Level 1 or the Certificate in Wild Game Meat Hygiene (large game). The DMG will promote and encourage competence in undertaking deer management activities through the following actions:

- As a minimum, each reporting unit, and any other individual involved in the culling of deer, will have or will have access to an individual with the above qualifications.
- Members will be encouraged to highlight changes in competency qualifications in the annual return.
- The DMG will assist where possible in the provision/facilitation of training and continual professional development opportunities for anyone lacking necessary qualifications or for individuals who wish to enhance their skills.
- The DMG have a clear objective to ensure that all those engaged in the management of deer within the group are working towards DMQ level 2.
- All DMG members will undertake all deer management to Best Practice standards.

Given the above, it should however be recognised that staff within the DMG area already have a wide variety of other qualifications and certificates covering other aspects of their work. These include ATV, Argocat, First Aid, Chainsaw, Health & safety. There is a strong ethos of training and staff improvement across many of the properties within the DMG.

Deer welfare is of fundamental importance to the DMG. It is recognised by the group that robust deer recruitment counts play an important part in understanding the measurement of the welfare of the wild deer within the group range, and therefore the group will be undertaking an annual recruitment count.

The figure produced will have an important part to play in regard to the population modelling of the deer within the group area. Deer larder weights will continue to be recorded and used as a tool in identifying the overall health and welfare of the wild deer.

Information gleaned by the group members on natural deer mortality will also assist in helping the group provide a robust population modelling procedure linked to the habitat conditions and environment within the wider group area.

Venison

The sale and home consumption of venison are currently going through a period of strong growth in the home market. Great efforts have been made by Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) to place the product in the householders' eye and we now have periods when the demand is struggling to be met.

The DMG currently has a 5-year cull average of 3862 carcasses per annum which carries substantive economic value both in wholesale sales received by the primary producer's and thereafter by the processors.

Scottish Quality Wild Venison membership (SQWV) is actively encouraged within the membership of the group, and there is an aim to consider the prospects in the future, of direct marketing of this high-quality food product from within the group membership.

The larder facilities within the management group members vary within the acceptable scale and each member has their own vision for their facilities. All members will work toward a uniformity of facilities to ensure that the collective output of venison from the group achieves the maximum economic benefits to the wider rural economy.

Native Woodlands

North Ross DMG has significant areas of Native Woodlands, amounting to some 8966ha according to the Forestry Commission's Native Woodland Survey of Scotland published in 2014. A map showing Native Woodland extent and herbivore impacts is at Plan 14. 73% of these woodlands were found to have low to moderate impacts by herbivores and may be expected to regenerate at these levels of impact. The remaining areas have higher impacts and their owners have been actioned to consider how these areas will be managed to maintain this important resource for the long term.

Woodland Expansion

North Ross DMG has contributed significantly to the Scottish Government's targets to expand woodland cover having established 21,389ha of new woodland since 1991. Some of the older of these woods are now fully established and have been made available for deer shelter, considerably enhancing the available forage and shelter.

A map showing the range of new woodlands is shown in Appendix 7. A further 130ha has been established on Corriemulzie and Glencalvie estates since this map was produced.

North Ross DMG have decided to undertake a further study of the potential for new woodland within the group area in 2019 in order to help identify the best areas to pursue this for the benefit of the group and the deer population.

Where new woodlands result in areas of deer range being removed, the group will plan for this by undertaking a compensatory cull of the deer that are likely to be negatively impacted by loss of forage and shelter. The group will consider and plan for woodlands becoming available as new forage and shelter when fences are removed as they become established.

All new deer fencing will be planned using the latest published [Fencing Guidance](#).

Habitat assessment

Land Cover Scotland map (LCS 88) shows that the habitat of the group area is diverse with a range of cover present. The larger cover areas are Heather moorland at 63,459 ha, Blanket bog and peatlands at 36,800 ha and conifer woodland cover at 13,352; (Appendix 3).

| <u>Land Classification</u> | <u>Hectares</u> | <u>% of Group Area</u> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Heather Moorland | 63,459 | 43% |
| Blanket Bog & Peatlands | 36,800 | 24% |
| Woodland | 21,717 | 15% |
| Montane Vegetation | 10,640 | 7% |
| Arable & Improved Grassland | 5,472 | 4% |
| Smooth & Coarse Grassland | 3,451 | 2% |
| Other including Open Water | 6,785 | 5% |
| | 148,279 | |

| <u>Woodland Composition</u> | <u>Hectares</u> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Coniferous Plantation | 13,352 |
| Recently Ploughed Land | 3,110 |
| Open Canopy Plantations | 2,842 |
| Broadleaf Woodland | 1,095 |
| Mixed Woodland | 1,007 |
| Woodland Recently Felled | 311 |

Deer are dependent on the habitat as well as impacting upon it. By measuring and recording the impacts of deer on habitat condition, it makes it easier to monitor whether land management objectives are being achieved. There are agricultural activities taking place across some reasonable areas of the wild deer range which can be evaluated during the life span of this plan through the monitoring program which is now in place. (Appendices 4, 5 and 6)

The group will manage deer impacts on the habitat by maintaining an agreed deer density per square km, by the use of deer fencing if necessary, and also by managing other livestock interests within their individual units to ensure that impacts are mitigated wherever possible.

There are a number of public objectives associated with land, either through designated site status or areas where bio-diversity and good environmental condition is felt to be particularly important. Ongoing assessment will be carried out by group members, and the collected data will be shared amongst group members, in order to identify any areas facing increased pressure and steps will be taken to mitigate any negative impacts by implementing appropriate management processes.

The two main upland habitats will be monitored for herbivore impact: heather moorland as this is likely to provide winter fodder for deer and thereby have a real impact on their winter survival and: blanket bog, as this fragile habitat is the most commonly impacted by trampling.

Habitat Impact Targets

North Ross DMG will adopt the following impact targets as aspirations for the group:

Blanket Bog and Heather Moorland: 90% of sample points to have low to low/moderate impact classes, up to 10% with moderate impacts and none with higher impacts. It is recognized that impacts may be higher than these targets in some areas and the group will monitor habitats over time and adapt management to ensure that these habitats do not deteriorate.

Herbivore numbers:

North Ross DMG understands that herbivores at a high density can negatively impact upon some habitats. North Ross DMG aim to hold an average deer density of 10 to 12 red deer per km² and monitor habitats to understand whether this density results in good habitat condition.

In addition to red deer North Ross DMG has sika deer, sheep and cattle utilizing the open deer range in some areas and their numbers and impact will also have to be considered in managing the range of habitats.

Carbon Storage

North Ross DMG plays a significant role in carbon storage through the management of 36,800ha of peat rich habitats and almost 22,000ha of woodlands.

The group recognise that they have a responsibility to improve carbon storage. They recognise that the existing woodland and moorland habitat serves a very necessary purpose in this respect. The group will monitor conditions throughout the duration of the plan and will identify opportunities to increase the group's carbon storage capacity through various means, such as peatland restoration and the creation of new woodlands. Where match funding can be secured, the group will instigate a study of the potential for peatland restoration and provide information for SRDP scheme applications where appropriate. (Appendix 7) SNH Peatland Action officer has already provided base data to estates to encourage applications for [Peatland Action](#) funding.

All members of the group will ensure responsible muirburn and will follow statutory guidance whilst working with other land use objectives to ensure that the habitat environment of the group remains in good condition. The group will avoid the burning of moorland in areas of deep peat.

Peatland damage across the group area is not considered to be a medium or high risk, however some group members have already undertaken successful restoration works and further opportunities are being explored by the group through the individual group members, and where possible, support through the SRPD or Peatland Action funding schemes will be sought to assist in peatland restoration.

A Significant number of group members are already active through their wider estate interests in river basin management, and the group consulted with two fisheries trusts during the production of this plan. All group members recognise the need for good river basin and water catchment management, and are willing contributors in the efforts to sustain the river basin management within the DMG area.

Environmental Designations

Where land hosts special features they are almost always awarded designated status thus ensuring the special features and interests of the site. Within the DMG boundaries the following areas are currently subject to designation, to enable SNH to deliver a wide range of benefits through the agreed management of activities within the boundaries of the site, dependent on the condition which the site is currently found. (Appendix 8)

Table 2.2 Designated areas within DMG boundary

| Site | Designation | link to Sitelink designation database |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Beinn Dearg | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/165 |
| Ben Wyvis | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/195 |
| Rhidorroch Wood | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1347 |
| Knockan Cliff | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/875 |
| Loch Urigill | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1668 |
| Oykel Gorge | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1264 |
| Alladale Pinewood | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/33 |
| Amat Woodlands | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/54 |
| Alness River Valley | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8662 |
| Alt nan Caorach | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/46 |
| Carn Gorm | SSSI | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/321 |
| | | |
| Ben Wyvis | SAC | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8205 |
| Beinn Dearg | SAC | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8198 |
| River Oykel | SAC | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8363 |
| Rhidorroch Wood | SAC | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8352 |
| Amat Woodlands | SAC | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8188 |
| | | |
| Ben Wyvis | SPA | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8470 |
| Beinn Dearg | SPA | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8468 |
| Loch Urigill | SPA | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8516 |
| Novar | SPA | https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8662 |

Control Agreement (Section 7) Deer (Scotland) act 1996

Within the DMG 7 landholdings have been full signatories to a control agreement under Section 7 of the Deer (Scotland) act 1996.

These members (*Corriemulzie, Alladale, Inverlael farm, Strathvaich, Loch Droma, Braemore, Inverlael deer forest*), along with SNH, signed up to the agreement in 2010, for a proposed period of 5 years relative to two sites (Beinn Dearg SAC & Alladale Pinewood SSSI). In 2015 the agreement was extended following further assessment of the site.

The designation area extends to 13,849 ha and the management agreement sets out the terms for the reduction and maintenance of wild red deer within a wider control area of approximately 46,400 ha, to prevent the deer from causing damage to and avoid the deterioration of designated habitats within the two sites.

On the commencement of the agreement the SAC was described by SNH as in an *unfavorable condition*. The broad aim of the agreement was to achieve a wild red deer density of 12-16 deer per sq. km and the site to be in *favorable condition*. The last helicopter count (2015) returned a red deer density of 13 per sq. km over the control area.

Habitat impact assessments carried out in the summer 2015 showed a uniform and significant increase since 2013 in all measured trampling, browsing and dunging impacts across the areas surveyed despite no overall increase in the numbers of deer. The groups' evidence, particularly based on Angus Davidson's repeat survey of Braemore estate, showed a recovery to no higher than 2013 impacts, which we hope will be mirrored across the S7 area when SNH commission their next survey.

As a result of the Spring 2019 helicopter count, carried out in favorable conditions the population density targets have been met with the population total now sub 5000 and the deer density now at 10.8 per sq. km.

Economic Benefits

The group recognises that wild deer and their effective management have significant real net costs to group members. This is at least in part offset by income derived from the letting of deer stalking along with accommodation provision for those doing so, along with sales of venison which is largely sold to game dealers for processing. There are economic benefits to be derived from the wild deer herd both for individual members and for the wider community. The group will pro-actively promote the use of local services and industries that are in a position to support the DMGs activities.

The group members currently cull an average (10 years) of 3688 wild red deer per annum. Of these, the red stag cull average (10 years) is a total of 698.

A large proportion of these stags are shot with sporting guests with significant economic benefit to the local community, as well as the group members through the letting of stag stalking to sporting guests. It is understood that the letting of the stalking, and the accommodation provision for those who come to stalk, provides a minimum direct income to the local area over a 10-12 week period in the autumn, of around £650,000.00. This direct spend is a feed-in driver for an as yet unquantified wider area spend throughout the deer group area on other services.

Throughout the deer culling seasons, the throughput of venison from the North Ross DMG equates to approximately 125 tons at a wholesale value of £276,000. The end value of the product through to processing and retail is believed to be more than £500,000.00

However, costs to achieve the above far outweigh the financial benefits, and based on those figures provided by members, it is thought that the actual costs are around 125% of income. The group will collaboratively consider how they can work together to reduce the financial costs to their individual businesses, and in a number of situations consideration is underway to the shared lardering and handling facilities, along with other measures where infrastructure used for deer culling and management can be shared between more than one member within the group.

Table 2.3 Economic benefit derived from stalking

| <u>Deer Costs</u> | <u>Stalking/Accom</u> | <u>Venison</u> | <u>Economic income</u> | <u>Nett Loss</u> |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------|
| £ 1,457,432.00 | £ 406,187.00 | £ 242,964.00 | £ 649,151.00 | £ (808,281.00) |

The group intend to spend time collating and evaluating fuller spend and cost details for the wider business community, and to produce a more detailed economic cost benefit analysis for wild deer stalking within the North Ross DMG geographical area as detailed within the groups working plan over the next 2 years.

Collectively the NRDMG is a significant employer both directly and indirectly for the most part within a remote and fragile economic area.

As part of the collection of data relative to the creation of this plan, we now know that the members of the group carry a direct employment responsibility for the following:

Table 2.4 Employment figures

| <u>Full time</u> | <u>Part Time</u> | <u>Total</u> |
|------------------|------------------|--------------|
| <u>31</u> | <u>30</u> | <u>61</u> |

Public Benefits

There are many ways in which to measure the public benefit of wild deer in Scotland. Red deer are recognised as an integral component of the land management mosaic within upland areas. Their revenue producing capability provides a very direct benefit in the maintenance and support of fragile rural communities through direct and secondary employment.

Wild deer have economic impacts on both the businesses which hold a direct responsibility for their welfare and good management, and also for the wider rural communities where wild deer can be found. Throughout the year people from outwith these communities have an engagement with deer which has direct impact on both the deer and these communities, providing positive benefits but also with the potential to deliver some negatives. This plan is formulated on the basis of minimizing the potential of negative impacts.

As part of the process of evaluating public benefit the group recognise that the current deer management structure within the uplands of Scotland provides significant benefit to the public in that the self-regulation, whilst not completely without weakness, has served the industry well, particularly over the last 20+ years when the structure and framework has improved through the hard work and commitment of the ADMG who have been aided and guided by the Deer Commission and now SNH.

The alternative of a state managed DMG system would add significant costs to the public purse at a time of continued depletion of public spend, whilst not necessarily helping to deliver the current range of public benefits on the ground. There is also a degree of uncertainty on how the public sector will react to the changes taking place within the framework of governance in the UK, with the UK leaving the European Union. This will bring a number of real uncertainties for the deer sector, being a primary food producer. There is every likelihood that the regulations that control our food production, hygiene and handling will come under review along with many of the other practices which we are currently obliged to including the regulation and designation of our sensitive and fragile environmental sites.

The good welfare of deer, both at individual animal and herd levels, can provide excellent public benefits. The group, through this management plan, will endeavor to monitor the health of the deer herd to protect vulnerable animals and through selective culling, maintain a balanced cross aged herd.

By managing the deer numbers and maintaining the density levels the group will ensure the habitat conditions within the group area retain and improve their favorable status.

As a part of the consultation process for the compilation of this plan revision, LCS Ltd communicated with 30 separate parties including community councils, community groups and bodies, land occupiers, police, roads authorities, Highland Council access officers and roads department, and common grazing committees within the group boundary, detailing the work being undertaken and offering to consider any views they have on the management of wild deer. Four of these responded with a request to be provided with the expiring plan which was then provided. To date no comment or proposals have been received for inclusion in the plan.

Whilst recognizing the importance of engagement with the general public, and also recognizing that there is a desire for there to be a higher level of engagement with the general public to ensure the maximum public benefit from the wild deer in Scotland, it could be assumed from the level of returns that there is a satisfaction in the current performance and actions of the deer management group. The group do recognise that there is a need to raise the profile of deer and their benefits within the group area.

The group will increase its engagement with other landholders within the group's geographical area. It will attempt to improve the recruitment of its direct membership, particularly with smaller landowners and agricultural property occupiers who have direct impacts with deer.

NRDMG will form a line of communication with community councils along with individuals and community groups who have an interest in the work of the group and all community councils will be invited to attend DMG meetings.

The minutes of all group meetings will be published on the NRDMG web page which is linked from the ADMG website, as will the ratified Deer Group plan along with any other relevant information such as delivery of action points from the working plan document on a regular basis.

Recreational Public Access

The geographical location of the group provides a significant attraction to recreational walkers and climbers, with a number of long-distance routes from east to west along with 7 recorded “Munro” classified hills (above 3,000ft summits) along with a number of other popular hill climbs.

The group welcomes responsible public access on all routes and hills within the group’s range and a number of DMG members maintain popular routes within the cost structures of their individual businesses. (Appendix 9)

Deer & Road Traffic Incidents

Most recent estimates suggest that there are more than 10,000 deer related motor vehicle accidents in Scotland annually. It is understood that from this there are around 70 serious human injuries sustained from these collisions.

As well as the personal distress and suffering, there is an economic cost to deer related vehicle accidents, which amounts to over £5 million per annum.

The North Ross DMG is bounded for a significant distance by the A835 Tore to Ledmore trunk road (49 miles) and by the A837 Ledmore Junction to Invershin local authority-controlled road (25 miles).

Data provided by SNH highlights significant numbers of reported deer related vehicle collisions (Appendix 10). The DMG will from January 2019 record all incidents of deer RTAs which members become aware of, and also numbers of dead deer within 200 m of the public roadside, and collate and forward for inclusion in future survey works by SNH & the Scottish Government.

The problem is most noticeable during two periods of the year – late spring when new growth comes on verge grasses, and in winter months when the road surfaces are regularly subject to the application of salt treatments due to freezing weather conditions.

Group members in some instances are already undertaking measures such as supplementary feeding and provision of salt licks in strategic locations in an attempt to keep wild deer from grazing on the roadsides.

The group have been involved in work with Deer Commission for Scotland, Police Scotland and Highland Council in the past to reduce DVCs by reducing the number of deer on the road, removing concealing vegetation close to the road and erecting speed sensitive warning signs.

North Ross DMG will monitor DVCs and map these to provide up to date information on DVCs and aim to reduce these to single figures per annum.

Other areas being explored are fencing sections of the A835 to stop deer accessing the road but these are costly to erect and maintain and would have to be privately financed.

Communications Policy

The NRDMG is committed to the transparent communication of all relevant information to its members, to government agencies and to the wider public, with the caveat that some sensitive data will be distributed to group members only.

The primary source of information about the Group will be on the Association of Deer Management Groups' (ADMG) website, on which all information relevant to the group can be located. This will include the Deer Management Plan and associated maps, the NRDMG Constitution, minutes of group meetings, and population models. All local Community Councils, Common Grazing Committees and other relevant interested parties will be made aware of meetings in advance and invited to contribute to the agenda for these.

When appropriate, the group will also publish its work, management and articles of interest within the local newspapers.

The points of contact for the group will be the Secretary and the Chairperson.

The communications policy will be reviewed on a regular basis to take into account the needs of the DMG.

Section 3 Culling and Counts

Deer populations

The principal species of deer on which the fundamental objectives of this plan are to be applied to within the group area, is Red deer. There are however significant populations of Sika deer in localized areas of the group with clear evidence of a spreading population. Roe deer are also found across the group area, predominantly recorded in proximity to (but not exclusive to) woodland and improved agricultural land across the fringes of the group.

The group recognises that Sika are an invasive species and had previously recorded that a policy of eradication was to be applied, in line with the policy for non-native species as defined by SNH. Sika are particularly elusive animals and are understood to have a reproductive capacity described as prolific, when measured against wild red deer where they are recorded in similar habitat and environment.

Sika stalking is growing in popularity, particularly amongst the Scandinavian countries, and Scotland has experienced a real growth in demand for this sporting opportunity. It has become an important economic contributor to a number of group members in NRDMG, and as such they are to be managed where found, to such low densities as to allow the economic harvest, whilst maintaining the population in close check and preventing expansion of its geographical range.

Roe deer where present, particularly in the south of the group area, have offered sporting opportunities for economic benefit to group members over a long period of time, and these benefits should continue to be harvested where appropriate. Roe are to be managed primarily to prevent damage to agricultural crops and woodland establishment. These objectives should not necessarily impact on the groups primary management objectives, which are the management of wild red deer combined with habitat and environmental stewardship.

The axis of this plan is the management and retention of a healthy wild red deer population within the confines of the group area, that exists in harmony with the multitude of other proper land management objectives both of the group members, and those who utilize land for those other purposes.

For the group to achieve this, there needs to be a clear understanding on how wild deer impact on the habitat and the environment in which they are found. That being established, the group require a robust population model in place that illustrates to those with an interest in the group's activities, both from within and out with, that the

group is following best practice in wild deer management, and working collectively for positive outcomes for people, deer, environment, habitat and the economy.

The population model will be built around a baseline helicopter count carried out in early 2019 and thereafter it will be updated during every year of this plan as required, subject to the various elements that can and will impact on it.

The group will thereafter arrange annually, on an agreed date, a fully coordinated count of wild red deer within the whole deer group, with a requirement for group members to provide such resource and time as may be required to carry out the annual count.

The group will also as a matter of importance, carry out annually (early summer) a recruitment count, using a methodology that gives confidence in its outcomes to group members, public bodies with an interest in the group deer population, along with the wider general public.

Wherever possible the group members should endeavor to carry out a proper census of the other species of wild deer found on their landholdings.

All results of the deer census requirements will be reported timeously to the group secretary and within 7 days of the annual count.

A full set of cull and count details for all group members are detailed within the plan appendix. (Appendix 11)