

North Ross Deer Management Group

Annual General Meeting

Held at Alladale Wilderness Reserve, Ardgay

On Wednesday 1st November 2023 at 9.30am.

In Attendance

James Hall – Chair (JH)

David Campbell – Director (DC)

Helen Watson – Secretary (HW)

Association of Deer Management Group – Tom Turnbull

West Ross Deer Management Group – Dr Linzi Seivwright

East Ross Deer Management Group – Robert Franklin

Centre for Good Relations – Sam Tedcastle

NatureScot – Megan Rowland (MR) & Jimmy Irvine (JI)

The European Nature Trust – Jacob Dykes & Kate Heightman

Forestry Land Scotland – Tom Cameron (TC) & Derick Macaskill (DM)

Edinburgh University – Janet Fisher, Callum Lewy-Wilson

Alladale – Paul Lister, Innes Macneill (IM), Alex Moore,

Ross Westrade, Hugh Fulleston-Smith,

Braelangwell – Finlay McCulloch

Corriemulzie – Hubert Colvin (online) (HC) & Ali Mackenzie (AM)

Croick – Carol Hall

Glencalvie – Nicholas Forman Hardy (online)(NFH) ,

Andrew Sutherland (AS) & Alastair Harington (AH)

Kildermorie – Ian Duncan (ID), Carol Duncan, Sam Thompson (ST)

Langwell – Rob Cooper (RC)

Leckmelm – Tom Hodgkiss (online)

Loubcroy – Simon Scott (SS)

Novar – Ronald Munro Ferguson (RMF)

Strathvaich – Patrick Creasey, Donald Macrae (DM)

Summer Isles – Innes Kerr (IK)

Wyvis – Hugh O'Donnell, (HOD) Sinclair Coghill (SC)

Apologies

Braemore & Droma – Christopher Kiaer Thomsen, Wayne Grant

Clath Liath – Ian Collier

East Rhidorroch – Julien Legrand

East Sutherland Deer Management Group – Sir Michael Wigan

Forestry Land Scotland - Megan Bregazzi

Highland Rural – Nigel Fraser

Inverlael Deer Forest – Hendrik J E van Beuningen, Jake Buckthorp
 Langwell - Paul Dacre
 Ledmore – Jamie Bain
 North West Sutherland Deer Management Group – Tom Chetwynd
 Novar - Aaron Winton
 Rhidorroch – Charles Harrison
 West Sutherland Deer Management Group – Alan Balfour

No.	Item	Action
1.	<p>Welcome</p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone to the Annual General Meeting, thanked the Chairs of other Deer Management Groups for coming and also gave a special welcome to Tom Turnbull from the Association of Deer Management Groups. We were pleased that the team from The Centre of Good Relations have come along and will welcome suggestions on ways to make the NRDGM as effective as possible. We are at the newly constructed meeting room at Alladale Wilderness Reserve and are delighted that Paul Lister has offered to host and once the core business has been delivered, we will enjoy looking around the reserve.</p>	
2.	<p>Apologies</p> <p>The above apologies were read out by HW.</p>	
3.	<p>Minutes of previous AGM on 25th October 2022</p> <p>There were no matters arising from the previous meeting other than DC mentioned Maree Todd, MSP did attend a subsequent meeting following being unable to attend the AGM.</p> <p>Cull Report</p> <p>The latest cull report for the group was distributed (see attached) and JH asked the group how they felt the stag season had gone:</p> <p>Corriemulzie</p> <p>AM said they had a good season with a late rut due to warm weather. Stags started roaring and then stopped and then a full rut. The beasts were all in good condition.</p> <p>Strathvaich</p> <p>DM – late rut, stags in good condition, shot 58 which is less than normal, seeing less mature stags on Strathvaich.</p>	

3.

Kildermorie

ST – reasonable season on Kildermorie, rut on hill was reasonable but later in the forestry than he has seen in the past two years, lack of deer in the North East forest. Very heavy rain at end of season caused a tail off but then at the start of the hind season there were stags holding hinds again. Better Sika rut than Red rut. Deer condition was good.

Glencalvie

AS - Stags fattest seen. Good season with late rut.

Alladale

Fed up with wet, windy weather! Have been doing a reduction cull for years however not feeling any impact, there's an abundance of males coming into Alladale, there are groups of males and males holding hinds, still culling and will reach their 120 target. Awaiting what the helicopter count finds.

AH asked what everyone was feeling about the removal of the stag season, would estates continue to cull stags? JH stated that those estates who used a NatureScot licence to shoot stags out of season would continue to shoot without the need to get a licence but most estates who didn't typically shoot out of season would probably continue with the seasonal model. JH asked TT what he thought? TT stated that he didn't have official guidance, but the ADMG did oppose the ending of the stag season during the consultation process as he thought that reflected what the majority of the members wanted. It was a disappointing process, which he has raised with the Minister. However, with the removal of the stag season going forward there will be more monitoring of the culling and there will be less of an excuse not to meet culls if you are under pressure to do so and NatureScot have written to all estates with their intention to meet the 10 deer per sq/km model. ID stated they will be sticking to the seasonal model, but he has heard that already in Germany there are companies offering clients a package to shoot deer in November. TT said that there are some estates offering sporting packages later than they would normally but generally estates were sticking to the seasonal model.

DC said that there is a NatureScot letter which has been distributed to all estates, which as TT touched on, the 10 deer per sq/km model would be adhered to and reminding landowners of their responsibilities. JH took the letter as the first step in a process where they will be monitoring cull targets closely and putting pressure on estates to meet cull targets, especially where there are designated sites.

JH introduced MR who is our new wildlife management officer, and stated there is a general uncertainty of deer numbers in our group but the helicopter count started yesterday, and he hoped that it gets completed this week. Our population model and deer management plan are both due to be updated within the next year and this will follow on from the findings of the helicopter count and the revised guidance from NatureScot.

RMF asked how NatureScot deal with trees in the helicopter counts? He stated that they have a deer count every five years but this year they estimate they have about 18-19 deer per sq/km inside their strategic fence, which is mostly forest, and the deer mostly Sika. JI replied as he is organising the helicopter count for NatureScot. He said there is a bit of a mixed bag approach when counting deer in woodland from a helicopter depending on the structure of the woodland. Where the trees are young you can see the deer running around under the trees from the helicopter but if the trees are older then it's not possible to count from the helicopter and that's why when doing a white count there is the chance that deer are sheltering in the woods. However, this year with the black ground conditions hopefully the deer are mostly out on the open range where it is easy to do the count. JH also mentioned that there is some experimental work going on with drones, would this help counting in woodland? JI said that if the trees were 30+ years old you still would not see deer with a drone so there are still limitations so dung counting can help but there is no ideal way of counting deer in woodland.

DC asked DM from Forestry Land Scotland finding in woodland with reference to red deer and sika, he has been told that Sika are increasing in numbers in woodland? DM said that they do dung counting in woodlands, along with drone but with dense woodland you will not count them with thermal imaging. As far as Sika goes, he has been involved in this area for 20+ years and they are hard on the Sika deer, and they are not shooting any less and proportionally there are more Sika to red. Sika are not really seen in south Scotland but north of the Dornoch firth there are significantly more sika probably 50/50 but south of Dornoch it gets less and less. RMF said that on Novar 75% of deer culled last year were Sika and that number has been increasing year on year. DM stated that there are forests locally where red deer were the dominant species, but in Ben Mhor for instance it's now 90% Sika. DC said he lives by Novar and on several occasions, he has seen a Sika hind with twins. DM stated this is not unusual and they have shot Sika hinds in October with large embryo inside due to be born within two weeks, so their breeding season is not just during the rut season. They have also

shot calves around Christmas time which were born early that year and they have also been pregnant, so it shows how they are breeding. JH asked were the red deer easier to control or were the Sika pushing the red deer out. DM stated that it is easier to control red deer.

JH asked how the helicopter count was going and JI said that the count went well yesterday with the glen between Alladale and Strathvaich done yesterday which is a third of the group and tomorrow there is 3 helicopters and 3 on Friday so hopefully that will ensure the count is completed in daylight hours. Tomorrow will be Alladale, Croick, Strathvaich and then the remainder on Friday.

Approximate numbers will hopefully be available within 2 weeks, but maps would take about a month.

HC asked will estates be held to account to achieve targets set if they haven't met them? JH thought that NatureScot will be more focused on hind cull and estates will be held to account. Even if delivered targets are not achieving improvements in land condition and deer numbers are seen as higher from the helicopter count than previously thought it will be a pressure from NatureScot and it will be habitat lead.

Owners have to be accountable to themselves to improve their land. A number of estates in the group are in a Section 7 and the only way to get out of the Section 7 is to improve the land conditions, and part of this is signing up to cull numbers so we do need to work hard to deliver targets.

MR agreed that hind targets are the key to managing deer numbers be it maintaining or reducing numbers.

ID stated that deer are only one of the variables of the condition of the ground as they are not the only herbivores affecting the condition of the habitat, the emphasis has to go on the habitat condition and managing all herbivores to achieve a sustainable habitat. Most estates have been carrying out extensive habitat surveys and going forward we have a way to go to put a plan in place to address ground conditions – it is a 20 to 50 year restoration process.

TT stated that the ADMG are carrying out habitat assessments and looking at the data they are trying to establish trends however, the Scottish Government seem to be focused on deer density as their measure for legislation and main factor to improve habitat condition. He encouraged everyone to

	<p>continue to carry out habitat assessments and undertake planting or peatland restoration or anything else that will be linked to habitat impact assessments.</p>	
<p>4.</p>	<p>Financial Statement for year 1st October 2022 to 30th September 2023 (please see attached statement)</p> <p>DC read out the Financial Statement for the above year and stated subscriptions are made up of two elements. The first element being land area, which is retained by NRDMG to run the group funds. The second element is made up of each estate's 5-year cull average of all deer species which is reported to NatureScot annually. Current charges are £4 for stags, £2 for hinds and calves and £1 for roe and others. This portion is forwarded to the ADMG towards their running costs. As there is often a discrepancy of what is reported to us and NatureScot it would be very helpful to be sent a copy of the return send to NatureScot in June to try and align totals – please send to helen@hils.ltd.</p> <p>The higher balance that we have in funds was due to retaining funds towards HIA assessments and gathering funds for our helicopter count. As NatureScot have funded the helicopter count as part of the Section 7 agreement and estates paying individually for the majority of HIA assessments we will be reducing the funds held and have set the pence per hectare at 5p this year as opposed to previous years where it has been between 15p to 20p. Estates have paid individually for HIA as most are able to claim the VAT back where as the NRDMG is not VAT registered due to the small amount of annual transactions.</p> <p>Should we get out of the Section 7 and we then may have to pay for a future helicopter count then we will need to start increasing funds to cover the coming costs.</p> <p>JH asked the group if anyone had any comments on the Financial Statement, however there were no queries raised on the report.</p>	

5.	<p>Proposed Budget for 1st October 2023 to 30th September 2024 (see attached)</p> <p>DC read out the proposed budget for the coming year and again we have proposed 5p per hectare so that we are just covering the running costs of NRDMG.</p> <p>There is a small amount for training and DC said if anyone was interested in IT training, we would be happy to arrange training. Otherwise, there may be other training needs identified during the year.</p> <p>ID asked why the money in and money out to ADMG were not the same amount? HW said that due to the differential in what we have reported as the 5-year average cull amounts and what is reported to NatureScot there is a contingency there if needed.</p> <p>ID asked was the levy only on red deer. TT and HW stated that we are charged on all species.</p> <p>JH asked were there any other queries? With no further queries he asked if the proposed budget was approved, and it was confirmed as approved by the group.</p> <p>Tom Turnbull – Association of Deer Management Group Chair TT thanked JH for inviting him to the NRDMG AGM and read out some of the key changes in legislation coming into effect, which are in full detail in the ADMG Autumn Update.</p> <p>Some of the legislative changes have already come into place such as the end of the close season for male deer and the minimum bullet weight being reduced to 80 grains. Use of thermal and image intensifying sights will become legal in Scotland from November. JI pointed out that the thermal and image intensifying sights have not yet been signed off so if you are planning using these sights please check first!</p> <p>TT stated that there is a consultation on The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan and deer managers have until the 14th of December to respond to the framework. He stated that the ADMG would be preparing a full response but encouraged all deer managers and DMG's to respond as well.</p>	

	<p>https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-nature-emergency-consultation-scotlandsstrategic-framework-biodiversity/documents/</p> <p>The main actions for deer are as follows:</p> <p>Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan Consultation</p> <p>The main actions for deer are as follows:</p> <p>Substantially reduce deer densities across our landscapes in parallel with ensuring sustainable management of grazing by sheep to improve overall ecosystem health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce new deer legislation which will modernise the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 and introduce new powers for intervention for the purposes of enhancing or restoring nature, including preventing biodiversity loss, by 2025. 	
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a national deer management programme including monitoring capacity. • Set deer cull to level at which habitats and ecosystems can recover and regenerate and deer densities are maintained at sustainable levels and appropriate to context by 2030; • Broad targets of 2 deer per km2 in priority woodland, 5-8 deer per km2 in Cairngorms National Park and 10 deer per km2 nationally by 2030. • Explore how best to support optimal herbivore densities to enhance biodiversity outcomes in the uplands. • Establish mechanisms to ensure new and existing woodlands are designed to enable effective and safe deer management such as within revised FGS by 2027. <p>TT said that you can respond to only the questions that are deer related.</p> <p>Environment Bill</p> <p>The Scottish Government is developing draft deer legislation, based on the 2019 Deer Working Group report and recommendations, for introduction in 2024, to be preceded by a full public consultation later this year. These changes will be part of a wider Environment Bill.</p> <p>Some of the legislation did need tidying up but would have liked a revised Deer Act rather than just having deer as part of the Environment Bill which has mudded the waters rather than clarified some points.</p>	

	<p>Common Ground Forum</p> <p>Organisations and individuals across the Highlands have come together to form The Common Ground Forum (CGF). Initiated by ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK with the aim of setting aside long entrenched disagreements over some areas relating to deer management, the Forum includes deer stalkers, foresters, farmers, landowners, community representatives, nature conservationists and many others. ADMG is also providing financial support to the project.</p> <p>This coming together represents a commitment to work together while respecting different viewpoints, and already a number of joint initiatives are planned.</p> <p>‘Our Common Ground Accord’ sets out seven commitments including identifying a common purpose, respecting others’ objectives, and working for mutually beneficial solutions. The Accord has so far been signed by more than 25 of the key organisations with an interest in wild deer management. For further details see www.thecommongroundforum.scot</p>	
	<p>TT would like all DMG’s to sign up to Our Common Ground Accord as it gives deer stalkers a voice. There will be a workshop in March for any stalkers who would like to attend.</p> <p>The Scottish Venison Market has written to the Scottish Government asking for a subsidised venison price and this is being considered as one of the incentives going forward for deer management.</p> <p>ADMG Programme Ahead</p> <p>London Discussion & Dinner – 13th November in London Please contact clare.irving@bidwells.co.uk if you would like to attend.</p> <p>Regional Meeting on Zoom – Tuesday 5th December at 5pm Again, please contact clare.irving@bidwells.co.uk if you would like to register.</p> <p>ADMG AGM – 13th March at Kingsmills, Inverness</p> <p>DMG Health Checks. ADMG is scoping arrangements for a voluntary DMG Health Check for Spring 2024.</p>	

	<p>DeerMap. Development of a predictive landscape scale mapping tool for deer managers is progressing and ADMG will hope to provide an update at the AGM in March.</p> <p>Scottish Venison We will be looking at ways of raising funds to support the marketing of Scottish venison as currently they are only given £20,000 per year to market venison. There will be a full day event 'Taking Stock – the Scottish Venison Summit' held at the Birnam Arts and Conference Centre on Monday 20th November where we will look at ways to try and get a better price for our venison. for more information: mail@scottish-venison.info This will be looking at kick starting the venison market and better understand why we cannot get a good price for our venison.</p> <p>IM – was speaking to a game dealer last week who has had an influx of deer over the last 3 weeks and the dealer said there is no market for the venison and until he gets government support for this period, he might be dropping the price to record low levels. What he is failing to understand is that people come to Scotland to shoot deer in the rut which makes the majority of the market during a 5 week period. The dealer is willing to offer more money in July and August but that just won't happen. We are getting half of what we were getting 4 years ago.</p>	
	<p>IM asked TT what he thought the chance of getting the government to support the venison price? TT agreed that we have difficulty in the venison price, and we used to send a lot of venison abroad which has now created many difficulties since Brexit and even completing the many forms in the wrong colour of ink can mean the meat is not exported. To be fair to the Scottish government we have received £250,000 support since COVID for the venison market and we are providing a very good product so what we need the Scottish Government to do is put more venison into schools and hospitals. We need to get more people eating venison.</p> <p>There was then a general discussion around the best time for quality meat and marketing of venison. JI stated that NatureScot are more involved in the marketing of venison and creating incentives.</p> <p>ID asked TT if he had heard about an extension to the hind season. He had heard that the season was likely to be extended</p>	

	<p>from 1st September to the 31st of March. TT said that the season is under review, and he thought it likely to happen.</p> <p>Jl said that there is talk among various organisations for revised dates but the dates that hinds can be shot under authorisation is from 1st September to 31st March so it may be that this paperwork exercise is also removed, and the season extended.</p> <p>TT said it is even more emotive that the removal of the stag season and that landowners may choose to retain their culling as the traditional season dates. SC commented that there is a differential as to what is unpleasant to do and what is good welfare for deer. He has culled hinds towards the end of March, however there is no welfare issues for the unborn calves, they will just die. It is an area where people in the industry can fall out with each other.</p> <p>JH summarised the key take away in that although we have seen lots of changes already it is only the first steps in the changes to come in the next two or three years.</p> <p>The core business completed, and the meeting ended at 10.55am.</p>	
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