

North Ross Deer Management Group Annual General Meeting
Held at Braemore Estate on Wednesday 6th November 2024 at 10am

In attendance:

Christopher Kiaer Thomsen (Acting Chair)	CKT
David Campbell (Director)	DC
Helen Watson (Secretary)	HW
Graeme Taylor - NatureScot	GT
Innes Macneil - Alladale	IM
Wayne Grant – Braemore & Droma	WG
Ally Sutherland - Croick	AS
Ali Mackenzie - Corriemulzie	AM
Kurt Connell - Corriemulzie	KC
Julien Le Grand – East Rhidorroch	JLG
Andrew Sutherland - Glencalvie	ASu
Ian Duncan - Kildermorie	ID
Sam Thompson - Kildermorie	ST
Jamie Bain - Ledmore	JB
Sinclair Coghill - Wyvis	SC

Apologies:

James Hall – Croick (Chair)
Tom Turnbull – Chair of ADMG
Finlay McCulloch – Braelangwell
Ian Collier – Clath Liath
Nicholas Forman Hardy – Glencalvie
Alistair Harington – Glencalvie
Bastiaan Vandraager – Inverlael Deer Forest
Jake Buckthorp – Inverlael Deer Forest
Rob Cooper – Langwell
Tom Hodgkiss – Leckmelms Deer Forest
Henry Bulmer - Ledmore
Simon Scott – Loubcroy
Donald Macrae – Strathvaich
Charles Harrison – West Rhidorroch
Hugh O'Donnell - Wyvis
Megan Rowland – NatureScot

Estates Unrepresented

Clath Liath

Foulis

Inverlael Deer Forest

Langwell

Leckmelm Deer Forest

Loubcroy

Morefield

Novar Estate

Strathvaich

West Rhidorroch

Welcome

CKT welcomed everyone to Braemore Estate and thanked them for their attendance here today. CKT gave a brief history of Braemore Estate and his purchase around 9 years ago. He explained his objectives for Braemore as being the overall improvement of the natural environment and biodiversity by working in collaboration with other group members.

Apologies were read out as above.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

DC thanked CKT for hosting the AGM at Braemore today. It is good to hold meetings at different estates so that everyone can have a look around other estates and hear about their objectives in running their estate.

DC ran through the previous minutes and the only amendments were as follows:

Item 5 – East Sub-Group Report Line 3

ID commented that the weather on the day of the count made “Kildermorie” not the “East Sub Group” look better on the day.

Item 6 – NatureScot Report

GT commented that there was no appetite within NatureScot to escalate the Section 7 “unless absolutely necessary” - as an addition to the report.

Matters Arising

7. HIA – Colin Morrison

DC reported that CM has reported that generally there is an improvement in the overall habitat conditions for the estates he reports on. This does not mean that every parcel has shown improvement, but that each estate has made a general improvement.

8. Deer Management Plan

The HIA report is yet to be finalised and distributed by NatureScot and until we have information on the HIA conditions the plan will not be updated accurately so this is still to be addressed. As a group we also need to decide how we want our revised Deer Management Plan to look, do we just want an update of the previous model or do we want a wider land management plan, of which the deer are a part of? So, this is open to further discussion at a future date.

Action - All

9. Deer Management Restoration Orders

DC prepared and sent a group response to Maree Todd and Lorna Slater with regard to the consultation. A copy of his response was sent to members at the time.

The minutes were then approved by ID and seconded by SC.

Financial Statement for 1st October 2023 to 30th September 2024 - See Attached

The figures from the financial statement were read out by DC. He explained that invoices to estates were made up of two parts – the overall Ha by the agreed pence per Ha agreed at last year's AGM (which pays to run the NRDMG), along with a 5-year average cull, (which is passed to the ADGM).

Following the information DC asked if there were any questions regarding the Income/Expenditure and no questions were raised.

Draft Budget for 1st October 2024 to 30th September 2025 – See Attached

The suggested figures from the financial statement were read out with an increase in Ha pence from 5p to 9p. ID asked why there was such an increase if there was no immediate need for the large balance at the end of the year.

DC explained that the Section 7 had expired in July, and the proposed increase was the start of gathering funds for the next helicopter count, should we not be under a further Section 7 once the HIA results are shared from NatureScot.

ID suggested that we reduce the levy, however given that we do not know what the future governance from NatureScot will be, other members would like to retain the increase. Generally, it was agreed that we would not approve this budget today but will await the full report from NatureScot regarding the HIA carried out in the summer and review the figures at our next meeting.

Another expense we do have to consider is that we will have the revised Deer Management Plan. GT stated that Scottish Forestry has a Forestry Cooperation Scheme

Grant running which accepts costs involved in updating deer plan as a funding need and up to £10,000 could be granted –this will be investigated once we decide what the revised deer plan format is discussed.

Action – All

Review of Stag Season & Discussion on Stag Population

DC would like all estates present to give a review of their stag season. When the helicopter count was carried out on 6th & 7th November last year we were given the group numbers for stags, hinds and calves and target culls were set with those numbers and the location of deer. What has become apparent from dialogue with various estates/stalkers is that the deer are not where they were at the time of the count.

IM commented that the deer were counted on an East Wind on black ground and the deer were definitely displaced from usual areas seen in a white count.

Braemore

WG reported that this season has been the toughest since he started in Braemore 17 years ago. Most of the stags shot were out the back at Beinn Dearg which is extremely challenging grounds both in getting there and extracting carcasses. There has been a lack of mature stags. A lot of resident stags left in September, and it was 10th October before anything came in to replace them. Probably due the mild weather the stags are all out the back on high ground. Shot 28 of target of 29.

Alladale

IM shoots male deer, not stags. The other stalkers do not shoot deer under 4 years old, but Alladale's objectives are not sporting and therefore they do not discriminate as to the age of the stags. Deer were in good condition but smaller. Wet weather impacted the cull, having snow on high tops in June. Spied lots of stags on Croick at end of August/September but towards the end of the season no stags seen on Croick. Out again on Monday but still no deer on Croick. Resident hind population deer down and not sure where they are just now.

IM shot 77 Stags of an 80 target but will continue to shoot.

Corriemulzie

AM felt that his stag target was set too high as a number of stags that were on Craggan, which is a part of Loubcroy were included in his numbers. However, they shot 83 of their 95 target. There was a lack of mature stags, a lack of deer at Rhidorroch at the west side of Corriemulzie. The rut was slow to start and lasted about two weeks and then came to

a sudden halt. The stags lost condition very quickly. The last couple of weeks of the season they were looking at a lot of younger stags than usual. The weather has been very mild during the stag season which has made for a difficult cull.

Croick

On the day of the count Croick was found to have a lot more deer than they had thought. A reduction cull was carried out last year and the target was increased for this year. However, this year Croick have not had mature stags to cull, this has become evident over the last 5 years. Croick shot 39 of their 90 target. They also are not seeing hinds. They are so concerned about the lack of deer that they are having Ben Harrower in next week to carry out a deer count on Croick. If Ben does not find the deer, Croick will be looking to reduce their hind target.

Glencalvie

AS stated, that there were less stags around than usual. It was the second week in September before a stag was seen holding hinds. Once the rut got going it was good and lasted until around the second week in October. Has had hinds the last two weeks but on the march with Strathvaich not seeing deer as would normally, it may be the mild weather but will wait to see how it goes. Shot 61 of 80 stag target.

Kildermorie

ST said Kildermorie had a good stag season. They shot 55 of a 45 target. This is ST's 4th season at Kildermorie and thinks that between 40 – 55 stags is a good season at Kildermorie. Stalked harder and this paid off. The west sides of Kildermorie were more productive this season. Kidney fat scores were good – over 60%, stags were a bit blockier. The rut was good but ended about two weeks before the season ended. The helicopter count was about accurate for Kildermorie but around mid-June the hinds moved on, and they haven't come back. Have struggled the first two weeks of the hind season and the deer aren't on the ground. St and another stalker went out last night for a rough count before today and only spied 213 deer on the whole place and at this time of year would expect around 400. ST thinks he will struggle to meet hind target.

Ledmore

JB had a good season and saw lots of mature stags. Rut started the second week in September and was over first week in October. Shot 39 stags of a 30 target. Stag weights good with an average of 15 St 6lb which is up on previous season. The hinds are there and hopeful to meet target of 150 hinds but depends on what happens with the weather. Ledmore have undertaken reduction culls for the past two seasons, but calving rates are high. Extraction is difficult at the moment with mild weather and deer in peat hags but will endeavour to get the target cull. This year they will need help from Langwell and

Loubcroy so that when deer are disturbed on Ledmore the bordering estate will need to be ready to take up the cull or disturb them back.

Rhidorroch

JLG shot 7 of his target of 10. He shot 4 stags with guests however the stags on Ben Damph and rapids which is not that nice with guests having to go so far out. None of the stags were old and this is the second season in a row that the stags are young. He would rather that the stags were shot with guests earning an estate a premium rather than just shot to make up numbers. When the rut starts all the hinds are on Langwell and Loubcroy, as hard shooting on Ben Damph has moved them on to the rapids and the stags are going out for the hinds. JLG said there is a lot of deer on Langwell and Loubcroy that need to be pushed on if they are not going to be shot.

West Rhidorroch shot 19 of a target of 10. CH did contact HW to say his target was too low, however a revised target was never confirmed.

Wyvis

Plenty of stags on the ground. Shot 32 of a target of 43. With an east wind a lot of deer were very high up and some clients were not up to the challenge. Unusually there was a lot of disturbance with walkers and cyclists which is ongoing and turning up in places that they haven't been in the past. Last winter was pretty stormy and resulted in higher mortality and poor calving this year. Target of 140 hinds this year, not seeing anything like the number of deer on the ground, particularly in the north-west area, the Strathvaich end where there was a lot of pressure put on last year. Hopes to achieve the target but nervous of not hitting the target and NatureScot feels the group are underperforming. Weighed everything but don't get much out of stag weights but find the hind and calves weights are really useful. 62% hind calves and 38% stag calves culled which is probably useful to feed into the population model.

There was a general discussion of how best we could work in collaboration to achieve the overall group goal. There was disappointment amongst those attending that every estate was not represented, and a discussion was had on how best to engage everyone to take part in group meetings. An idea was that any estate who could not send a representative to meetings would submit a report with agenda items they had information or opinions on. The group is a voluntary membership, however the legislation set by the Scottish Government affects all landowners and a stronger position will be held by working together to manage the land, of which deer are a part of.

GT said that the group's foremost priority must be to get the hind cull targets distributed in a way that the group will meet the target so that the achievements to date do not slip. There may be some support available from NatureScot with help extracting carcasses from difficult locations.

Also, the group needs to decide what information will be fed into the population model and it is important that accurate data is submitted for the population model i.e. recruitment and mortality.

DC said that it is urgently required that all estates review their hind target and give numbers that they can realistically cull. What must be borne in mind is that the end total needs to be achieved within the group. An email will follow this meeting to request all estates to do this. We cannot come to the end of the hind season and only have shot 70% of the group cull figure, as what has happened in the stag cull.

AM wanted it to be minuted that once we get going all estates must work together and keep it touch so that hinds cannot find a quiet corner to sit in, we must keep them on the move and inform estates when they are on the march and heading their way.

HIA Results

Each estate has been carrying out HIA and building up records of condition. IM expressed concern that he didn't feel that the designated site would ever be in favourable condition and has been asking for years if/when it ever was in favourable condition, without any answers. He has been improving the habitat further down the glen and has seen good improvements, although this takes considerable time.

NatureScot Update

NatureScot has been tasked with going out and doing HIA and condition assessment on Beinn Dearg, the Section 7 site. This was carried out during the summer, which is a year later than planned. The targets for blanket bog and montane acid grassland are for 90% of impacts to be in low or low moderate class with no more than 10% in moderate and none in moderate to moderate-heavy class. Those targets remain and will be a marker of success for the agreement. Presently GT only has interim results and only has collective impacts so only has a direction of travel at the moment. Overall, since the last HIA there has been a reduction in herbivore impacts across most of the site, the collated impacts showed no high impacts the highest been high moderate. Noticeably more low returns than in 2013. Significant number of plots moved downward in impacts since 2013, and the commonest category now recorded are moderate low and low. That is all relatively positive. There are some areas which are higher than the 10% expectation so there are likely some areas which have higher impacts and deer will always choose the furthest away tastiest ground where they are difficult to get to.

No understanding as yet, whether all those herbivore targets have been met for the Section 7 but GT expects the results to be delivered from the contractor in the next three weeks, and he will be pushing the contractor hard to get them.

IM stated that he hoped the climate would be taken into account. The season has been wetter, and as stated earlier there was snow on the top in June, the ground was dead and when it comes back to life it was exactly where the deer go. GT stated they are accepting that there will be areas that will be of a higher impact but the 10% is an overall percentage.

DC asked what will be the way in which estates will be given the report? GT said NatureScot will be sent a draft report which will be distributed to the estates within the Section 7 for their comment and then there will be a meeting together to discuss the report which will then be turned into a final report and GT will be making recommendations on the findings of the report as to the next steps.

Actions will be either continuation of the Section 7 or the deer group to be given back control.

SC asked apart from the HIA condition what would be the other conditions the deer group would have to meet? GT said that the other considerations will be estates are representative, whether there is enough data to make management decisions and the strength of governance in how well you are been chaired and strength of population model. There are deficiencies today in that there are estates not represented and ability to gather data and manage it. To be clear that is not anyone in this room's fault. It is a bit disappointing not to see a higher turnout from estates.

DC said there is nothing in that out with our control.

ID said that then it needs to be in an updated Deer Management Plan. CKT agreed with ID in that we need to decide on what to put in a new plan. IM said that he has had a Deer Management Plan drawn up for Alladale and it is very expensive. GT again said that Scottish Forestry have a grant scheme operating called Forestry Cooperation Grant where up to £10,000 can be applied for.

CKT said that if we cannot access funding then we do need to keep the subscriptions higher in order to pay for it. IM said that funding is not easy to access, and we need NatureScot to support the application.

A discussion was held around future deer counts. GT said he would like to see a count in 3 years rather than leave it 5 years. Historically there is a tendency for groups to relax when out of a Section 7 and culls are not met, resulting in heavy impacts and further action. In the interim recruitment count and mortality rates to be accurately recorded and feed the population model with as much accuracy as possible. Focus on keeping deer numbers controlled.

CKT mention the environmental impact of helicopter counts. GT explained that while drone technology is advancing it is not at a stage that it could be carried out to group open range. It is successful in woodland on small scale. IM commented that it is good in broadleaf woodland, however, not successful in dense mature woodland.

Helicopter hire is costing around £12,000 per day. With this as a possibility several group members said we need to carefully consider the levy, we set the budget at if the group needs to fund this in three years.

JLG asked would we not be better off staying in a Section 7 so that the group would not be responsible for future helicopter counts! However, it is better to self-govern rather than be state governed.

DC said that it was good that everyone here today took the opportunity to take part in the meeting and give honest feedback. Everyone present agreed that we need to have a representation from every estate so that group decisions could be made as it is quite unfair that those here has made the effort while others have not.

ST asked GT if NatureScot had any powers over the estates who don't come to group meetings. GT responded that while they do not have any powers, they are happy to speak to individual estates if they are affecting the overall operation of the group. 50% of a group turnout is not sufficient for a group to operate successfully.

DC will speak to James Hall and will come up with a strategy to emphasise the importance of the deer management group, of attendance at deer management group meetings, of reporting deer management data as and when they are asked to.

DC thanked CKT for hosting the meeting and providing lunch which was enjoyed by all, and we look forward to having a look around the estate after lunch.

The next meeting date will be set following information received on hind cull targets.

