

**MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING
HELD VIA ZOOM
THURSDAY 24th MARCH 2022**

Present:	Randal Wilson Donald Rice Alasdair MacDonald Angus Davidson Jake Buckthorp David Lilley Barbara MacDonald Glyn Robson Kenny Ross Edgar Seligman David Bennett	Chairman Dundonnell Dundonnell Fannich Foich Heights of Kinlochewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Strathbran Strathbran
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Caroline Cook Graeme Taylor	Secretary/Treasurer Bowlts Chartered Surveyors NatureScot
Apologies:	Stuart Allison Ruari Matheson Hendrik van Beuningen Tom Cameron Gary Ross Norman Kelman Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Aidan Bell Andrew Oliver Paul Swan Ben McKeown	Eilean Darach Fannich Foich Forestry and Land Scotland Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverbroom Letterewe Letterewe Letterewe NatureScot

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN Action

Randal Wilson (RW) welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for taking the time to attend. Since the group last met in November, there are stag/hind culls to discuss, recruitment counts to do and continued population modelling.

He also advised that he had decided, after 11 years in the Chair, to step back and let someone else take on the management of the group going forward. He confirmed that his last meeting as Chair would be at the AGM in May/June.

Further, the group will shortly need to update its Deer Management Plan and so he felt it was an appropriate time to hand over the reins.

From/

From previous enquiries, he knows that there are not many volunteers for the role as Chair and so there was an item on the Agenda today to discuss the options available. He mentioned a paid “facilitator” role which seems to work for other groups including North Ross, East Ross and the Monadhliaths to name but three. However, he advised that this does come with increased costs. He mentioned that the demand on time on running a deer management group has escalated greatly over the last 10 years and for this reason, he was quite happy to consider a paid “facilitator” taking on the workload in the event of no-one volunteering to take on the role. He suggested that facilitators have been around deer management and the running of groups for quite a long time and some have years of experience of the complexities and challenges that arise and so they can be well placed to take on these responsibilities.

RW confirmed that there would be plenty of time to debate this issue as we move through the Agenda.

2. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 3rd NOVEMBER 2021**

2.1 **Adoption**

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous meeting, this being proposed by Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran and seconded by Kenny Ross (KR) of Lochrosque.

2.2 **Matters Arising**

It was agreed that all of the issues noted as being actionable in the previous meeting had either been dealt with or would be dealt with through items on the Agenda.

3. **REVIEW OF ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

RW reminded the group of the schedule of actions that we use at our meetings and this was shared on the screen. Further, it was noted that this schedule of actions was updated after every meeting.

3.1 **Designated Sites**

RW took the group through the plan target relating to designated sites which currently were described as unfavourable as a result of herbivore impact and the need to have deer management in place to work towards a favourable/unfavourable recovering status. He highlighted the Fannich Hills Section 7 Agreement/

Agreement issue where there now appeared to be a consensus that things were heading in the right direction and asked Graeme Taylor (GT) of NatureScot to update the group on the current position.

GT advised that there appeared to be consensus within NatureScot that the management of the Fannich Hills Section 7 Agreement area should revert to the Deer Management Group, but advised that he wanted to obtain confirmation of this from his colleagues before confirming. He confirmed that NatureScot will undertake a helicopter count of the area within the next five years and in addition would undertake to do the habitat impact assessment for the area.

GT

RW widened the debate and invited Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart to give his view. GR confirmed that he was happy with the NatureScot position, as was Angus Davidson (AD) of Fannich, Jake Buckthorp (JB) of Foich and Kenny Ross (KR) of Lochrosque. In saying that, KR said that it was still important that there was good communication between the group and NatureScot.

The meeting then moved on to discuss the Management Plan for An Teallach, where Megan Rowland had undertaken to send Ken Bowlts (KSB) a copy of the completed Management Plan that had been prepared, but to date this had not arrived. GT undertook to send a copy of the Management Plan as signed off to KSB. He also confirmed that NatureScot were happy with the process and outcome of the Management Plan preparation.

GT

Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell confirmed that the direction of travel is good, with impacts on An Teallach as low as they have been for many years. Alasdair MacDonald (AM) of Dundonnell said he was not sure that the Plan had actually been finalised.

GT advised that the Letterewe Woods were being re-surveyed this year. It had been planned previously but had been delayed for various reasons. He was hoping for some good results from the survey, given the amount of work put in on the part of the estate over the last few years.

3.2 **Retaining Existing Native Woodland Cover**

RW took the group through the plan target, where the group committed to reviewing the condition of native woodland within the group area and to facilitate any action that may be required to retain and improve the condition of native woodlands, exploring options for funding.

RW mentioned the group's agreement that it should wait until a common standard was determined for the methodology of surveying the woodlands and/

and asked GT for an update on where we were with regard to agreeing a suitable methodology. GT confirmed that a draft methodology was currently being “road tested” on Ben Eighe and Glen Affric. He confirmed that he would circulate a link so that we could see the draft methodology as it currently stands. He advised that following the road testing, the methodology should be available at some point over the summer.

GT

3.3 **New Woodlands**

The group’s plan encouraged members to explore the possibility of woodland expansion in the context of deer management needs and in the event of woodland expansion being undertaken by group members, consideration would be given to deer population levels via the deer population model.

KSB confirmed that GR of Lochluichart had sent on the details of the new woodlands and he confirmed that at some point these would be included within the group’s maps.

The group was reminded by RW to keep KSB informed of their woodland proposals, both completed and any future ones, so that this information could be properly collated.

3.4 **Carbon Sensitive Habitats**

RW took the group through the plan target regarding carbon sensitive habitats, where the group undertook to consider opportunities and priorities for the creation and restoration of peatlands, identifying funding sources where possible. Further, the group will encourage members to minimise surface damage to peatland. He acknowledged that this was a fairly active area for the group and a great deal of progress has been made, this being shown on the updated maps issued previously.

At the last meeting, GR of Lochluichart confirmed that he would let KSB have a map of their two schemes so that they could be included in the group’s Plan and KSB confirmed that he had done this.

KSB also advised that ES of Strathbran had reverted to KSB to confirm that there had been a delay in their works from 2022 to 2023, but that in due course the details would be confirmed.

ES

KSB confirmed that AD of Fannich continued to liaise with KSB on work being undertaken on Kinlochewe, Fannich and Gruinard.

RW/

RW encouraged group members to take advantage of the peat wetland scheme run by NatureScot in support of the carbon sequestration initiative.

3.5 **Habitat Monitoring**

At our previous meeting, RW had reminded everyone of the need to get back round the sample plots, a requirement of our plan target. He reminded everyone that the habitat monitoring surveys were to be carried out at three year intervals, with monitoring data being fed back and collated by the group for consideration. He invited group members to say where they were in terms of revisiting their sample plots, with AM of Dundonnell, AD of Fannich and Gruinard, JB of Foich and David Bennett (DB) of Strathbran confirming that they had the re-survey of their sample plots in hand, to be carried out this season.

Further, David Lilley (DL) of Heights of Kinlochewe undertook to clarify where Norman Kelman (NK) was in terms of resampling (DL subsequently confirmed that the resampling work was in hand for this season).

It was also confirmed at the meeting that Kinlochewe, Letterewe, Lochluichart and Lochrosque had all carried out the re-survey. GR agreed to chase Cathy Mayne to forward on the results to KSB.

GR

RW confirmed it was good to see that if people hadn't completed their plots, work was very much in hand, and that it would be fascinating to see the results relative to the base data previously collected.

3.6 **Deer Population and Population Model**

Before considering the detailed model, RW stressed that the collection of the data for the recruitment counts was vital. He asked that as many and as large groups be counted, with full details of hind numbers and calves returned so that the group could get as accurate picture on the recruitment into the group's herd as possible.

KSB ran through the model's figures, starting with the cull figures for the 2021/22 season. He explained that all the figures were in with the exception of Corriemoillie (Friday family), Tournaig and Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS). For the purpose of examining the figures, he explained that the target figures for FLS had been inserted, given that they didn't collate their figures until the end of March. Subject to the above, the cull figures for the 2021/22 season indicated 408 stags, 537 hinds and 180 calves. Generally everyone had hit or exceeded targets in respect of stag culls, a few were below on hind culls, but overall the picture was reasonably good. He showed how these figures were then/

then pulled through to the population model itself, which showed us moving slowly towards a slightly better ratio of stags to hinds which had started at 1:1.59 at the last helicopter count to the current position of 1:1.58. A small move in the right direction. What the model showed was in summary a reasonably good picture, but there was a clear indication that the hind cull had to be kept up as the alternative was that herd numbers could run away with us.

GT agreed with the summary position and confirmed that he considered the position relatively good, with the group positively seeking data and actively using the deer population model. He did confirm that it was vital for recruitment counts to be as accurate as possible as this would give a better idea of where the population was moving and also it would be good to have a helicopter count at some point to give a “sense check” of the model. He confirmed that he would try and get an idea where the group was in the NatureScot count programme, given that the last count was in 2018.

GT

3.7 **Deer Welfare**

RW confirmed that not a lot of progress has been made. It was noted that Megan Rowland was to chase Sinclair Coghill to see if some way of interpreting the data could be agreed. RW hoped that this could be simple, without requiring too much more data, as we were already pressing group members to collect quite a lot.

GT confirmed that whilst carcass weights are helpful in terms of giving an indication as to welfare, it was also useful to combine this with mortality data and getting some measure of the extent to which stalkers are having to cull deer that are in poor condition.

GT also took the opportunity to raise the issue of deer marauding in towns/villages, and in particular in Poolewe, where the local community council had been in touch with NatureScot. It was noted that this was also a problem in Mallaig and Kinlochleven. Part of the issue was people feeding deer within the villages. When queried as to what the problem was, he said there was general concern about deer being in the village, but there definitely was a split in public opinion, some people don't like the deer there, others are actively feeding them, and there was a problem that needed discussion in order to resolve. He indicated that the estates near Poolewe may be drawn into discussions to see what could be done.

Barbara MacDonald (BM) advised that there were also issues in Gairloch, with people having to erect deer fences to impede marauding deer in the village.

RW/

RW suggested that the matter be raised with Aidan Bell at the National Trust and the suggestion was that GT would ask Ben McKeown to speak to BM to see if anything can be done.

GT

4. **FUTURE MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE GROUP**

RW confirmed that it was his intention to step down as Chairman at the AGM. His suggestion was that either someone stepped up to take over the role, or a facilitator be appointed, the suggestion being that the cost might be somewhere between £10,000-£15,000 per annum. Whatever route was chosen, RW advised that he was keen to have a structure in place with his retiral looming.

ES thanked RW for all his work over the years, and also KSB and his office. He queried who would chair the meeting if a facilitator was in place and RW suggested that in some cases, a facilitator can chair.

GR queried how the additional cost would be financed. It was noted that the costs of running the group were currently apportioned between the estates on the basis of their historic stag cull, but GR queried whether we could also take into account hinds and possibly area too. ES said that whatever we decided, there would have to be a consensus, and RW agreed with this, as did GR. ES queried whether we could get a budget and there can then be discussion between owners via telephone. KSB agreed to produce a budget for circulation.

KSB

AM queried whether it would be worthwhile asking David Campbell (the party who had submitted a facilitator proposal) to come along to a meeting and RW indicated that this was probably stage two. The first stage was for the group to decide how it wanted to proceed.

GR queried whether KSB could look at different ways of allocating the annual subscription vis-a-vis stag, stag and hinds, stag, hinds and area, and KSB said that he would try to do this.

KSB

RW at that point asked GT whether he had any view on this and he explained that he was aware that the Monadhliath group had a facilitator in place, Drew MacFarlane-Slack. His impression was that that worked well and that Drew was good at communicating with the group. Generally GT indicated that it didn't matter how the group organised itself, as long as the business gets done.

BM suggested that it was probably better for the Chairperson to be an owner, if possible, and that it would also be good if a way could be found to keep Bowlts, so that the group could benefit from continuity, and retain all the benefits achieved over recent years.

On/

On a cautionary note, DR compared the Deer Management Group to his experience with fishery boards, where there seemed to be an ever increasing workload being carried out on behalf of the Government. He suggested that he was beginning to feel “volunteer fatigue”. RW confirmed that he had that sensation too, hence his wish to step back.

There was a general consensus in the group that the workload of the group had increased over the years and AD agreed with this from his own experience.

AM queried, if there was to be a change, who would own the data, and RW clarified that the group would own the data.

After an extensive discussion, it was agreed that KSB would try to produce the above budget for circulation and that there then should be a Zoom meeting at some point in April with the owners to see where that gets us in terms of moving forward with this issue and following that, we would set a date for the AGM.

KSB

4. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

KR raised the copper versus lead ammunition and queried where NatureScot was. GT advised that NatureScot had been using copper for a while, but when asked to enter into discussion on this, his heart sinks. He advised that NatureScot had struggled to find suitable ammo, but during the course of the switch to copper, they tend to be aiming higher up and a little further forward nearer the shoulder and that now things appear to be working reasonably well.

GT highlighted the issues of the .243 calibre and the discussion as to will they be legal. His suggestion was that people held on to their .243s as ammo was being developed.

KR indicated that he was using 6.5mm Barnes blue tip but these were now unavailable.

There was general recognition that the performance of the copper ammunition and its availability is a continuing problem.

5. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

As above, it was agreed that there would be some debate within the group about the future management and administration, and once that had run through, a date would be set for the AGM, the hope still being that we can have a face to face meeting in late May/early June 2022.