

**MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING
HELD VIA ZOOM
WEDNESDAY 3rd NOVEMBER 2021**

Present:	Randal Wilson Stuart Allison Angus Davidson Jake Buckthorp Craig McIntosh Aiden Bell Barbara MacDonald Glyn Robson Kenny Ross Annabel Wilson Edgar Seligman David Bennett	Chairman Eilean Darach Fannich Foich Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Strathbran Strathbran
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Caroline Cook Megan Rowland	Secretary/Treasurer Bowlts Chartered Surveyors NatureScot
Apologies:	Gordon Crawford Ruari Matheson Hendrik van Beuningen Tom Cameron Gary Ross Norman Kelman Friso Westheim Andrew Oliver Paul Swan	Eilean Darach Fannich Foich Forestry and Land Scotland Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Letterewe Letterewe Letterewe

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Action

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), thanked everyone for attending the virtual meeting, held once again via Zoom. He advised that the group would be holding its next meeting in person if allowed, which might be a pleasant change.

RW advised that today's discussions would be focussed primarily on the forthcoming hind cull and he looked forward to seeing where the consensus took us, although he expressed the view that the group should, at the very least, continue with the maintenance cull.

He mentioned the updating of the Deer Management Plan which is now due, and suggested that as a group we need to start thinking about how we would like to shape/

shape the Plan going forward. Unsurprisingly there will be a cost implication and so he had asked Ken Bowlts (KSB) to start giving some thought to this now so that the proposals could be considered at the next AGM.

RW confirmed his view that the group are now much more than a Deer Management Group and have been for some time and his suggestion was that the new plan should reflect this, even if only a potential name change. He suggested that the new plan might be called “The West Ross Deer and Associated Land Management Plan”, but he welcomed everyone’s thoughts on this.

He advised that there had been recent discussions with the new Chairman of the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), Tom Turnbull, through a meeting of the Chairs and Secretaries, and one of the items on the agenda was the possible rebranding of the Association and where their role lies in the wider land management debate going forward. He advised that this was an evolving narrative but he hoped that everyone would get involved in the discussion.

RW suggested that while the backbone of the group’s Deer Management Plan will remain the same, one thought in particular is going to be continuing with our assessment of the effectiveness of the plan. This has been a critical part of our journey over the last ten years, being able to demonstrate progress, and his view was that it must remain part of the structure going forward. Unfortunately, the Deer Working Group did not recommend keeping the assessments going, possibly because they did not like to see the demonstrable improvement in the deer management sector.

RW advised that there had been a recent communication from NatureScot to all chairs and secretaries with some key messages to take forward and this would need to be circulated and digested by the group. However, RW mentioned that within that communication, there was reference to the sub-10 deer per km² that was recommended and accepted by the Deer Working Group. He advised that this looked like a cornerstone of deer management planning going forward, to reduce the impacts on road safety, agriculture, forestry and peatlands.

He also confirmed that there was information within the communication on the use of trialling drone technology for counting deer and assessing habitat and advised that Angus Davidson (AD) will give further insight into this during our habitat monitoring discussion.

In concluding his welcome, RW confirmed that there was lots going on in the deer world and that it looks like we have a busy year or two ahead of us.

2./

2. **MINUTES OF AGM HELD ON 16th JUNE 2021**

2.1 **Adoption**

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

2.2 **Matters Arising**

KSB mentioned the issue raised by Jake Buckthorp (JB) of Foich regarding whether any funding was available for the tagging of deer. He confirmed that he had now received a response from Megan Rowland (MR) of NatureScot to confirm that no funding was currently available.

The other matter arising concerned the report on the use of non-lead ammunition. KSB confirmed that MR of NatureScot had now let him have this and it would be circulated together with the Minutes of the meeting.

KSB

Other than the above, there were no other matters arising, it being agreed that all of the issues noted as being actionable in the previous Minutes 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 highlighted for the Group the schedule of actions which we use at all our meetings and this was shared on the screen. It was noted that the schedule of actions was updated following every meeting.

3.1 **Designated Sites**

RW reminded the group of the plan target that designated sites currently described as unfavourable as a result of herbivore impact will have deer management in place to work towards a favourable/unfavourable recovering status. He ran through the Fannich Hills Section 7 Agreement where there was now a general consensus that things were heading in the right direction. RW confirmed that the group needs to know where we are going with the Section 7 Agreement, but that he was happy for the management of this area to come within the group. Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart agreed with RW that the management should be moved to the deer management group. Angus Davidson (AD) also agreed that the management of this area needs to be incorporated within the group, although there would be the need for ongoing collaboration with NatureScot. KR of Lochrosque agreed with AD on the ongoing NatureScot involvement.

RW/

RW asked Megan Rowland (MR) to take back to NatureScot the views of the group and she confirmed that she would report to NatureScot and see if we can get sign off such that everyone could agree that the management could come back to the group.

MR

In discussing the above, RW stressed that NatureScot would have to pass back to the group all the data that they have on the Fannich Hills Section 7 area such that this could be utilised by the group moving forward and there would also need to be an undertaking from NatureScot that any future data collated would also be shared with the group.

RW reminded the group of the other target within the designated sites section that the group would commit to reviewing the status of all designated sites within the group area and to facilitate any actions that may be required. Relating to this, RW queried whether the Management Plan for An Teallach was now in operation and Stuart Allison (SA) of Eilean Darach confirmed that he was aware the plan was approved by Eilean Darach, but he wasn't quite sure where everyone else was. MR of NatureScot had no update, but undertook to send a copy of the completed plan to KSB.

MR

Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe, who had previously confirmed that NatureScot had been in touch to advise that the survey they proposed carrying out would be delayed until 2022, had no further update on this.

3.2 **Retaining Existing Native Woodland Cover**

Within the Deer Management Plan, the group had 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 the woodland, exploring options for SRDP funding. In order to meet this target, the group had agreed that it would need to develop a plan to improve the condition of native woodlands and explore funding options.

RW reminded the group that we had effectively been on hold with this plan target due to the lack of an agreed methodology for surveying the woodlands and that the latest suggestion was that NatureScot had produced a methodology which was being considered by the Best Practice Group. However, it appeared that there had been no progress since our last meeting in June 2021 and it was clear that the issue of methodology had yet to be resolved. There was agreement that establishing a standard methodology for all the deer groups was key.

3.3/

3.3 New Woodlands

The target set by the group was for group members to be encouraged to explore the possibility of woodland expansion in the context of deer management needs. In the event of woodland expansion being undertaken by group members, consideration will be given to deer population levels via the deer population model with regarding being had for any changes in range, forage and shelter. GR of Lochluichart confirmed that Lochluichart would begin planting a new woodland next month and confirmed that the would get Steven to forward a copy of the plan to KSB.

GR

BM of Letterewe confirmed that they were still looking at the possibilities with Ben Lennon of Bowlts, but that they hoped to progress at some point in the future.

RW asked group members to keep KSB informed with their proposals, both completed and any future ones, so that this information could be properly collated by the group.

All

3.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

RW restated the Deer Management Plan’s target for the group to consider opportunities and priorities for the creation and restoration of peatlands, identifying funding sources where possible. In addition, the group would encourage members to minimise surface damage to peatland. In order to achieve this target, it was necessary for the group to develop a programme of possible areas for peat restoration and investigate funding options.

GR of Lochluichart confirmed that they have been working on two schemes and had a third one in hand. He confirmed that he would send a map to KSB so this could be incorporated in the group’s plans.

GR

ES of Strathbran confirmed that they would be doing one in 2023 and again confirmed that he would send details of this to KSB.

ES

AD confirmed that he would keep Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts updated on the work he has been undertaking on Kinlochewe, Fannich and Gruinard.

AD

RW continued to encourage the group members to take advantage of the Peat Wetland Scheme run by NatureScot,

3.5 Habitat Monitoring

RW highlighted that at the last meeting in June, it was noted that the three year habitat impact assessments on the original baseline sites were now due and/

and he encouraged everyone who had undertaken the surveys to ensure that the data was forwarded to KSB's office.

All

AD confirmed that he would have the data for Foich, Fannich, Lochrosque and Gruinard forwarded to KSB's office, as did BM for Letterewe.

AD/BM

GR of Lochluichart confirmed that he would have Cathy Mayne forward on their data.

GR

Craig McIntosh (CM) of Inverbroom explained that they are still waiting for their data, but confirmed that once they had it, he would pass it on.

CM

SA of Eilean Darach advised that he was hoping the survey would be done early next year for the Eilean Darach sites.

At this point, AD was invited by RW to explain to the group the work being undertaken on digital data capture and in introducing his colleague, John Dunnet (JD), AD explained that with no progress being made on the SWARD project, they had decided to develop their own way of capturing and pulling the data together.

JD explained to the group that they had been trialling the collection of data using mobile/devices and then loading the data onto an online portal. This data might include not only habitat monitoring data, but also cull, biodiversity and indeed any other data that had GIS significance.

Annabel Wilson (AW) of Lochrosque showed the meeting the waterproof handheld device that they had been using and she advised that it was easy to use. KR of Lochrosque agreed.

JD then showed how the data appeared by sharing his computer screen, with all of the data being geopositioned on the digital maps.

RW queried the use of fixed wing drones and their use for counting deer and AD confirmed that they were looking at this and experimenting with thermal imaging devices on a drone.

KSB commented on the quantum leap in technology available, but suggested that care needed to be taken if it was going to be adopted on a group-wide basis and that all forms and data collecting methodology should be standardised such that we could collate and compare the data across the group in a sensible, meaningful way.

GR/

GR of Lochluichart queried whether everyone was weighing all of the carcasses taken off the hill and after some discussion it was clear that there might not be uniform practice across the group. It was agreed that this was something that might be explored in the future.

3.6 **Deer Population and Population Model**

RW acknowledged that everyone was familiar with the plan targets in terms of developing the model and using it to provide guidance on group and estate cull target setting over the long term. At the last meeting, everyone was asked to ensure that full details of the number of hinds and yearlings in the recruitment count was provided to KSB's office rather than just a percentage and it was noted that some information was still needed. RW stressed the importance of having accurate figures as it was vital that we have as accurate a recruitment count as possible in order to model the population. He asked KSB to take the group through the model.

At this point, the population model was shared on the screen so that everyone could look at it and KSB started by looking at the 2021 recruitment count which showed the figures provided by group members, indicating a 17% recruitment in those estates providing full figures. He explained that we have better quality data where the hind and juvenile numbers were given, but where just a percentage was offered, such data was less valuable.

KSB then took the group through the density model which was the front page of the spreadsheet. In doing so, he drew members' attention to the grey box at the top right which indicated that in order to meet the aspirational required sporting cull of 400 stags, the group needed a population of 3,000 stags. The figures then suggested that if we were to have a stag:hind ratio of 1:1.25, 3,750 hinds would be required and this, when taken together with the calves, would give a total number of deer of 7,800. He then highlighted for the group the last helicopter count figures where the stag:hind ratio was 1:1.59, stag numbers were 2,946, hinds/calves amounted to 6,188, giving a total population of 9,134, some 1,334 beasts higher than the model suggested was required to produce the aspirational cull as above. He then took the meeting through the model, showing how the model accounted for mortality, calving rate and how as we went through the years, we included the recruitment count data, with the most recent figure of 17% mentioned above being brought in to the 2021 spring population figures.

At our previous meeting, it had been agreed that the group as a whole would endeavour to cull around 665 hinds and the model showed this continuing for the next four seasons and if it did, the spring population would come to around 7,572 beasts, fairly close to the aspirational figures and bringing the group closer to the 1:1.25 stag:hind ratio.

KSB/

KSB then took the meeting through to the cull targets which shows how the group total group hind cull of 665 might be apportioned between the different group members. He explained that the way the model did this was to take the five year average for each estate and on that basis, work out what percentage of the total cull each estate usually shot and that proportion was then allocated to the planned cull of 665.

It was agreed that this seemed to work fairly well for most estates, although perhaps not for all.

Following KSB running through the model, RW opened the floor to discussion and one of the first points that was made was that possibly with the Section 7 group area coming in, a subset of the model might be necessary. AD agreed that it would be a good idea to pick up the NatureScot model for the Section 7 area, but also advised that for Fannich, they were probably going to shoot some 20 hinds.

ES of Strathbran confirmed that he had been in touch with KSB and CC and that Strathbran were going to shoot perhaps 12 hinds. Effectively, he confirmed that they planned a maintenance cull.

BM of Letterewe confirmed that their deer numbers were up and that the calving percentage was around 30% and that therefore they planned to shoot more hinds, possibly quite a few more than 61.

JB of Foich confirmed that there were a lot of hinds on his ground throughout the season and that they would maybe shoot 70 or more this coming hind season. He also advised that the WhatsApp group was working well and helps the stalkers to keep in touch with one another.

CM of Inverbroom advised that they would probably be shooting over 40 hinds.

KR of Lochrosque indicated that his ground was a little bit lighter in terms of hind numbers and as they move through the hind season, they would be monitoring this closely. RW advised that for Lochrosque, they would be sticking with the 125 hind target.

GR of Lochluichart advised that he would be reducing the hind cull number for Lochluichart to around 45.

As the meeting progressed, CC updated the cull figures for 2020/21, putting in the actual stag culls for those estates who had provided the data or gave updates at the meeting (other anticipated culls were included in italics, to be updated/

updated when hard data received). She also put in the anticipated hind cull on the same basis for each estate. A PDF copy of this section of the population model is attached hereto for information.

3.7 **Deer Welfare**

At the last meeting, it was agreed that MR of NatureScot was to chase Sinclair Coghill to see if we could get some progress on how we might present the carcass weight data in some way that gave an indication of deer welfare. Unfortunately, no progress has been made on this and it was agreed that this was something that should be kept on the agenda.

4. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

4.1 **Non-Native Species**

RW indicated to the group that he had received one or two reports of a surge in sika numbers.

ES of Strathbran indicated that they had seen quite an upturn in the sika numbers, with more spilling out from the woods than usual, and that they would be culling accordingly. He explained that they had shot 12 sika stags during the season and David Bennett (DB) confirmed that there had been a very active sika rut.

GR of Lochluichart advised that they had shot 16 sika stags on the hill at Lochluichart.

JB of Foich indicated that they had seen 3/4 sika on the hill and had shot nine in total.

CM of Inverbroom confirmed that he would be shooting more sika hinds this year at Inverbroom.

KR of Lochrosque reported seeing sika venturing out of the woods onto the hill and a lot out on the roadside.

DB of Strathbran reported problems with holes in the wood fence, allowing deer to move onto the hill.

RW encouraged group members to keep an eye on sika numbers as we move to the new plan and members may need to consider upping the sika culls.

4.2/

4.2 **Non-Lead Ammunition**

KR of Lochrosque reported using blue-tip non-lead ammunition and that this was working reasonably well.

JB of Foich talked about using red-tip Winchester ammo and confirmed problem after problem. He confirmed that it was not nice and asked MR of NatureScot to take this information forward in her new role as the situation was very unsatisfactory.

RW confirmed that these stories are not good in terms of deer welfare.

BM of Letterewe mentioned an article in the Scottish Gamekeepers Association newsletter on non-lead ammo, which was not very positive.

CM of Inverbroom confirmed that he had bought non-lead ammunition but hadn't used it yet.

There was mention of the non-lead ammunition ricocheting. The issue of the availability of non-lead ammo was also raised, with it being in short supply. This was confirmed by MR of NatureScot.

GR of Lochluichart reported a lot of problems with non-lead ammunition and DB of Strathbran suggested that we may need to train dogs to track wounded deer.

MR of NatureScot confirmed that the official government line was to stick with non-lead ammunition, although this is not yet a legal requirement. It is being suggested that this will change in July 2022.

ES of Strathbran confirmed that both quality and availability are serious issues. He queried whether the ADMG could help and RW confirmed that he would be reporting the problems to them.

RW asked MR of NatureScot to take this issue forward with NatureScot to ensure that they know of the problems members are having. She confirmed that she would.

MR

5. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

There was agreement that a meeting in late March 2022 would make sense and that it might be possible to hold this in person, although if not, then there would be a real attempt to try to ensure that we had a face to face meeting for the AGM in June 2022.

RW/

RW then closed the meeting, thanking everyone for their input, and wished everyone well with the upcoming hind cull.

KSB/AM WRD/03
16th November 2021

Estate	2020/21			2021/22 (draft)			Target		
	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Stags	Hinds	Calves
Dundonnell	25	21	4	25	37		25	37	8
Corriemoillie (Friday family)				9	16		9	16	3
Eilean Darach, Little Gruinard and Larachantivore	28	63	43	36	50		31	84	31
Fannich	4	19	5	32	20		25	41	10
Foich and Strone	15	59	32	33	70		28	67	20
Gruinard	19	32	2	28	37		23	37	5
Heights of Kinlochewe	30	36	12	27	12		26	12	2
Inverbroom	14	40	16	20	40		16	52	13
Inverewe (NTS)	1	0	0	0	1		0	0	0
Kinlochewe	13	14	8	13	15		8	27	7
Letterewe	31	95	30	43	90		35	61	11
Lochluichart	53	114	56	41	45		51	70	20
Lochrosque, Cabuie & West Fannich	32	113	26	36	125		28	125	26
Strathbran	8	10	5	25	12		17	7	1
Strathvaich	4	0	0	2	6		2	6	1
Tournaig							0	0	0
Forest Enterprise	15	19	13	28	20		28	20	10
Totals	292	635	252	398	596	0	353	665	167

** red figures are draft based on targets for those not at the meeting*

CC/0025

03/11/2021