

## MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING HELD AT STRATHBRAN LODGE WEDNESDAY 23<sup>RD</sup> APRIL 2025

Present:	Linzi Seivwright Ben Taylor Peter Watt Kenny Ross  Alasdair Macdonald Iain Allison Ruari Matheson Angus Davidson Jake Buchthorp Sandy McKenzie Gary Ross Craig McIntosh Abi Ball Sarah Proctor Aidan Bell Barbara MacDonald Glyn Robson Gary Ross John Wood Archie Howells Lewis MacLennan Edgar Seligman	Chair Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada/ Lochrosque and Kinlochewe Dundonnell Eilean Darach Fannich Fannich Foich Foich Gruinard Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochluichart Strathbran
In Attendance:	Caroline Cook Paul Main Mandy McWilliam	Secretary/Treasurer NatureScot Bowlts Chartered Surveyors
Apologies:	Daan van Dedem Maurits van Dedem Baastian Vaandrager The Hon Mrs J MacLay Andrew Oliver Paul Swan David Bennett John Urquhart Cieran Watson	Fannich Fannich Foich Gruinard Letterewe Letterewe Strathbran Strathbran FLS

Linzi Seivwright (LS), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. She gave thanks to Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran and his team for hosting and outlined the plan for the day.

I./

**1. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 13<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2024**Action

These were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting, proposed ES of Strathbran and seconded by Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart.

**2. MATTERS ARISING**

LS confirmed that any matters arising would be dealt with as we go through the meeting.

**3. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT BILL**

LS explained that the Scottish Government published the Bill on 19<sup>th</sup> February, with part one relating to targets, part two to legislation, part three is national parks and part four is about deer and deer management. She talked about what this means for the Deer Act. Most of the information has been seen before. She mentioned there being talk of putting Deer Management Restoration Orders in, but this has now been dropped. However, the Bill includes two paragraphs, 6ZA and 6ZB, and these are the triggers that will be used to go to regulatory action. 6ZA relates to damage, similar to that previously included in the Deer Act. 6ZB is crucial as it introduces a new power of intervention relating to restoration enhancement or improvement of the natural environment. She confirmed that the ADMG are trying to get clarity as to what this could mean on the ground. They are also talking about the development of a new Code of Practice for Deer Management. This will be an important element.

In summary, LS explained that the proposals are very broad ranging, and the ADMG are trying to get clarity.

LS explained that there are also changes coming in terms of authorisations and setting up a new register which everyone who shoots deer will need to be included on. On authorisations, instead of a piece of ground being authorised, it will be a person. LS confirmed that the ADMG will publish their response but are also encouraging others to put their thoughts into the consultation process, which closes in May.

PM clarified that the fit and confident only relates to people who are shooting unaccompanied.

ES of Strathbran asked whether the ADMG would circulate their response, and LS said that they would. ES queried whether the aim is to reduce the number of deer. LS said that the aim is to strengthen NatureScot's powers and to make those powers more flexible. She said that an important element will be what incentives will be available to estates. LS said that it will all come down to delivery and enforcement and what the Scottish Government and NatureScot resources are. ES queried/

queried whether this would apply across the board, but LS felt that would be tricky. She explained that it is difficult to know who is controlling deer in the lowlands, we don't have the same coverage in terms of cull returns.

Paul Main (PM) of NatureScot confirmed that previously he was part of a project intended to allow RPID to share their contacts, so that they can ask for cull returns. He said there are around 15,000 contacts that RPID have that they don't. Alasdair Macdonald (AM) of Dundonnell feels that we are easy prey, and PM agreed. LS said that it is key that we recognise that the lowlands are a gap, and from an ADMG point of view, they want to ensure that there is just as much scrutiny on them. The DMGs are doing all they can, and LS agreed, we need to support DMGs and not have them disappearing off into the ether. LS said that they are making these points to anyone who will listen.

LS also explained that through the Common Ground Forum, organisations had been able to come together to collectively lobby government, including on incentives around venison. AM said that would make no difference to them, but LS felt that it was important that we do what we can to ensure longevity, retaining jobs and skills.

LS encouraged everyone to go online and participate in the survey and confirmed that she will circulate the link again. Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts asked if we should put something in as a Group, and LS confirmed that she would be happy to draft something and will circulate it before submission to make sure that everybody is comfortable. PM said that we need to be aware that the government would only view this as one response, and so it is important that individuals also respond. LS confirmed that she will keep the group updated on progress.

LS

LS then talked about the Common Ground Forum, which has been in place for some time. They have held a series of meetings with different stakeholders and have been encouraging the stalkers to come along. She talked about a session last year when at that time, the proposal to change the deer seasons was still on the table. There were quite senior civil servants at the meeting who clearly listened to what was said in the room, which may have contributed to proposals to change the seasons being dropped. She felt that this shows that there is power in our voices.

#### **4. PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

LS explained that we have kept the action list up to date since our Deer Management Plan was implemented, and update this after every meeting so that we have an up-to-date document which notes all that we have done in terms of the actions from the plan. She feels that it is a really useful document.

##### **4.1 Designated Sites**

CC of Bowlts confirmed that the action here is to develop a plan for sites in unfavourable status. It was noted that we were now "business as usual" in terms/

terms of the Fannich Hills Section 7. PM of NatureScot said that he had tried to chase up the people who know about things before this meeting but hasn't had a response. However, he confirmed that it looks like that they are planning to report February 2026.

On how we monitor designated sites, we had noted that the An Teallach surveys would be done in 2026. Barbara Macdonald (BM) of Letterewe said that the Ardlair one has been published.

#### 4.2 Existing Woodlands

CC confirmed that the methodology had been signed off by the Best Practice Group. She noted that Ben Taylor (BT) of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada had said that they were going to be carrying out upland surveys and would circulate the results.

BT

LS asked if anybody would like to undertake habitat monitoring training. Craig McIntosh (CM) of Inverbroom said yes. PM of NatureScot said that if you check the website, there is some being done very soon. ES of Strathbran asked if the details could be recirculated.

LS

#### 4.3 New Woodlands

ES of Strathbran confirmed that they are still working on a plan for 70 ha of new woodland in the Grudie river basin, close to Lochluichart. There will be some natural regeneration in there too. It has gone in for sign off.

GR of Lochluichart said that their Forest Plan is out for public consultation. ES said that there is something similar going on at Strathconon, a huge scheme, but it is in the very early stages.

Jake Buckthorp (JB) of Foich said that they have 90 ha, 70 ha planted and 90 ha fenced. He agreed to let CC have a map.

JB

BM of Letterewe said that they aren't doing any new woodlands but have been working on some of the ancient woodlands. They have fenced off one area and now have permission to fence off another. She confirmed that the bit fenced last year is showing promise for regeneration already.

CC said that one of the things they are getting a lot of requests for at Bowlts is compensatory planting from the renewables sector. ES of Strathbran said that Ben Lennon of Bowlts has organised this for him. They found a developer who needed natural woodland planting, and they had a 25 ha site that suited their needs. He suggested that it is theoretically quite lucrative if the opportunities are there and there isn't a long-term commitment. GR of Lochluichart/

Lochluichart noted however that you can't claim carbon credits. ES said that they had looked at the figures quite carefully, and having the upfront payment had been beneficial to them, it was significantly profitable, to the tune of several hundred thousand pounds on 25 ha. GR said that the difference with peatland is that you have to maintain it for a lot longer, and if you don't, you have to pay back. Agreed that this is worth looking into.

Angus Davidson (AD) of Fannich also talked about the market for peatland, how it is impacted through pylons, etc.

BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that they are not planning doing any immediate fencing, but they are looking at creating better opportunities for regen.

#### 4.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

Noted that we had asked that if anyone is doing any work on peatland, could they let us know and it can be included in the Plan.

All

#### 4.5 Habitat Monitoring

CC confirmed that the next round was to be held either last year or this year, and so far we know of three estates which have carried this out, so she hoped that everyone else will be doing that this year. Noted again that there is training available, and if anyone wants a refresher on what we are looking at, do please let us know.

All

BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that they did it last year and will send over the info. Inverbroom will do it this year. Fannich and Foich do 10 per year on a rolling basis and will send in the information. LS asked that everyone send the info to Bowlts.

All

CC said that we only publish high level info in the Plan, we don't go into a huge amount of detail.

LS said that we also need to be clear who we are doing this for, and first a foremost it is useful for the individual estate. Everyone should be interested in their own info, and it should inform the culls each spring. She feels that the estates should be doing this as part of their estate management, not because they are told to.

#### 4.6/

#### 4.6 Public Access

CC talked about the importance of keeping the information up to date on Heading for the Scottish Hills. LS hasn't yet attended a meeting of the Community Access Forum, but she will do.

LS

LS noted that if there are specific issues regarding public access, she can raise them at ADMG level.

#### 4.7 Deer Population and Population Model

CC noted that we had circulated the cull figures ahead of the meeting, but had omitted the out of season figures, so apologies for this. She then tabled both the in and out of season figures.

Iain Allison (IA) of Eilean Darach asked whether the Cabuie figures were the total figures, and Kenny Ross of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada/Kinlochewe and Lochrosque said that they were. LS thanked everyone for getting the info in. Mandy McWilliam (AM) of Bowlts confirmed that we have nothing yet from Corriemoillie and Tournaig, as NatureScot have advised that they don't have the information. Gary Ross (GR) of Gruinard asked why Aultbea weren't included, given that they have a significant skelp of ground. CC confirmed they had never responded to the group, and we have never been able to get any information from them. Agreed they could be added to the schedule, as would Poolewe. PM of NatureScot confirmed Poolewe were not a member of any group. LS advised that she has spoken to their representative, and they are keen to join a group, but are not sure which one. Agreed that LS and PM will discuss this further.

LS/PM

KR clarified that at least 30/35 of the calves they took were taken out of season.

ES of Strathbran asked about the five year average, querying what it was that prior to the new culling regime at Cabuie. Agreed that every single estate is up, but he was interested to know what impact this had and also to know how much we would be up if we strip them out.

CC looked at averages 2009 to 2018, the period between the two counts, 361 stags, 482 hinds and 174 calves, so a lot less over that ten year period. In 2007 the figure was 11,000 and in 2018, 9,000. IA said that most of the estates in the group are shooting too many hinds in calf.

LS talked about the two counts undertaken in 2009 and 2018, and when you look at the culls that the group were doing, they weren't covering recruitment, but the population reduced by 2,000 between culls, which didn't make/

make sense. We have been using the 2018 count info in the Population Model, and her concern is that we simply don't know what we have as a group right now, and so we definitely need a count now. Her plea is stronger than ever and she explained that this is a count for us, not for NatureScot, and at the moment, we are simply speculating about what we have as a group. Recruitment rates are changing, and all the counts that have been coming back from NatureScot recently are coming back with in excess of the deer that have been modelled. She strongly encouraged that we do a count next winter/spring, and if NatureScot can contribute, that is great, but if not, it should still be a priority for the group. She asked if anybody disagreed.

GR of Lochluichart felt that NS should contribute. John Wood (JW) of Lochluichart said that it is annoying that we have been waiting years, and still NatureScot won't pay, but if we shot all of our deer, they would. Sarah Proctor (SP) of Inverbroom said that they were at another DMG meeting yesterday, and they have said to NatureScot that they need a count and have called for them to pay for at least half, or potentially fully fund. She asked about the count methodology. She said that they had a drone count on another area, and their ambition is to have a thermal drone count in Inverbroom later this year. LS noted that Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada are doing thermal counts on a fairly regular basis. BM of Letterewe, said that you have to count the way that suits your ground, and only a helicopter count suits them, and they have done a count every year for a long time. Ruari Matheson (RM) of Fannich said that the count has to be done on one day, and no disrespect, but Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada took five days, but KR confirmed it was two days. RM said even over two days there is a lot of deer movement, and with the drones, the deer just scatter. IA of Eilean Darach suggested that red deer don't.

RM felt that NatureScot won't be bothered with our group area as it is going the way they want it, thousands of deer are getting shot, they are delighted. LS again stressed that it is important that the count is done for us. PM of NatureScot said that he has spoken to the coordinator for next year's planned counts. He said that no plan has been set out yet for any DMG. He suggested that they would be unlikely to fund anyone 100%, but it will help each DMG get up the ladder if they are prepared to make a contribution. PM wanted to answer RM's point, suggesting that that is not the way they work, they are looking at restoring habitats rather than shooting deer, although he accepted that can be how it feels, but it is not the policy. LS said that we would start from the point of view that we have a shared population, and we need to make sure that individual targets are being met, and we ensure that we have socio-economic support in the future, that is vitally important. Until we know what population we have, we don't know what resource we have in terms of commercial stalking. We need the information to allow us to have constructive discussions going forward. At the moment, we don't know.

BT/

BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that from their perspective, they have been doing their own drone counts but are happy to contribute to a helicopter count. AD of Fannich asked why the count didn't happen this spring. LS said that there were a couple of owners who weren't willing to contribute. LS feels that we need to be a bit stronger now and she will speak to the individuals concerned. She wants us to agree to a spring count next year and that we go to NatureScot and ask for as big a contribution as they can give. GR of Lochluichart asked why we don't just miss those estates who don't agree out, as we are already missing out Aultbea, Tournai and Corriemoillie. LS said that we would leave that to NS to decide upon. GR said that we need to know what NS are willing to contribute, as this will have a big impact. LS confirmed that she will ask for a 50% contribution from NatureScot.

LS

GR talked about SACs in our area, meaning a count is important. SP of Inverbroom said that they will do their own drone count but would be interested in a wider count.

KR of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that he takes on board RM of Fannich's comments, but said that the drones are incredible, the deer don't move much, the height they get and the information they pick up is amazing. GR asked about disturbance, and KR said it is less than the helicopter.

BT then went back to the Natural Environment, and venison subsidies, and queried whether having fully funded helicopter counts been considered as an incentive. LS said that a couple of years ago, there was a package available to groups, but then that funding was pulled. That model would be ideal. The issue that we have is that helicopter counts are hard in terms of carbon impacts. BT struggled to see that the carbon out of one day's helicopter would have a bearing. PM said that these conversations are happening. He talked about the drone counting being transformative. KR said that Strathconon have bought their own, and that is something that he would encourage. LR agreed the prices are coming down and if you had your own, you could constantly monitor the changes.

LS said that she will speak to PM further, try to get NatureScot to put us top of the list, and get back to everyone as soon as possible.

LS

#### 4.8 Deer Welfare

Noted that the group have agreed to keep up to date with the review of the Best Practice guidance.

Also/



Also noted that if estates provide details of non-native species on the return forms, we will include the data.

All

LS asked if anyone has feral pigs, GR of Lochluichart said they had one but it disappeared. JW of Lochluichart mentioned one early in the season. ES of Strathbran said that someone saw some on their boundary.

GR said that they have shot a lot more sika over the last few years. LS again suggested that if they could be included in the form, that would be useful. KR talked about shooting a sika calf which was in calf, saying that the FLS guys have been seeing the same.

## 5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN REFRESH UPDATE**

CC has been through and updated the DMP and it has been sent to LS. They are going to check through it. She noted that it is a bit of a moving target, and it seems like every time we get ready to publish, we get ownership or boundary changes. She feels that we therefore need to get to a point where we publish. She said moving forward we should keep it up to date as we go along. She said that probably when we get to this year's AGM, we will include a smaller amount in the budget every year rather than a much bigger chunk every five years.

LS confirmed that when we circulate the Plan, everyone should make sure that the boundaries are right and take a note of the actions/objectives. We will take comments on the circulated draft with a view to signing off the final copy at the AGM.

LS thanked CC for her work on this.

## 6. **ADMG UPDATE**

LS advised that the ADMG will be partnering with other organisations to have a hub at Scone this year.

LS had noted most of the updates earlier in the meeting, but again asked everyone to fill out the online consultation, and if there is anything that is concerning about the Environment Bill, they should talk to her.

LS confirmed that she wants to sign this group up to the Common Ground Forum, and she tabled their information. They are looking to have a stalkers event in this area. ES of Strathbran felt that the information on their handout was nebulous – asking what does it actually mean? LS said that when the project started, there was a sense that there was a polarisation of views. They have now been able to get different/

different people/organisations in the room and it has been quite powerful, they have been able to go to Scottish Government as a whole. The aim is to try and move forward collectively.

## **7. NATURESCOT UPDATE**

PM noted that he has been assigned as the Group's WMO, and his patch includes central Highlands, from Tain to Fort Augustus and west.

PM felt that we had already covered most things. He queried whether anyone has issues with sea eagles. GR of Lochluichart said yes. RM of Fannich talked about films of sea eagles picking up lambs. PM said that there is no compensation currently available, but they will work with people in terms of mitigation. RM asked what you could possibly do to stop a sea eagle going off with a lamb, and PM talked about looking at how you deal with lambing, where it is done, e.g. indoor. RM felt that it was an impossible task. PM said that it is a learning process and is ongoing. He agreed there is no easy solution. GR said that it will only get worse and might result in people pulling out of having sheep. AD of Fannich said that a number of sheep farmers/crofters have given up.

PM confirmed that if there any queries, he is happy for people to get in touch with him directly or go out and meet people on the ground.

LS thanked PM for his update.

## **8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

LS asked AM of Dundonnell if there was any update on the Hill to Grill project, but there wasn't, although he had been in touch with the school. LS suggested that if any of the estates were contacted to work with the schools, it was very worthwhile and therefore if they are approached, please let LS know as it would be good for the group to be involved. AM offered to speak to the teacher at Gairloch High School and LS said that would be a good idea.

KR of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada talked about copper bullets. They had people in from Scandinavia last year, who confirmed that they are going back to lead. He said that Highland Venison won't take stags shot with copper bullets. He asked if the government are doing anything about this. LS said that this had been discussed at the ADMG AGM. The aim is to get a strong venison sector and one of the key things is that if we are looking at venison going into the food chain, they can't have lead in it. ES also talked about the frustration in terms of the copper bullet not taking the beasts down, and KR agreed. KR said that they are using the Seko blade bullets, which are £90 a box. BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that another issue is not wanting copper around the golden eagle areas. ES mentioned issues with copper bullets ricocheting off a target. RM of Fannich said that what concerns him is/

is when you have contractors in and it is all about £££, they aren't following up on wounded deer, and many are getting away. BT said that what they do is collect a photograph of each deer that is shot from their contractors. RM felt that contractors would take shots that a stalker wouldn't. GR of Lochluichart said that it is also disheartening if a guest makes a good shot with a copper bullet, and it gets away.

BT said that they will be shooting stags over the summer. IA of Eilean Darach asked if the night licence was finished, and BT said it was, and he would make sure that they have the necessary authorisations.

AM of Dundonnell talked about SSE Beaully/Denny power line. IA felt that it was mainly following the road. GR of Lochluichart said that it is going over their ground. Noted that this is an underground cable. AM also talked about a service road. Noted that SSE have issued notice to the landowners affected.

ES talked about the Shared Rural Network. There is a hub approved at the eastern end of East Fannich, which they have resisted for the last two to three years together with Fannich and Cabuie, and Highland Council approved the Planning Permission a few weeks ago. He feels that it is going to stick out like a sore thumb and their next line of defence would be to hold things up with Heads of Terms. RM of Fannich said that the one at Nest is going to be shelved. BT talked about another one at the west end of Loch Fannich where Planning Permission has been put in. ES said that they had put in a freedom of information request, and the total budget for the project is £21 million. It is based on covering land area, not population. SP of Inverbroom talked about an approach on Kintyre they got a few years ago. They weren't able to object, but they did was to try and hold things up at the Heads of Terms stage. She said that on the grapevine, the company are starting to run out of money, and so holding things up or making life difficult might not be a bad thing.

JB of Foich had a query for Inverbroom, who are his neighbours, around their deer management plans and if they plan to consult with them. SP of Inverbroom said that they only took ownership of part of the estate on 3rd March, and of the rest just last week. They don't intend making any massive changes this year, but will look at habitat, deer populations, and will go from there. She said that absolutely they will keep in touch. They aren't looking to knee jerk, but their objective are around habitat, peatland restoration and natural regen. LS said that it would be good to have the Scottish Wildlife Trust present to the group at some stage. SP said that they would be keen to come and present, however not as a fait accompli, but for comment, although she suggested that this won't be in the next six months.

## 9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be the AGM, and LS advised that Garve Hall had been suggested as a possible venue. She confirmed that as it is the AGM, the Chair and Secretary/

Secretary/Treasurer posts will be up for nomination, and so if anyone is interested, they should get in touch.

LS drew the meeting to a close and thanked ES for his hospitality today. She confirmed that following lunch, there would be a trip up to see the work which ES and his team had done on peatland restoration.

AM WRD/03  
28<sup>th</sup> April 2025