

**MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING
HELD AT LOCHLUICHART ESTATE
WEDNESDAY 6th MARCH 2024**

Present:	Ben Taylor	Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada
	Kenny Ross	Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Locrosque and Kinlochewe
	Donald MacLeod	Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Locrosque and Kinlochewe
	Alasdair MacDonald	Dundonnell
	Iain Allison	Eilean Darach
	Angus Davidson	Fannich
	Gary Ross	Gruinard
	Craig McIntosh	Inverbroom
	Aidan Bell	Inverewe
	Friso Westheim	Letterewe
	Barbara MacDonald	Letterewe
	Andrew Oliver	Letterewe
	Paul Swan	Letterewe
	Glyn Robson	Lochluichart
	John Wood	Lochluichart
	Gary Ross	Lochluichart
	Billy Robison	Lochluichart
	Archie Howells	Lochluichart
	Harry Leslie Melville	Lochluichart
	David Bennett	Strathbran
In Attendance:	Linzi Seivwright	Chair
	Caroline Cook	Secretary/Treasurer
	Megan Rowland	NatureScot
	Steven Liddle	Lochluichart
Apologies:	Albert van Dedem	Fannich
	Ruari Matheson	Fannich
	Hendrik van Beuningen	Foich
	Jake Buckthorp	Foich
	The Hon J MacLay	Gruinard
	Norman Kelman	Heights of Kinlochewe
	Mark Lorimer	Inverbroom
	Jamie Coles	Inverbroom
	Edgar Seligman	Strathbran
	Patrick Creasey	Strathvaich

I./

1. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 16th NOVEMBER 2023

The Minutes were adopted as an accurate reflection of the meeting, proposed by Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart and seconded by Barbara MacDonald (BM) from Letterewe.

2. MATTERS ARISING

Linzi Seivwright (LS), Chair, confirmed that any matters arising would be dealt with as we go through the meeting.

3. PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN

3.1 Designated Sites

LS asked if there any updates from NatureScot. MR of NatureScot confirmed that they were waiting to hear back in relation to An Teallach and she didn't have any other updates for the group.

3.2 Existing Woodlands

LS asked the group if there were any updates on existing native woodlands, but there was nothing to report.

3.3 New Woodlands

David Bennett (DB) of Strathbran confirming that they would be planting new woodlands on Strathbran and would provide further detail once available.

DB

Ben Taylor (BT) from Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada advised that they were undertaking a wider survey of the area and some areas had been identified for new woodlands. More details on this would be provided on this by this time next year. LS asked that he keep the group up to date with any changes.

DB

3.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

LS confirmed that if there were any new peatland projects being undertaken, the details would be forwarded to the group.

3.5 Habitat Monitoring

CC confirmed that habitat monitoring should be carried out either this year or next year and LS did a round the table to see if anyone was planning anything different.

- Lochluichart/

- Lochluichart – GR confirmed that Cathy Mayne would be doing theirs.
- Strathbran - DB said that he didn't do all the plots last time but can submit what he has.
- Inverbroom – Craig McIntosh (CM) agreed to speak to Mark Lorimer about the next round of habitat monitoring.
- Letterewe - BM confirmed that they would be doing theirs themselves.
- Fannich - Angus Davidson (AD) confirmed that they would be undertaking theirs.
- Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Locrosque and Kinlochewe – Kenny Ross (KR) confirmed that they would be doing it this year.
- Foich - noted that they carry out some on a rolling programme each year.
- Gruinard confirmed that they also do this every year.
- Dundonnell – noted that they have done this every year.
- Eilean Darach are planning to do this year.

AD of Fannich asked MR of NatureScot if the Fannich Hills designated sites monitoring is being done again this year. MR confirmed that she would check and confirm.

MR

DB of Strathbran asked if there was any help available on this in the form of training. LS agreed that we could perhaps ask Cathy Mayne or someone else if training could be provided. The meeting agreed this would be useful.

LS

CM of Inverbroom commented that he felt this was better done by professionals, then there is no comeback in the future in terms of the data being correct and it was useful if the same person did it every year. Agreed that it made sense to have someone professional do it, it was good to have consistencies, but if the estates couldn't afford to employ someone, it was okay if this was done locally.

CC agreed that she could provide plot maps if necessary and would also provide an Excel spreadsheet in the format that the data was required so that we don't get the information in lots of different formats.

CC

Steve Liddle (SL) of Lochluichart commented that it was beneficial to know what was going on in the area and it was good to have as much knowledge as possible, and if we are getting a consultant to do the HIA, it would also be good to have stalkers trained because they were the ones making the decisions on the ground.

MR commented that undertaking the HIAs showed due diligence going forward.

There/

There was then a discussion about density and HIAs and that the targets were 10 deer per km² and if this density wasn't achieved, then by carrying out the HIAs, the group would have further knowledge on why this wasn't being achieved and they would be in a better position to argue a case for active management. It was also agreed that if there were sheep on the ground, this should be noted because this would affect the results of the HIAs.

LS confirmed that it would then be good to tie in next year's count if there was going to be one with the HIAs.

It was agreed all round that the more data we have going forward, the better, and it was a useful tool for deer management.

3.6 Public Access

There was then a long discussion about the various issues with public access, difficulties in counting deer and stalking deer, there were various problems noted with regard to holes being cut in fences, walkers not using paths, gates and styles, leaving gates open and deer ending up in plantations. Again it was commented that pre Covid there were maybe one or two cars, but there are now many more cars parked along the verges. LS commented that the group has to keep plugging at the access forum, making sure their data on the Heading for the Scottish Hills website is up to date and if possible if there is an option to put information on the Walk Highland website, then that would also be useful.

Another issue raised was access by 4WD clubs and offroad driving. There was also a discussion about whether we should have information boards, leaflets, boards in car parks and look at other places that perhaps do it better.

LS commented that the ADMG have representation on the National Access Forum and it would be useful to find out if there was any funding for mitigating factors, for example boards and leaflets. She also commented that these could be distributed at train stations, bus stations, Tourist Information Offices. LS agreed to look into this further and consider what we can do as a group moving forward to pressurise the Access Forum.

LS

3.7 Deer Population and Population Model

CC discussed the draft cull figures. Noted that not everyone's cull figures were available but we have already as a group exceeded the target for hind culling. LS then went round the table to see how each estate felt about how the season had gone:-

- Lochluichart/

- Lochluichart reported a high percentage of calves, not in good condition, and not many of the hinds were pregnant, it has not been a good winter but the numbers on the hill were pretty much as normal;
- Strathbran – a wet winter, taken a lot of the poorer hinds and the hinds that are left look okay, calf survival was good and they noted little calf mortality and a lot of young stock around, a few younger deer but no more in total and they would be doing a spring count. The stags are in good condition, there was a late rut and it seemed to be getting later. The stags were good right through but there were less pregnant hinds and not so many in calf.
- Inverbroom – similar, early on they selected hinds, shot a lot of the poorer ones, the stags were surprisingly good considering the poorer hinds but there is still a while to go yet. The numbers for November and December showed no vast change.
- Letterewe – stags in good condition, hinds not so much but not so many dead, calves in good condition.
- Dundonnell – stags could have been better, not much growth in the spring.
- Fannich – confirmed there weren't a lot of pregnant hinds but good numbers of calves and the numbers were about right.
- Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada – not too bad early but towards the end there were none in calf and they are working towards reducing numbers so they shot lots of hinds. A good season for stags. They had quite a few sika which were all in calf but no red hinds in calf.
- Gruinard confirmed the same as everyone else.
- Eilean Darach – the numbers were fine, same as everyone else, but they did have hinds in calf.
- Inverewe – nothing more to report, other than what has been said already.

There was then discussion about the count, which didn't happen this year and are hoping that NatureScot would schedule the count for next spring. MR confirmed that they probably would still look for a contribution and it was asked what would happen if the landowners don't want to pay. MR said she would find out and confirmed that we were no longer in the Section 7 so there was less of a need for them to count, but she would confirm once she knew further whether it would be a 2024/25 count.

MR

Iain Allison (IA) from Eilean Darrach, raised the issue of Night Licences being granted on a farm next to them and they don't know how many deer are shot and so this information has not been fed into the population model. LS commented that we could put in a request to NatureScot and MR of NatureScot suggested that if we put in the request at the end of March and include the name of the property, they should be able to provide the information. She confirmed that if parties have been issued with a Licence, they have to provide cull returns.

LS/

LS highlighted that the group needed to do a spring recruitment count and this should be done so that we can feed the information into the population model, even if it is done in summer. BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada commented that they may do a thermal drone count in August and if a contribution for a future helicopter count was required, that would be fine.

3.7 Deer Welfare

Nothing to report.

4. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN REFRESH UPDATE**

CC commented that work is in progress in this and that she and LS have met to go through and discuss what needed changing for the next version. It is hoped that a new draft will be available for the AGM to be held in the summer. She asked that estates return their estate details sheet if they haven't done so already so that this can be included within the updated Plan. The Plan would then have to be further updated once we have count information available next year.

5. **ADMG UPDATE**

Managing Deer for Climate and Nature Consultation. LS gave a presentation summarising the main changes to legislation being proposed in the consultation, namely introduction of Deer Management Restoration Orders (DMNROs), changes to NatureScot's powers, deer seasons, competence and authorisations and venison. LS encouraged all to look at these and respond to the consultation on an individual basis.

AM of Dundonnell commented that there are other species on the ground and why aren't these being looked at, it is just deer that are being considered for climate and nature conservation. CM of Inverbroom suggested that if they want the stalkers to shoot more hinds later in the season, if they opened up the hind season, he would find that very difficult. LS commented that the stags season had already been removed and that it was likely that reducing the closed season for hinds was a done deal, but it didn't mean that estates had to shoot at times they didn't want to. LS also suggested that the lack of clarity is astonishing and that through the grouse network, the legislation there was being challenged under ECHR because it was taking away the choice from the landlord. Friso Westheim (FW) of Letterwe suggested that there was no reasoning to the specific focus on deer and nothing seemed to matter except culling deer. He queried whether the ADMG have got the firepower and funding to tackle this, because no one felt comfortable with the proposals that were being put forward. He commented that the upland landowners were an easy target. LS commented that if people felt very strongly about it, they needed to work with other organisations and she raised the Common Ground Project/

Project which is an environmental link project, linking together people working in the countryside. There was a general comment about what the ADMG are doing about this, they have to find a way of presenting their case for jobs and communities because the government needs the landowners to deliver their agenda and targets. There was also a final comment about what happens if everyone pulls out of the DMG and LS commented that we don't want the group to fold because we are good at collaborative work with NatureScot. However, it was recognised that if the government becomes too regulatory, then the risk was that land managers could become disenfranchised and the collaborative approach to deer management could be lost.

AD of Fannich commented that we have to fight on a community basis and fight them with their own policies on other things. LS suggested that there is a three pronged approach going on to the consultation, firstly to put in an individual response, secondly a DMG response and thirdly to let ADMG know and they would include their comments on your behalf. The ADMG are working with BASC and SLE and LS would make the link available to the comments so far so that people can see what has been submitted.

LS

The consultation ends on 29th March and further information would be available at the ADMG's AGM which LS will circulate the details of.

LS

6. **NATURESCOT UPDATE**

MR of NatureScot had nothing to add, she simply mentioned the above consultation.

7. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada confirmed that they wouldn't be looking to support a sporting population of deer, they are more interested in woodland expansion and environmental factors. They still, however, want to be involved in the Deer Management Plan and they want to look at reducing their impact on their neighbours and so if they were undertaking a data collection exercise, he would feed the details back to the group in due course. He also confirmed that they would have no sheep on their land.

8. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be the AGM and the date will be circulated in due course.