

MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING HELD A VIA TEAMS WEDNESDAY 13th NOVEMBER 2024

Present:	Linzi Seivwright Ben Taylor Kenny Ross Maurits van Dedem Daan van Dedem Ruari Matheson Angus Davidson Hendrik Jan van der Hoeven Jamie Coles Barbara MacDonald Andrew Oliver Glyn Robson Edgar Seligman	Chair Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada/ Lochrosque and Kinlochewe Fannich Fannich Fannich Fannich Foich Inverbroom Letterewe Letterewe Lochluichart Strathbran
In Attendance:	Caroline Cook Megan Rowland Mandy McWilliam	Secretary/Treasurer NatureScot Bowlts Chartered Surveyors
Apologies:	Jake Buckthorp Cieran Watson Gary Ross Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Aidan Bell Paul Swan David Bennett Tom Forrest	Foich FLS Gruinard Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Strathbran Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council

Linzi Seivwright (LS), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Before getting into the meeting, she paid tribute to Friso Westheim of Letterewe, who we lost very tragically earlier in the year. He was deeply passionate about the estate and rural issues, and his enthusiasm for the group was greatly appreciated and valued. He will be a very much missed member of the deer management community. LS confirmed that our thoughts are with the family and everyone at Letterewe.

1. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 19th JULY 2024**

Action

The Minutes were proposed by Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart and seconded by Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran).

2./

2. **MATTERS ARISING**

LS confirmed that any matters arising would be dealt with as we go through the meeting. However, she mentioned the contact list, which we had discussed at the last meeting. This was being updated and would be circulated internally and she wanted to check that everyone was happy with this. Caroline Cook (CC), Secretary/Treasurer, said that the Fire Brigade had asked for a contact list for the group in the summer, so it is important that this is kept up to date and so if at any point, estate contacts changed, she asked that Mandy McWilliam (AM) is advised.

All

3. **PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

3.1 Designated Sites

LS asked Megan Rowland (MR) of NatureScot whether there were any update and MR confirmed that she had none at the moment. She has chased to find out when they will be doing surveys on An Teallach, and all she knows is that it will be at some point up to 2026. She said that they have limited input. She confirmed that she is cut off from NatureScot just now as she is on leave. LS thanked MR for joining us during her leave.

3.2 Existing Woodlands

LS noted the surveys to be carried out by Cabuie, and we would be hearing more about that later in the meeting.

3.3 New Woodlands

LS noted that Strathbran were to be doing some survey and soil tests, Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran confirmed that they have done some surveying and they are working up a scheme at the moment, but at this point he had no particular update. It is opposite some woodland that Lochluichart have planted in the Grudie woodland in recent years. LS mentioned a very interesting talk which ES' cousin, Jos, had given recently, and she felt the group would be very interested to hear more.

LS also mentioned that they had received a concept plan for a new woodland at Lochluichart, which we will circulate with the Minutes. We have been asked for comments. GR of Lochluichart didn't know if there was a deadline for comments, but ES of Strathbran thought that the deadline was 9th December, and they have already responded. GR said it is just an update of the Forest Plan for the next 10 years. LS said that if anyone has any comments, they should let her and CC know.

3.4/

3.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

The action on this point was for everyone to update CC on peatland restoration. CC said that she has everything up to a certain point and that will be included in the DMP.

3.5 Habitat Monitoring

CC confirmed that we have completed two rounds, and some estates (Letterewe, Lochluichart and Gruinard) have done their third. The data from the first two rounds will be included in the updated DMP. The other estates had said they would do it next year. She had thought that Ben Taylor (BT) of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada would have had some data early September, BT thought he had probably only sent this to LS. CC felt that there might be an issue if the points used were different, and so we need to be careful how we report that as we don't want the reports being skewed.

LS reiterated to those who haven't done this yet, if they need assistance with plots or training, just let us know. It is important moving forward that we have as complete a habitat assessment across the group as possible so that we can keep up the good work. She also stressed that if anyone is using contractors or consultants, it is good to get these booked in just as quickly as possible.

Kenny Ross (KR) of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Lochrosque and Kinlochewe said that Angus had historically worked on theirs, although perhaps BT would take this over. Dundonnell and Eilean Darach are doing it next year. Jamie Coles (JC) of Inverbroom said that they will pencil this in for next year, but they have a lot of other things going on at the moment. CC thought it was good to get it done within two years, which leaves a gap to the next round.

3.6 Public Access

LS said that she has been asked to join one of the Community Access Forum meetings. They have also offered for one of their people to come to one of our meetings, but as a first step, she will go to theirs.

She also advised that the ADMG have commissioned a short film, intended for the wider public. This was included in the Mountaineering Scotland newsletter, which we have circulated. It raises awareness of stalking. She will keep the group updated if she goes along to one of their meetings.

LS

Again, LS asked that the Heading for the Scottish Hills website is kept up to date.

3.7/

3.7 Deer Population and Population Model

CC confirmed that we looked at this in July, when we set the cull targets. It hasn't changed since then as we don't have up to date figures. She said that AM of Bowlts had asked for stag and proposed hind cull figures recently. We have so far had responses from Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Dundonnell, Eilean Darach, Foich, Gruinard, Inverbroom, Letterewe and FLS, so she went round the room to ask for any figures. These were:-

- Fannich – 27 stags. Hinds - probably same as last year.
- Lochrosque and Kinlochewe – nothing.
- Lochluichart – 45 stags, hinds similar to last year.
- Strathbran – 25 stags. Going to take 20-22 hinds and calves.

CC confirmed that once we get the final cull figures in March, the Population Model will be updated. She said that LS will talk about the proposed count shortly. We have been modelling since the 2018 count and at the time, we thought that count was probably quite low, and so it would be useful to get up to date count figures.

On the count, LS confirmed that there had been various correspondence to get thoughts from the owners. We had taken a possible 25% contribution and worked out how much it would cost each estate. She confirmed that if the group are willing to make a contribution, NatureScot would prioritise us. She said most of the group are happy, but there are a few estates who have said no, and it is difficult to go ahead if not all the group are on board. NatureScot could potentially do the whole count on the basis that we have quite a lot of designated sites in the area in terms of public interest. She said that thermal count info is showing figures at odds with where we are in terms of the population model and given the level of support we have overall for a count, she has written to one of the estates who initially said no and will follow up with the others. She is not sure whether NatureScot would consider us if we aren't able to pay. MR of NatureScot said he spoke to Jimmy after her conversation with LS. He suggested that they could count the whole area, but this is unfair when some are paying and some not. There is also the option that those who don't want to contribute don't get counted by the helicopter, only by foot, but that means we end up with mixed data. Using one method is the ideal. Their ideal is that everyone contributes and the whole thing can move forward. At the moment, MR feels it is on the group to decide what they want to do. Priority wise, we could make the argument that there are designated sites and public interest, which may push us up the list, but until we make a decision, they can't make a call. LS asked if we are currently on a provisional list. MR said that just now, because of the indecision, that doesn't seem to be the case, there are other areas that they can crack on with. She said/

said that if the finances could be organised, that would make a difference. She also said that even if we pay 25%, their share is over £70,000, which is not inconsiderable. They need to consider value to the public purse.

LS said that she will go back to the estates who are not keen to contribute and see where they are. LS said that these things are only worth doing if we can involve anyone, if we start missing areas, it undermines the value to everyone and creates uncertainty. She felt that we need to have an all or nothing approach. The only alternative would be a complete foot count, but she didn't think that this would be practical.

LS

BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that if it was a partial count or a foot count, they probably wouldn't take part. He agreed with LS's thoughts on all or nothing.

LS confirmed that she will continue discussions, and we will try and come to a decision fairly quickly. She said that if there is budget that NatureScot need to use up, perhaps we could be squeezed in at the last minute, although she is aware that they are under significant budgetary constraints.

CC asked that if anyone hasn't responded on the count, could they respond to AM at Bowlts so that we know where we are.

All

It was noted that responses so far have come in from Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Dundonnell, Eilean Darach, Fannich, Heights of Kinlochewe, Inverewe and FLS. BM of Letterewe said that they would be happy to join in a total count. GR of Lochluichart also confirmed they would join in, providing everyone else did the same.

3.8 Deer Welfare

LS mentioned that from other groups, there is an indication that many of the hinds culled last winter were not pregnant, and the anticipation was that we would see quite a low recruitment rate this summer. She wondered if that had been reflected on the ground, and if that is the case, it is worth keeping an eye on the hinds this year, if there are lots that weren't pregnant last winter there might be more this winter, so we would see a bumper calving next year which would affect the population model. She asked if anyone had noticed anything. KR of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, Lochrosque and Kinlochewe, said that there were definitely fewer calves about, they knew that early on. He agreed that the hinds were looking in good condition in the rut, so he thought next year there will be more calves. BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada said that their recruitment rate was 21%, which was quite low. Stuart Allison (SA) of Eilean Darach said that just about every hind they shot was in calf, so just the/

the opposite. They are counting about 42% at foot this year. There has been a response to them being shot a bit harder, but he isn't expecting any difference, the rut has gone strong this year.

4. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN REFRESH UPDATE**

CC confirmed that she and AM have been through the DMP and every table and map had to be changed due to the boundary changes. She will now send this to LS to review and then circulate it to the group, asking for any comments. She said that obviously the figures contained in the DMP are based on the 2018 figures and if we do get a count, we would refresh it again and add that information in.

5. **CABUIE THERMAL COUNT AND DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN PROPOSALS**

LS handed over to BT of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, who gave a talk on the results of their thermal population count and also the habitat impact assessment results. They have all the data in hand as regards native woodlands, and they done survey work on some of the peatland areas, checking on success of the restoration works.

The thermal population count was undertaken in July, which is the time of year we would expect to see the peak of deer, post calving, good weather, easier to do drone surveys. He said it had been eye opening for them. They had estimated a summer population around 1,500 deer, but they came in about 3,200 deer, a density of 20 per km². He shared his screen to show maps showing the results. About 57% were female, 31% male and 12% calves. He is aware that the survey method is relatively new, and people have different feelings about the drone surveys, but KR and Donald MacLeod had assisted and felt it was a pretty fair reflection of that day. KR agreed, confirming that they too were quite surprised that there were deer everywhere. The drone guys had never counted anything like that. BT accepts that this was a snapshot in time, but they are going to try and repeat the exercise in March at a winter low. He will continue to share the results with the group, and if anyone wants to see more of the survey results, he would be happy to run through it. ES of Strathbran asked if they had counted deer outside their boundary, and are they included in the overall numbers. BT said that no, they aren't included, they have a split of the figures inside and outside their boundary. He showed a table, and ES said that he would be surprised if they didn't have more sika than were shown, and BT agreed. BT also thought there would be more roe.

JC of Inverbroom asked if any of the deer were double counted – and how is that monitored, as they can shift quite a long way. BT confirmed that he had quizzed the surveyor on this before they started. He confirmed that on the day of survey, there were three drone operators, each paired with a keeper, they had radio contact, it was/

was done over couple of days, and they communicated on which sections they were doing. The feeling from the guys was that there wasn't much double counting as they were in different areas. JC said that without tags on the deer, it is difficult to be 100%. BT said this is one of the things they are trying to grapple with. He agreed there is a bit of work to do in terms of working out where the group are, but he said that KR and Donald were content that double counting wasn't an issue, given the way they carried out the count.

KR confirmed that every day when they finished, there was a system in the pickup and they were able to knock off groups of deer which they knew were double counted. Generally, they were fairly happy when they sat down at the end of the day, that it was pretty accurate.

Looking at the entire group area, BT felt that it would be too slow to count with drones and get an accurate figure. Their ownership was as big as they could go. ES of Strathbran queried how long it took, and BT confirmed two days. Maurits van Dedem (MvD) felt that it would take more days to get a more accurate figure. Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe asked how many hectares were covered, BT said 15,500 ha. ES said that they were undertaking peatland restoration works on part of their ground, and so possibly half of their population would have been on their ground on those days. BT said that there is an acceptance that it is a snapshot in time and there is a need to replicate the survey. It is relatively expensive, just shy of £10,000. And if you do it twice a year for five years, it is a big investment, but they had felt it was worthwhile.

SA of Eilean Darach wondered about the population in the north end, with it being a summer count, what displacement was caused by foot traffic. BT agreed, and they will repeat in March when things will be quieter.

LS felt that this reiterated the need to have a wider count, just to see exactly what is going on. Until we get that, it is difficult to second guess what might be happening, so even more reason for us to push for a full count.

LS said that if we go ahead with a count, BT had mentioned that they would do a drone count at the same time. BT said yes, they are as interested in everyone else in seeing the results from the different techniques, and so that would be helpful. LS said that if they are prepared to do that, it would be good for the methodology, allowing a comparison. She felt it is very valuable data, but is a snapshot and it would be good to know what is happening in the wider area.

BT also tabled plans showing herbivore impacts of the various woodlands, and what is quite interesting is that the woodlands on Cabuie are very diverse, 22 different tree species. He confirmed that he will send the maps to CC. He said they will also send over the impacts on habitats. He said that the result of all of the survey data that/

that they have collected so far is that they are looking to do a big reduction cull this year. They have taken 200 stags, and although they don't want to give a definite figure for the hinds because of movement of the deer, their guess is about 600. They have applied for night shooting and out of season licences to support some of the work, and KR and Donald will have others helping them out, but they are absolutely committed to continually monitoring the deer population and the impacts. The reduction cull will take precedence over fencing, which he appreciates is uncomfortable as it might have an impact on neighbours. He again said he would be happy to take questions.

BT

MvD of Fannich said that it would be of concern to them as a direct neighbour, and they would be interested to have more insight into their overall objectives, especially if cull numbers are being put up to the levels they propose. He wondered whether it was too soon to make decisions on the drone count information. BT said that the objective is to get deer down to below 5 per km², and 2 would be better. He felt that they had enough data pre the thermal count data to know they needed to do a reduction cull. BT said that he finds the deer density quite a rough measure, and this could be quite low given the low woodland cover at the moment, but they are not ruling out the need for fencing in the future.

SA of Eilean Darach asked whether in the long term their aim is going to be to have tolerance areas? BT said yes, for the next couple of years they want to reduce, and once they are down to a more comfortable level, they plan to implement different zones.

Angus Davidson (AD) of Fannich said that it will take a long time for them to get the figures down and is there any reason that they have come away from the fencing? BT said that the simple answer is that it was the owner's decision. They presented options and the feelings from the owner was that they would like to see the deer numbers down before they make any other decisions. The owner is friends with the likes of Corrou, who have been down this route before, and so there are other advisors involved.

CC queried, having noted the plans which BT tabled, whether they have acquired part of Heights? BT confirmed that they had and agreed to send her a copy of their boundary. She said that they hadn't been aware until recently that there had been a change.

BT

BT said again that if there is any data that people are interested in, they are happy to share.

GR of Lochluichart said that if they are doing this sort of culling, they are going to push deer onto the neighbours' land initially and the deer will go into larger groups to protect themselves. BT and LS agreed that this is a good point. LS said that if people/

people are starting to see more deer moving across the landscape, we can put in place certain mechanisms, collaboration with neighbours, reporting changes in movements, so there is an opportunity for estates to share information between themselves. GR said that their concern is that if that starts happening and we see serious trampling, especially with the SSSIs, the landowners in that area will be put under pressure from NatureScot. LS took that on board. Again, LS felt that sharing information is key.

LS thanked BT and KR for their input, suggesting that it is very helpful for the group to hear what data they have been collecting and the impacts this has. Again, she reiterated that this pointed to the importance of a full group count. BT thanked everyone for the opportunity, he appreciated it is perhaps uncomfortable for neighbours to hear.

6. **ADMG UPDATE**

LS confirmed that she has an autumn brief which she will share. She said that the Scottish Government published the 16,000 consultation responses to the Managing Deer for Climate and Nature consultation and they are waiting to see how this will manifest in terms of an environment bill. She thinks that NatureScot have the draft and we are awaiting timescales. In the meantime, ADMG are doing a lot of work, speaking to various bodies, MSPs. It is difficult to know if the government are listening, and it certainly doesn't feel like it, but they have a meeting coming up in the Scottish Parliament and will be trying to lobby MSPs.

LS

LS advised that NatureScot have put in place a pilot incentive scheme in two areas, one in Loch Ness-side and one in the central belt, trying to address the need for increased culls. This has been set up on a headage basis with the payment based on the number of additional carcasses they are able to produce. She isn't aware that there has been a big uptake, but the ADMG are keeping an eye.

She talked about the Common Ground Forum, which is a project which has been going for the last few years, basically bringing together everyone involved in deer management to try and see if we can work through conflicts we have had traditionally. It has been very successful, particularly in liaising with the environment organisations, so it is interesting to see whether they can come together and agree on certain things. One of the things that has come forward has been that people are concerned about the implications of this legislation in terms of jobs. There have been a couple of meetings, inviting stalkers along to discuss the issues and concerns. LS will send round details, but essentially it is about working in a collaborative way, and she would be keen for us to sign up as a group, as this would be a strong message to send out. Unless she hears to the contrary, she would like to sign the group up, but if anyone has any feelings to the contrary, please just let her know.

LS

LS/

LS mentioned that Scottish Venison have refreshed their strategy. There are so many layers to this and it is key that we have support to work through the many issues, to help support estates moving forward. ADMG are putting a significant contribution into Scottish Venison. There is also discussion going on with Scottish Government about getting support for the venison sector.

LS had mentioned the access film. There is going to be a lot happening over the next year or so. ADMG have a digital newsletter and it is incumbent to people to sign up to receive this. She will send a link and urged everyone to sign up to this. LS

Lastly, in terms of regional meetings, there is one on 14th January, an online meeting, the AGM will be held on 19th March at the Kingsmills Hotel in Inverness. She asked that everyone put these dates in their diary and we will be circulating more info in due course.

7. **NATURESCOT UPDATE**

MR said that there isn't a lot of excitement until we get more clarity on the Natural Environment Bill. She talked about the pilots which LS mentioned, and they are interested to see how they go, although there hasn't been a big uptake.

MR mentioned one thing that came up in another South Ross DMG was the issue of feral goats. She had done a bit of digging into the management of feral goats, and she will forward the response from NatureScot. MR

MR has had a response from Kirsty re: An Teallach, it is not because of the budget situation, it is down to what is classed as business critical, this determines what sites get surveyed. This isn't high up on the list, but can be put on the wish list, which she will do. If it is urgent that this is looked at, we should let her know.

LS thanked MS and said that we will keep in touch with them about the count.

8. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

GR of Lochluichart said that they have seen evidence that there has been a wild boar at Glenmarksie and also one at Lochluichart, the first seen for a long time. LS asked about any more reports of wild boar or feral pigs. KR of Cabuie, Bruchaig and Fada/Lochrosque and Kinlochewe said that Ronnie saw two wild boar, so they are about. LS asked if GR had seen them or had they been able to control them. GR said that they had definitely seen of one, and evidence of rooting in another area, so definitely feral pigs or wild boar. ES of Strathbran asked, if you see wild boar, do you shoot them? LS said that there is no restriction, but in terms of welfare, piglets might be an issue. MR said that there is a section in the Best Practice which deals with this, but currently it is shoot on sight.

9./

9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

LS confirmed that she would be keen to have a site visit to one of the estates in the spring and she will discuss this with some of the members. It is anticipated that it will be an in-person meeting.

KR confirmed that the Achnasheen Hall is now no longer in use, the Council have closed it down. LS said that we will have to think about the venue for our AGM.

LS thanked everyone for joining, hoped everyone had a successful hind season and said that she we hoped to see everyone in the spring.

AM WRD/03
13th November 2024