

MINUTES OF WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP MEETING HELD VIA TEAMS THURSDAY 16th NOVEMBER 2023

Present:	Alasdair Macdonald Stuart Allison Maurits van Dedem Mark Lorimer Jamie Coles Aidan Bell Barbara MacDonald Glyn Robson John Wood Donald MacLeod Edgar Seligman	Dundonnell Eilean Darach Fannich Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochrosque and Kinlochewe Strathbran
In Attendance:	Linzi Seivwright Caroline Cook Mandy McWilliam Megan Rowland	Chair Bowlts Chartered Surveyors Bowlts Chartered Surveyors NatureScot
Apologies:	Dave Robertson Donald Rice Hendrik van Beuningen Jake Buckthorp Gary Ross Norman Kelman Craig McIntosh Andrew Oliver David Bennett	Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Dundonnell Foich Foich Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Letterewe Strathbran

1. **WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR**

Action

Linzi Seivwright (LS), Chair, thanked everyone for joining the meeting. In particular, she wanted to welcome Megan Rowland, our new NatureScot representative. LS confirmed that the group look forward to working with her.

2. **APOLOGIES**

As above. Noted that this includes Dave Robertson, from the newly named Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Estate.

3./

3. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 19th JULY 2023**

LS confirmed that most of the action points will be covered as we go through this meeting. The Minutes were adopted as an accurate reflection of the meeting, proposed by Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart and seconded by Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran.

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

As discussed at the last meeting, she confirmed that we will be refreshing the DMP, and hope to have a draft of this ready by March 2024. Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts will be coming to people for information to assist with this, and if anyone has any substantial updates, it would be good to hear from them. LS noted that there will be rejigging of boundaries because of the renaming of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada Estate and this will be included in the Plan.

CC confirmed that the DMP includes a page with details for each estate, which was filled in by everyone many years ago. She will circulate this again in due course and ask everyone to refresh their info.

CC

4.1 **Designated Sites**

LS asked Megan Rowland (MR) of NatureScot for an update. MR had spoken to Graeme Taylor (GT) of NatureScot, who confirmed that Fannich Hills site monitoring is scheduled next year. On An Teallach, MR wasn't entirely sure where we are, but she will get an update for the group. CC asked about the Ardlair and Fisherfield SSSI and MR confirmed the report has been done and is to be published.

MR

GR asked if the same people would be carrying out the Fannich Hills site monitoring, as there had been issues with a previous company who had been involved, although the most recent company had been better. MR confirmed that it would go to tender, but her preference would be that we try and get the same people back to do the monitoring. She agreed we don't want different people involved. Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe confirmed that this is what happened to them, and they ended up with different people doing it in a different way. LS understood that the government need to go through a tender process but suggested that if continuity could be considered during the process, that would be helpful.

4.2/

4.2 Existing Native/New Woodlands

LS asked for information on any new schemes coming on board. She confirmed these will be included in the Plan. It was noted that we have received an email from Scottish Woodlands, acting on behalf of Cabuie, Bruachaig and Fada, saying that they will be looking at putting in peatland restoration and woodland creation. They will provide more information in due course. LS hopes they will be at the next meeting, and we can get an update from them.

GR of Lochluichart mentioned an extension to their wind farm, where there will be some compensatory planting and peatland restoration. This has yet to be passed by planning, but he will confirm once it has been.

ES of Strathbran said that they are about to start a peatland restoration project, around 210 ha. They are also looking at woodland restoration in the Grudie Oakwood, plus some potential planting, around 15-20 ha of natural woodland. In terms of peatland, ES said that they won't look at a dramatic reduction in deer numbers, but perhaps a slow reduction over five years.

LS said that for the Plan, it would be useful to map the restoration schemes. ES said that they have focussed on areas where the deer spend less time. CC asked whether they had done a count, and ES said that they had, and that we should have the information. CC suggested if that if anyone else has done a count, it would be useful to get the figures.

4.3 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

ML of Inverbroom confirmed that they are planning peatland restoration, but aren't too far advanced with this. They will provide more information when they are further down the line.

LS confirmed that it will be up to individual estates to ensure that they have the appropriate population for what they intend to do. She said from the group's perspective, if estates have a handle on their own numbers and know where they need to be, that is fine.

LS confirmed that the ADMG are pushing back on the Scottish Government's figures re: deer numbers, stressing that these must be mainly in the lowlands. She said that they will continue to bang the drum regarding the "too many deer" narrative.

4.4/

4.4 Habitat Monitoring

Noted that CC had issued the maps showing the information for the habitat surveys carried out in 2020 and 2021 and she shared the summary sheets, which she will circulate after the meeting. She said that she has summarised the data from 2016/2018 and compared it to 2020/2021.

CC

On the dwarf shrub heath browsing, this seems to be moving in the right direction. More plots were done in 2020/2021, but even accounting for extra plots, this is improving. Alasdair MacDonald (AM) of Dundonnell mentioned the red squares on Dundonnell, suggesting these are down to sheep. CC confirmed that this had been noted, but there was now less red areas, so things are still improving.

On blanket bog, for some reason, this seems to be going the other way, with the number of plots with low to medium browsing impact decreasing from 91% to 82%. She suggested this might again be due to the sheep issue at Dundonnell. AM confirmed they are not their sheep, they are the tenant farmer's. GR of Lochluichart said that the bits on Lochluichart are where the deer are feeding.

CC said that if we look back to the culls in 2018/19, we had quite a hard winter and there weren't nearly as many deer culled at that time, so there were perhaps more deer around. She confirmed that we will be looking for the monitoring to be done again in 2024.

GR noted that there were no figures from Strathbran, and CC confirmed we didn't get data from them. CC asked ES of Strathbran whether David carried out any monitoring in 2021. ES wasn't sure, but confirmed that he will check with him. CC recalled David having an issue with his computer, when he had lost information, so perhaps this had been the problem.

ES

LS noted that the next round of monitoring is due in 2024, and asked if everyone is in a position to go ahead with this. GR said that Cathy Mayne is doing theirs next year – about 90 plots over the South Ross and West Ross areas. LS confirmed that they will send a reminder out to everyone and will assume that everyone is on track to do this. She said that if it would be helpful, we could run a refresher training session.

LS

With regard to monitoring blanket bog sites, LS confirmed that she sits on the Best Practice Steering Group, who have been looking at revising the methodology.

ML of Inverbroom confirmed he has no problem with habitat monitoring, but he said that we are a deer group, and what is being asked is if we have too many/

many deer causing damage, but as AM of Dundonnell pointed out, a lot of the damage is caused by sheep, so he queried what we are we trying to achieve here? LS said that the more information we have, the stronger our position will be in terms of defending the numbers of deer we have. She agreed it is tricky to differentiate between deer and sheep damage, but this is something that the owners/managers will know. The more information and the more detail we have, the better. LS mentioned that in the first Scottish Government biodiversity strategy paper, sheep weren't mentioned at all, but ADMG went back and asked that other herbivores were considered as it is important to factor in other herbivores in the landscape.

LS asked MR of NatureScot whether she wanted to comment. MR agreed with what LS had said. However, from their point of view, it shows that we are engaged in the process, and it shows areas where damage is caused, for example, by tenant farmers with a large number of sheep. It provides us with information so that we can argue our case. She said that the 10 deer per kilometre figures is a flag, anyone over this gets looked at. She said that NatureScot are under pressure from higher up in Scottish Government to be more active in terms of stepping in where the numbers or impacts are too high.

ML queried, if you are showing damage to habitat and it is not as a result of excessive deer numbers, but a combination of deer and sheep, what should happen to the sheep? MR agreed deer have always been the perceived problem, but if the problem is sheep, then NatureScot should be involved in finding a resolution. ML also said we need to consider damage by walkers. He thought we need to get to a position where we know all causes of the damage, not just deer. LS said that this is an extremely difficult issue to deal with, and that the Strategic Deer Group are looking at this. Another problem is that the issues sit within different areas of government, so the deer and the agriculture side are separate, so we need to make sure they are talking to each other. LS said that our owners/stalkers know their ground better than anyone, so the more justification they can provide for the numbers of deer and sheep they have, the better. She confirmed that we need to make sure that these things are in balance.

CC said that in terms of monitoring, if people have carried out this out and they have sheep on the ground, it is important that they make a note of this.

LS stressed that all herbivores have an impact and isn't necessarily the case that this is spread equally over the ground, and so if you have higher impacts, it may be that you are happy to accept these impacts. She said that it is really up to each estate to use the information for their own purposes.

4.5/

4.5 Public Access

LS accepted that access is an issue for estates and she talked about the Heading for the Scottish Hills Website and the plea to estates who are on there to make sure that their information is as up to date as possible, and the more information they can provide the better. It seems there are more people using the website, and NatureScot are pushing for it to be used.

ES of Strathbran asked about the access in terms of the new open season on male deer, which might mean that stalking would be a year round operation. He queried how this would impact on safe access. LS said that from a point of view of safety, this is inherent whenever you are shooting, and it would be useful to put this on their section of the Heading for the Scottish Hills website. She thought that most estates were going to maintain the usual season. She also mentioned that some estates had previously used out of season licences, so it was difficult to see how this would fundamentally change.

4.6 Deer Population and Population Model

LS talked about the suggested helicopter count, which not everybody had agreed to, and so she didn't feel that it was appropriate for us to proceed. She confirmed that we have therefore gone back to NatureScot to say that we won't be going ahead. She asked MR if NatureScot had an update on their intention to count the group anyway. MR had discussed it with GT and he said that West Ross is on the cards to be counted in the next round of counting. MR thought that this would be 2023/24, but she will check and confirm. LS said that if NatureScot are looking to put in monitoring for the designated sites, and we have a count, then that will be helpful in terms of updating the Plan.

MR

CC shared the figures that we have had in terms of what the estates have culled for stags and what they propose for hinds. Donald MacLeod of Lochrosque and Kinlochewe confirmed that they had taken 7 stags on retained ground, and no hinds intended. CC confirmed that we will rejig the targets due to the boundary changes. Jamie Coles (JC) of Inverbroom confirmed that he would provide the Inverbroom figures after the meeting, and Maurits van Dedem (MvD) of Fannich gave their figures.

AM of Dundonnell asked about returns from farmers in our area for out of season shooting. LS said that we don't get any of that information, but if we think that it ought to be taken into consideration, then we can go to NatureScot and ask for them. She said that if anyone knows of people who are shooting that might impact the figures of the group, then we can ask for information from NatureScot.. Stuart Allison (SA) of Eilean Darach said that he/

he would certainly be interested in this information, particularly in terms of An Teallach. MR asked that he send her his queries by email, then she will be clear of what information is being requested. LS said that we can include this in the Plan if it is not here already, agreeing that anything that affects the overall population model should be included.

On the hind numbers, LS suggested that if everyone is going to do either what they did last year or what they have confirmed they are proposing, we are on target for 750 hinds, and she would urge people to stick with this and not take their foot off the accelerator.

GR of Lochluichart asked if we are including roadkill in the figures. CC said no, we don't have up to date information on this. GR confirmed that they are asked to provide the information to NatureScot. MR of NatureScot wasn't sure if the deer collision numbers are kept up to date, she will look into it.

MR

LS talked about the winter mortality figure in the model, usually about 6%, and suggested if we feel that it should be more, we need to feed this back to CC. LS also said that deer vehicle collisions are also of public interest, if we are seeing high figures in certain areas, is there a reason and is there anything we can do to mitigate against it.

LS asked whether people wanted to be updated now on the cull figures, but it was agreed that we would stick with reporting them at the usual time.

4.7 Deer Welfare

John Wood (JW) of Lochluichart confirmed that the deer weren't looking too good. DM of Lochrosque and Kinlochewe agreed, suggesting the condition is awful so far this year, more like you would normally see in Jan/Feb. GR of Lochluichart said that they started the hind cull straight after the stags, whereas they usually just take out what is needed and leave the rest to Jan/Feb. JW felt that things aren't going to look good at the end of January/February. DM agreed that they will be looking at higher mortality. SA of Eilean Darach said that if we are getting a count next year, it would be good to clear the poorer hinds out now. DM said that counting will be key, as we won't know the full mortality without it.

LS said that this is useful information, and it is for the managers to consider what they can take the cull earlier to free up more for what is there, rather than getting the stage where we have to report large winter mortalities.

ES of Strathbran talked about ammunition, and asked whether there were any updates on copper bullets. He confirmed that they have had a few issues this year/

year with wounded deer wandering around. LS said that some people have been changing the point of aim for that very reason. MR of NatureScot said that they have had similar issues, and so she fully sympathised. MR talked about some people switching back to lead, although she couldn't endorse this as a course of action. LS talked about conversations around experimenting with the calibre and make of bullet, and some people have found the right combination to be fantastic, so stalkers might just have to experiment.

AM of Dundonnell said that he is still using lead and has no intention of changing unless he has to. He feels it is a welfare issue. LS said that the regulations were supposed to come in in July this year, but for all sorts of reasons, there has been a delay in the game dealers imposing them. She felt that it is all part of the wider conversation about venison and is driven by what the final consumers, particularly the supermarkets, are looking for. She agrees welfare is paramount, but people just have to do what they feel is right at the moment.

Agreed that sourcing copper ammunition is an issue and so MR didn't feel that we are at stage where they could say everyone needs to make the switch. GR of Lochluichart said that sometimes you go to get ammunition, then they don't have it in stock, so they are in the same boat as AM, they are sticking with lead.

5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN REFRESH UPDATE**

LS reiterated that we are looking to have a draft ready for the spring meeting.

6. **ADMG UPDATE**

LS confirmed that we had circulated the autumn update and that there is a lot happening within Government. There are two major consultations ongoing, the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan consultation, where there is a specific section on deer, which relate to some of the targets we have mentioned, 10 deer per km², plus 2 deer per km² in woodland. Noted that the ADMG are asking for clarity on this from NatureScot. That consultation is open until 14th December. LS confirmed that the ADMG will put in a consultation response. LS urged particularly landowners to have a look at this and comment if appropriate. She would like to put in a response from the group, which she can circulate first to make sure everyone is happy. There are concerns at the moment that the Government aren't listening, so we need to put in responses where we have concerns and make sure they are highlighted.

LS

The second important consultation is on the drafting of a new Environment Bill which will incorporate the new deer legislation, containing the recommendations from the Deer Working Group. Again, most of this is tidying up, but there are some fundamental/

fundamental things which will enable NatureScot to more readily use the regulatory powers. ADMG will be scrutinising this when it comes around.

There is a date for the ADMG AGM, 13th March. There will also be a regional meeting on 4th December, which will be online. LS felt that it would be useful for people to hop on to this and hear what is going on.

7. NATURESCOT UPDATE

MR didn't have much to add. She talked about the closed season being removed for all male deer, with the focus on red deer. Most of this is removing a paperwork exercise. There is a change to the Firearms Order whereby any type of night sight or thermal infrared, can be used for shooting, although you do still need an authorisation to shoot at night. You can also now use lighter bullet weights for 243s, in an effort to make sure that people can still use a 243.

LS felt that it was important to stress that although part of the firearms change is the use of thermal scopes for shooting, but you still need a night shooting authorisation. She felt that there was work to do in making sure that message was clear.

They are also looking at other methods for counting, to get away from using helicopters. They are looking at using drones or thermal drones and trying to find ways to see and count deer in woodland.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

CC talked about Mandy McWilliam (AM) of Bowlts having sent round a request to ensure that everyone's contact details are up to date. She asked that everyone respond to her with the relevant names, telephone numbers and email addresses, that will allow us to reissue our contact list.

LS wanted to make everyone aware of the Finding the Common Ground Project, which is an initiative started by ADMG and Environmental Link. It stemmed from a conversation that at some groups where there was tension between those who had different objectives. It has been going for two years and a number of actions have come from it. She said that it was an extremely useful process, and flagged up that there is more to be gained from people working together rather than being at odds with each. As a result, the organisations who were involved have agreed to sign up to the Common Ground Project. She confirmed that she will circulate the information and wondered whether we as a group should sign up to it.

A key thing that came out is that there is a lot of talk of change, reductions in deer numbers, and there are people that feel that change is being done to them, not with them, and that the people on the ground are being left behind. LS said that as part of/

of the process, it is key that the stalkers are well represented. Therefore, a workshop will be held in March which will seek to engage as many stalkers as possible, to understand their fears and uncertainty. She will keep the group posted, and if anyone would like to get involved, they would be welcome. Again, she would like the group to be involved in this initiative.

LS

9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

LS suggested that the next meeting, to be held in the spring, should be a face to face meeting. She suggested that this could be followed by a site visit in the afternoon. She confirmed that GR of Lochluichart had kindly agreed to host this. LS confirmed that she will liaise with GR with regard to a suitable date and circulate this to everyone.

LS thanked everyone for hopping on the call, CC and AM of Bowlts for their input, and looked forward to seeing everyone in the spring.

AM WRD/03
16th November 2023