

**South West Ross Deer Management Group  
Autumn Meeting 2022  
New Kelso Lodge, Strathcarron  
Sunday, 16 October 2022**

**Present:**

Shaun MacDonald (Chair)	- <i>New Kelso</i>	Mark Adams	- <i>Kinlochdamph</i>
Andrew Cope	- <i>Glen Mhor</i>	David Abrahams	- <i>Applecross</i>
Louise Gray	- <i>Ben Damph</i>	David Mackenzie	- <i>Lochcarron Crofters</i>
Diana Thompson	- <i>Lochcarron</i>	Tom Chetwynd (Sec.)	- <i>Tullich</i>
Simon Stewart	- <i>Coulin</i>	Ben McKeown	- <i>NatureScot</i>
Gillian Pattinson	- <i>Lochcarron</i>	Archie MacLellan	- <i>Applecross</i>
Miles Thompson	- <i>Lochcarron</i>	Patrick Lambert	- <i>Food &amp; Agricultural Systems</i>

**1.0 Welcome**

The Chair welcomed those present and said it was great to get everyone around the table again after so long.

**2.0 Apologies**

Kurt Larson	- Ardoch	Richard Munday	- Kinloch
Malcolm Turner	- Ben Shieldaig	Claire Munday	- Kinloch
Troels Bajnhoej	- Ledgowan	William Fooks	- Fionnaraich
Russell Cooper	- Forestry & Land Scotland	Colin Murdoch	- Reraig / Lochcarron CC
Randal Wilson	- Kinlochewe	David Bertie	- Applecross
Chris Mackenzie	- Achnashellach	Mike Donegan	- Applecross
Bill Stalker	- Lochcarron	Neil Morrison	- Coulin
Charlie Hill	- Glen Mhor	Richard Curzon	- Tullich

**3.0 Deer Management Plan**

**3.1 Actual Stag Culls – 2022-23 Season**

SM reported that New Kelso had seen a good number of stags in good condition, which was generally recognised by the other members present. It was felt there was a slow start to the rut but there are now reasonable numbers of mature stags present throughout the group.

Culls to date are very much in line with previous years but given the slow start to the rut it may be the case that there may be both early and late calves in Summer 2023.

TC reported that the Network Rail data was showing an increasing number of deer collisions with trains on the Achnasheen – Strathcarron stretch of line with approximately 20 strikes per annum, predominantly stags.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

Questions were asked about Sika and TC confirmed that they do appear in cull returns, predominantly for the eastern half of the group. TC also reported that feral pigs were now present in Glenmoriston and spreading steadily.

### **3.2 Proposed Hind Culls – 2022-23 Season**

Prior to the meeting the following reports were received:

- Ledgowan are commencing a reduction cull to reduce number from 17 deer/km<sup>2</sup> recorded in 2017 to below 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup>, with a focus on hinds.
- Applecross are applying for an AECS scheme with an overall reduction in numbers.
- Glen Mhor are re-fencing the low ground and will maintain an “enclosed” population of approximately 15 – 20 deer or 1.5 – 2.0 deer/km<sup>2</sup>, to enable regeneration.

Those present suggested that they may increase their hind culls slightly or maintain historic culls levels.

Questions were asked about the use of night shooting and out of season authorisations and TC confirmed that The Woodland Trust were using both in the Shieldaig area, as were NatureScot on Beinn Eighe, immediately to the north of Coulin, and Lochcarron Golf Course to the south of Tullich.

### **3.3 Deer Counts**

Mention of was made of the Applecross count undertaken in July 2021, with stags very much in line with the population model and hind numbers rising against the model with 28% calving for that year. When worked through the population model the Applecross summer count indicated that average recruitment could be 34% with average calving likely to be 40% and calf mortality 6% per annum.

TC also made mention of the Central Sub-Group partial foot count undertaken in April 2022, returning 207 stags, 284 hinds and 109 calves, showing 38% recruitment for April this year. Interestingly, this reflects the stag to hind ratio shown in the Population Model for the CSG in Spring 2022. This could show that the anticipated recruitment for the DMG could now be higher than its was 5 -10 years ago, possibly due to milder winters.

TC suggested that a whole group foot count should be considered for Spring 2023 as the DMG is not priority group for a NatureScot aerial count, a point confirmed by Ben MacKeown. Discussion followed on the difficulty of counting Applecross as part of a whole group count given the staffing requirement with some members offering to help if required.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

AM stated that the Trustees felt it was crucial for a foot count to be undertaken in Spring 2023 to support the deer management policy for the next 5 years and discussion also followed on undertaking a count on Ben Damph, possibly during a following week. DA suggested that a foot count should be possible in April – May 2023 and count co-ordinators were confirmed as follows:

East	- Neil Morrison
Central	- Tom Chetwynd
West	- Archie MacLellan

### **3.4 Population Models**

Discussion followed on population models with TC explaining that the first 5-year period had finished following the aerial count by NatureScot in Spring 2017. With reference to the 2017-2022 model TC suggested that the model shows 38-40% calving with approx. 6% calf mortality. Also, the figures for the East Sub-Group had been updated following the foot count in Spring 2019 to recalibrate for 2017 count, which was felt to have been too high. Having taken this into account it is likely that in Spring 2022 there were approximately 1,200 stags, 2,000 hinds and 885 calves making a total of 4,000 deer which broadly reflects and is marginally down on the population of 4,200 counted in Spring 2017. TC went on to say that it was possible that stags numbers were actually slightly lower than 1,200 and hind numbers higher than 2,000 given the performance and characteristics of the population. This may explain why stags continue to feature in the Beinn Eighe cull given that they are being displaced by hinds from within the DMG and are looking to winter elsewhere.

TC raised the point that the stag : hind ratio is still 1 : 1.7 and with approx. 2,000 hinds present within the DMG approximately 330 stag and 330 hind calves are produced annually. In comparison, the average stag cull is 200 whereas the average hind cull is 252 per annum which tends to show that stags are probably moving off to be culled elsewhere, whereas hind population may be steadily increasing within the DMG. It is widely recognised from research elsewhere that a greater number of hinds to stags tends to push stags off to seek fresh ground and the ideal scenario is a ratio probably in the region of 1 stag : 1 hind over the DMG.

TC also mentioned that with the anticipated changes in deer legislation, it was probably within everyone's interest to slow down the movement of stags into other areas given that if they do move off they are less likely to be tolerated in future and could potentially be culled all year round and therefore less likely to return. Discussion followed on freeing up ground for stags, reducing hind numbers and improving wintering ground to hold stags throughout the year.

SM raised his concerns over the growing trend in conservation organisations claiming that they will improve the environment over and above the level maintained by existing land managers. He suggested that there was little data to back some of the claims and that there

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

were now clear examples of where economic activity has ceased there is a corresponding drop in biodiversity, and there is a now a clear requirement for auditing and data collection

to assess how changes have occurred in as there is often little evidence displayed to support claimed improvements. SM went on to say that deer are now quite far down landowners list

of priorities, whereas they are iconic and important as a key species within the landscape which if removed from the landscape may lead to unintended consequences.

TC discussed the second population model had been prepared for the 5-year period 2022-27, within which the hind cull has been increased significantly to try and achieve a 1 stag : 1 hind ratio. This should result in a population of approximately 1,600 stags and 1,800 hinds which should in turn produce 270 stag calves per annum or an additional 70 stags over and above the current sporting cull achieved in the whole of SWRDMG. This in turn would provide habitat improvement and more grazing available to the deer herd which should reduce stags wandering off at certain times of the year.

Discussion followed on whether 6.4 deer/km<sup>2</sup> was a suitable density for Ben Damph with TC pointing out that much of SWRDMG was rock and with 44,000 hectares of Dwarf shrub heath across the DMG this probably represented approx. 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> for the net grazeable area.

### **3.5 Habitat Monitoring**

TC asked whether any member had undertaken HIA within the last 2 years, with Kinlochdamph and Applecross confirming that they had undertaken surveys. It was suggested that members should try and undertake HIA of Dwarf Shrub Heath in Spring / Summer 2023 and that a training day could be arranged if required.

Discussion followed on the best time of year for HIA with differing views on Spring v mid to late Summer as the ideal times although it was recognised that Best Practice recommends late Spring and early Summer.

TC reminded members that HIA remained important for informing culls in that moderate to high impacts would normally lead to increased culls whereas low to moderate would indicate that sufficient deer are being culled.

TC also reminded members that in the event that they are considering woodland expansion or peatland restoration projects, appropriate compensatory and reduction culls should be implemented to avoid adverse impacts to the habitat.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

### **4.0 Deer Management Plan Review**

TC reminded members that the previous DMP ran from 2015 – 2020 and that deer numbers had remained fairly consistent since 2010 although there were changes within the DMG with areas being enclosed for new native woodlands. TC also suggested that with Deer Working Group recommendations coming into play with changes to the deer legislation and the

prospect of compulsory land management plans for larger properties under proposed land reform there may be merit in seeing how changes come into play before the DMP is updated and renewed. SM thought that this was a good idea given the significant changes ahead both within the DMG and through legislation and policy and asked NatureScot whether this was acceptable. BM responded by saying that HIA was probably more important to NatureScot than a refreshed DMP at this stage as these should be informing deer management decisions on the ground. It was agreed therefore to keep the DMP renewal on hold.

TC also mentioned that he had recently attended the Gairloch Conservation Unit DMG meeting and that the suggestion had been made to link up with SWRDMG to the south given the shared population and the proposals for woodland schemes along Glen Torridon. There was a feeling that a larger DMG could become more unwieldy although there were identified benefits of having closer links with Beinn Eighe. Following discussion it was felt that a connection could be maintained through sharing of information and that any closer link could be kept under review.

### **5.0 Woodland Creation & Expansion Schemes**

The following schemes were noted as being in the pipeline:

- Ben Damph – north / west section adjacent to the coast.
- Ledgowan – 128 ha. planted in 2020 with further scheme being planned.
- Ben Shildaig – 90ha planned in 2023 and 260ha in 2024.
- Coulin has become part of the Glen Torridon project, as part of a 5 estate scheme.
- Kinlochdamph have scoped a scheme and details will be shared.
- New Kelso have been approached with a proposal for a new native woodland.

TC reminded members that it is helpful to share woodland proposals with the DMG at an early stage.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

### **6.0 Peatland Restoration Schemes**

It was noted that Ledgowan are proposing a further PRS in 2023.

Kinlochdampn confirmed that they were investigating PRS potential. MA said the process was fraught, the science constantly changes and the potential carbon tonnage had been reduced by 66% to tighten up the validity of the scheme.

There was a feeling that many PRS advisors hadn't fully got to grips with the requirements of the scheme and the constantly changing guidelines and science created uncertainty for potential applicants.

### **7.0 Financial Report & Budget**

TC presented the statements on behalf of Kurt Larson and reported that no subscriptions had been raised since before COVID. Subscriptions were due therefore for 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22, these amounting to £11,180 in total.

TC ran through the budget and pointed out to members that this figure included the ADMG levy, secretarial fees, facilitation fees and website hosting fees incurred by the group annually. He also explained that the ADMG levy is based on a rolling 5-year average of stags, hinds, calves and other deer culled annually.

The budget as presented was approved and TC confirmed that he would issue invoices shortly.

### **8.0 Venison Update**

Members confirmed that they were managing to get stags collected and discussion followed on the retirement of James Slaughter and options for the future.

TC emphasised that game dealers are trying to encourage more stags to be culled earlier in the season to avoid over-supply during the rut. SM also mentioned that Ardgay Game offered two prices, one for venison collected from a chill and another from non-chilled buildings.

Questions were asked about butchery courses and SM confirmed that this could be arranged through Roddy if there was sufficient interest. Discussion also followed on venison processing at a local level under the Wild Game Guide with supply to local shops and restaurants, with appropriate manpower identified as the key constraint.

TC asked whether people were using copper or lead ammunition and most members confirmed that they were still to move over to non-toxic.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

### **9.0 NatureScot Report**

BM provided an update on the Scottish Government policy and the Biodiversity and Climate Change crises and the identified link with deer management which has led to the formation of the Strategic Deer Board. He went to summarise the SG expectations in terms of biodiversity recovery with priority woodland recovering by 2030 and all woodlands recovering without fences by 2045. Low impacts were all important whereas deer densities were not necessarily a focus.

BM confirmed that the DMG was probably not an area of focus for action, given that all holdings were actively engaged in collaborative deer management. TC emphasised that the high level of communication between members and the provision of data was exemplary and helped ensure the smooth operation of the DMG, leading to effective deer management.

BM mentioned the proposed change in ammunition legislation with .243 remaining as a legal red deer calibre, remote sensing using satellite imagery and drones and the land reform proposals with proposed land management plans for properties over 3,000 hectares.

### **10.0 ADMG Report**

TC reported that ADMG has responded to both the Scotland Biodiversity and Land Reform consultations and has concerns over the land reform consultation given the lack of evidence that large scale land ownership has any negative impact on management.

ADMG has been working with the Scottish Venison Association to further develop venison markets.

The key message from ADMG to DMGs is to maintain momentum and a collaborative approach to the delivery of deer management and that it is important not to lose sight of the progress already made by DMGs. TC reported that deer numbers were probably dropping in the open range / upland areas and the focus in future may well be on the lowland areas.

TC also made mention of the Strategic Deer Board and that they would become more important as the Deer Working Group recommendations were taken forward into new legislation.

There is a proposal to renew the DMG health checks as undertaken prior to 2019 and to further develop DeerMap with the James Hutton Institute.

An update was provided on the Common Ground project aimed at reducing conflict between conservation interests and deer management.

## **South West Ross Deer Management Group Autumn Meeting 2022**

The next regional meeting for ADMG was planned for Tuesday 6 December 2022, held on Zoom and the next AGM will be held on 22 March 2023 in Inverness.

### **11.0 AOCB**

TC mentioned that Helen Murchison, Achintraid is in periodic contact about stags in Kishorn. GP mentioned that it is a difficult situation given that some people wish to see the stags whereas others are concerned about damage to their gardens and the situation is not helped by Seafield encouraging stags into agricultural fields, where there is currently a no shooting policy.

### **12.0 Date of Next Meeting**

Provisional arrangements were made for a meeting on Friday 12 May 2023, with further arrangements to be confirmed in the Spring.