

**South West Ross Deer Management Group
Spring Meeting 2024
New Kelso Lodge, Strathcarron
Thursday 13 June 2024**

Present:

Present	Initials	Estate	Present	Initials	Estate
Shaun MacDonald	SM	<i>New Kelso (Chair)</i>	Richard Curzon	RC	<i>Tullich</i>
Michael Donegan	MD	<i>Applecross</i>	Colin Murdoch	CM	<i>Reraig</i>
David Abraham	DA	<i>Applecross</i>	Malcolm Turner	MT	<i>Glean Shildeag</i>
Kurt Larson	KL	<i>Ardoch (Treasurer)</i>	Del Ross	DR	<i>Glean Shildeag</i>
Archie MacLellan	AM	<i>Applecross</i>	Joan Cumming	JC	<i>Glen Torridon Partnership</i>
Charlie Hill	CH	<i>Glen Mhor</i>	Ross Macmillan	RM	<i>FLS - Achnashellach</i>
Neil Morrison	NM	<i>Coulin</i>	Miles Thompson	MT	<i>Lochcarron</i>
Philippa Cliff	PC	<i>Coulin</i>	Gillian Pattinson	GP	<i>Lochcarron</i>
Troels Banvhoj	TB	<i>Ledgowan</i>	Ben McKeown	BM	<i>NatureScot</i>
Danny Mackie	DM	<i>Ledgowan</i>	George Milne	GM	<i>New Kelso</i>
Mark Adams	MA	<i>Kinlochdamp</i>	Tom Chetwynd	TC	<i>Tullich (Facilitator)</i>
Chris Mackenzie	CM	<i>Achnashellach</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

Apologies	Estate	Apologies	Estate
Nicholas Wills	Achnashellach	Russell Cooper	<i>FLS - Achnashellach</i>
Louise Gray	Ben Damp		

3.0 Minutes of Meetings

The Minutes of the Autumn Meeting – 2022 (Sunday 16 October 2022) were circulated prior to the meeting.

The Minutes of the Spring Meeting – 2022 were approved CH and seconded by KL.

4.0 Matter Arising

There were no matters arising.

South West Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting 2024

5.0 Chairs Report

SM, Chair, gave a brief report saying that a lot had been happening despite the DMG not meeting on a regular basis, which would be covered during the meeting.

6.0 Financial Report

KL, Treasurer, gave a brief report confirming that the bank balance stood at £2,144 following receipt of some outstanding subscriptions, which brought all legacy subscriptions up to date.

TC confirmed that all subscriptions had been settled for the year 2021-22 and ran through the budget for the DMG for the three-year period 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 as circulated prior to the meeting.

For these three years the website fee has been maintained at £120, secretarial costs at £1,200, facilitation fees at £600 and the ADMG levy at approximately £1,500 per annum year leading to total annual costs to the DMG of £3,420 per annum. TC explained that these costs are split between the 14 members represented in the room with the ADMG element based on the 5-year average rolling cull for the DMG and for each estate, with £4 per stag and £2 per hind and calf charged.

SM stated that these fees were more favourable than those charged previously and invited members to write to him if they had any concerns or queries. It was agreed that itemised invoices for the first two years would be issued to members in June 2024 and the year 2024-25 would be issued later in the year.

7.0 Deer Management Plan

7.1 Stag & Hind Culls – 2023-24 Season

TC thanked all members for submitting their cull data when requested, and he summarised the culls as follows:

Year	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total
2022-23	243	291	94	628
2023-24	246	400	137	783

These figures include Lochcarron Golf Course, Kinloch and Reraig Forest who are reporting members to the DMG.

Discussion followed on the 2023-24 season with the following comments:

- Applecross identified that they had shot more hinds than in previous years to address a high hind count.
- Glen Mhor are reducing deer numbers following an extensive repair programme to the perimeter fence to get numbers to 20 -30 deer in total.

South West Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting 2024

- Ledgowan are culling to achieve 7/km² across the whole of Strathconon to protect a peatland restoration scheme with a starting density of approximately 20/km² on North Ledgowan
- Achnashellach noted a loss of condition in hinds towards the end of the season with their April count showing 29% recruitment and density at 5.6 deer/km² for the estate.
- Coulin are noting more Sika and are working towards zero tolerance in woodland areas, also noted increased calf losses in February due to wet weather.
- Glean Shildeag increased the culls following fence closure on a new woodland area and will be drone counting twice a year, the last of which showed 5 deer/km² over the whole. DR noted that he was counting approx. 250 hinds and calves in Jan / Feb on Couldoran.
- Lochcarron are looking to increase hind culls to address numbers counted in locality.
- Kinlochdamph did not see the mature stags that they would normally see and do continue to winter feed from January – March.
- Ardoch is fully enclosed and culled one mature red stag and one roe. KL also mentioned the new owner of Seafield who holds deer on his ground and intends to shoot for the freezer.
- New Kelso skinned 85 – 90% of deer culled within their new larder for their freezer and are pleased with the quality of the deer they hold which reflect the quality of the ground and reduction in the number of sheep.

A question was asked about losses on Network Rail land (Achnasheen – Strathcarron section), which are significant and increasing up until 2023, probably due to the increase in the height of the fence. Deer strikes are reported daily and are normally collected by way of FOI.

7.2 Foot Counts – Spring 2024

Achnashellach, Coulin and Ledgowan undertook a foot count in Spring 2025, all of which is useful for recruitment purposes which ranged from 27 – 29% for the East Sub-Group against an average of 33% within the population model.

Discussion followed on whole group foot and / or helicopter counts for Spring 2025. BM confirmed that a heli count would not happen within the next year given priority areas elsewhere. Drone counting was also discussed with comments from MT regarding their experience at Glean Shildeag where it is being used regularly at estate level. It was recognised that the technology is developing fast and may be applicable at a larger scale soon. JC mentioned that BH Wildlife now has a team of 5 operators and asked for thoughts on the setting up of local drone counting team. GTP have funding from NLHF for capacity building, training and experience for local people, including development of a thermal imaging drone team.

7.3 Population Model

TC reported that based on the population model, densities are now standing at approximately 7.3 deer/km², ranging from 5.1/km² in the west to 9.5/km² in the east. There were no questions on the population model.

South West Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting 2024

7.4 Habitat Monitoring

TC reported that New Kelso and Tullich had undertaken vegetation surveys in June 2023 as well as HIA on dwarf shrub heath. Applecross also undertook HIA in Summer 2023 and TC outlined that HIA will probably become more important in future years rather than focusing simply on deer densities referred to by ScotGov.

Discussion followed on the numbers of deer and changing habits of deer throughout the group and wider area, with deer continuing to appear in villages. SM cited examples where material changes have been made and the consequences are now being experienced, including deer counting which was not widely undertaken 60 years ago.

Various members confirmed that they would be undertaking further HIA in Summer 2024 and Applecross also confirmed that they would be undertaking a baseline ecological survey as part of WES accreditation.

Discussion followed on the value of HIA and how it is treated by Gov agencies and the various impact assessments for different habitat types. It was pointed out that a property may experience low impacts on DSH and high impacts within woodland given the seasonal movement of deer.

Further discussion followed on changing habitats and the increased risk of wildfire in the changing landscape.

7.5 Proposed Culls – 2024-25 Season

Members outlined their proposed culls for 2024-25, with most members continuing to maintain similar culls and some indicating that they would increase culls to meet changing objectives.

The proposals suggested that approximately 280 stags and 465 hinds and calves would be culled in the 2024-25 season. TC said that it was encouraging to see that members were focusing more on their hind numbers as these were probably critical in influencing the emigration of stags from the DMG area.

7.6 Public Interest

TC made members aware of further communication received from Helen Murchison regarding deer in Kishorn Village.

There has only been one deer vehicle collision (DVC) recorded in the last year in the New Kelso area.

South West Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting 2024

7.7 Deer Management Plan – Review & Update

TC asked whether members were happy to continue to maintain the current deer management plan (prepared by Professor Putman for the period 2015 -2020) as the base plan subject to annual updates through the minutes. Discussion followed on the increasing focus on native woodland expansion, peatland restoration and ecological restoration within the DMG which is leading to an increase in hind culls.

It was agreed to continue with the current plan with annual updates to the population model and records of discussion through the minutes until such time as the new deer legislation had been introduced and the way forward in terms of Government expectations for deer management were clearer.

BM provided an update on the proposed new legislation and the recent consultation which lead to a draft bill later in 2024. This may lead to the introduction of Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs), a new power in addition to the current powers which may also include incentives for deer management.

Discussion followed on new legislation, new policies and grant schemes and the importance of collecting data and regular auditing throughout to ascertain whether such developments were having a positive or negative impact in the local and wider environments.

8.0 Woodland Expansion & Peatland Restoration Schemes

MA confirmed that Kinlochdamph is looking at two new woodland schemes.

PC confirmed that Coulin is planning a further Peatland Restoration Scheme and are partway through a natural capital assessment mainly for woodland creation scheme.

Discussion followed on carbon capture in peatland and how its assessed in light of PRS.

TC suggested that with these schemes coming forward and the previous schemes completed, 2025 would probably be a good point for a full review of the DMP taking into account all new enclosures and fencelines and PRS areas.

MT confirmed that Glean Shildeag had completed Phase 1 of their woodland creation scheme and that Phase 2 would start in Autumn 2025 with scoping underway for a third phase.

9.0 Glen Torridon Partnership

JC outlined the aims of the GTP, comprising the Woodland Trust, NTS Torridon, Coulin, Ben Damph and NatureScot Beinn Eighe as founding members, which focuses on habitat restoration. The key habitats are native woodland, open hill and riparian which fall within the Alliance for Rainforests area, this including oak and native pine woodlands with bryophytes.

South West Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting 2024

GTP would like to develop a collaborative DMP with the active participation of all deer managers sharing the sub-populations of SWRMG and Gairloch Conservation Unit (GCU).

JC also mentioned that a local community stalking initiative had started on Bein Eighe, which GTP would like to roll out across other estates in the partnership, and that the availability and supply of venison for local communities would also be developed. Conversations had also been held with GCU over improvements in infrastructure, such as deer larders and processing units as well as increasing capacity of local butchers to handle venison and a scoping study is likely to be undertaken on this.

Discussion followed on the sale of processed to the local market and SM asked that a briefing note be circulated to the DMG. Also, the maintenance of welfare standards with community stalking schemes.

JC mentioned that there were various funding packages of £6/ha. available through Scottish Forestry to promote natural regeneration through active deer management at scale, as well as through National Lottery Funding.

Availability of drones was also discussed for fence checking and deer distribution surveys.

10.0 NatureScot Report

BM outlined some of the proposed changes to legislation, including DMNROs which will update the current Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, with a Bill due to be published by Scottish Government in Autumn 2025. This will be combined in time with an updated Code of Practice after the legislation has been passed.

11.0 ADMG Report

TC provided a brief update on ADMG consultations and their concern on DMNROs against which they have pushed back hard, this based on the lack of clarity provided by ScotGov on how they may be enacted. There is a strong feeling that DMNROs will directly affect voluntary deer management and that the proposed changes focus too much on regulation and not on incentives.

12.0 AOCB

MA mentioned that SLaE will visit Kinlochdamph.

Bob Kindness provided a summary on the River Carron restocking project.

13.0 Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 31 October 2024