

South West Ross Deer Management Group Stalkers Meeting

**New Kelso Lodge, Strathcarron
Monday, 21 October 2019**

Attendees:

Shaun Macdonald (Chair)	- <i>New Kelso</i>	David Abraham	- <i>Applecross</i>
Tom Chetwynd (Secretary)	- <i>Tullich</i>	Richard Curzon	- <i>Tullich</i>
Gillian Pattinson	- <i>Lochcarron</i>	Bill Stalker	- <i>Lochcarron</i>
Richard Munday	- <i>Kinloch</i>	Malcolm Turner	- <i>Ben Shieldaig</i>
Troels Bavnhoej	- <i>Ledgowan</i>	Donnie Chisholm	- <i>Ben Shieldaig</i>
Danny Mackay	- <i>Ledgowan</i>	Sinclair Coghill	- <i>SNH</i>
Colin Murdoch	- <i>Reraig Forest</i>	Neil Morrison	- <i>Coulin</i>
Alison Hewitt	- <i>Kinlochdamph</i>	Pat Lambert	- <i>New Kelso</i>

1.0 Welcome

The Chair welcomed those present.

2.0 Apologies

Kurt Larson	- <i>Ardoch</i>	Mark Adams	- <i>Kinlochdamph</i>
Mark Pattinson	- <i>Lochcarron</i>	Charlie Hill	- <i>Glen Mhor</i>
Chris Mackenzie	- <i>Achnashellach</i>	Andrew Cope	- <i>Glen Mhor</i>
Jim Alexander	- <i>Kinloch</i>	Archie MacLellan	- <i>Applecross</i>

3.0 Deer Management Plan

3.1 Deer Counts – Summer 2019

The count undertaken by the Central Sub-Group on 18 August 2019 showed a shortfall in number of stags compared to the population model, as shown in the table below:

Population Model - Comparison - Central Sub-Group			Whole Group				
SNH Aerial Count v Current Estimate			Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Density
2017	SNH Aerial Count	Spring Population	433	596	265	1,294	8.2
2017	Population Model	Summer Population	535	720	252	1,507	9.5
2019	Population Model	Summer Population	461	629	220	1,310	8.3
2019	Count / Estimate	Summer Population	240	631	136	1,007	6.4
		2019 Variance	-221	2	-84	-303	
		2019 Variance (%)	-0.48	0.00	-0.38	-0.23	

The East Sub-Group undertook a co-ordinated count in Spring 2019 involving Ledgowan, Coulin and Achnashellach which showed a significant shortfall in numbers compared to the population model. No count was undertaken in Summer 2019.

No count was undertaken in the West Sub-Group in Summer 2019.

The requirement to for undertake counts with greater consistency was discussed and it was proposed and agreed that a co-ordinated foot count should be undertaken by the whole group in Spring 2020. This would provide a 3-year interval following the aerial count undertaken by SNH February 2017 and an opportunity to provide a comparison to the DMG population model.

(AP 1: Undertake whole group foot count – Spring 2020)

Aerial counts were also discussed, and it was confirmed that all future helicopter counts undertaken by SNH will require a contribution from the DMG. In the case of SWRDMG this may be in the region of £6,000 to £10,000 inc. VAT when the next count is undertaken in 2022.

Richard Munday suggested that although helicopter counts provide a good audit of deer numbers the level of cost is increasingly difficult to justify and that drones may provide a more cost-effective option. Discussions followed on some of the current limitations surrounding drones and RM informed members that a drone company had undertaken a trial at Kinloch and that they were due to meet with SNH to discuss this in more detail shortly.

Sinclair Coghill also mentioned that helicopter counts were under consideration in terms of carbon accounting within SNH and that their long-term use may be uncertain.

3.2 Stag Cull – 2019 Season

The 2019 stag season was discussed with both the West and Central Sub-Group members generally agreeing that the stags culled were in good condition and weighed in well. The East Sub-Group members suggested that the stags culled were lighter than expected.

Some members had already provided cull figures prior to the meeting and the remainder provide details at the meeting. These have now been collated and show that 142 stags were culled overall. This shows a 38% drop in the stag cull for the DMG in comparison to the previous 5-year average of 229 stags for the period 2014 – 2018.

Discussion followed on the differences and changes in management objectives for various group members with a greater leaning towards conservation becoming evident and this is recorded in greater detail under Section 3.6 below.

3.3 Proposed Hind Cull – 2019-20 Season

Proposals for the 2019-20 hind season were invited and these can now be summarised as follows:

East Sub-Group:	90 hinds
Central Sub-Group:	80 hinds
West Sub-Group:	40 hinds
Total:	210 hinds

Discussion followed on the proposed overall cull and the apparent imbalance between stags and hinds. The Secretary suggested that the proposed cull of 210 hinds was low when compared to the proposed cull of 245 hinds within the population model.

The Secretary made members aware that one member had raised concerns over the number of stags culled by some estates. He asked members whether the DMG should dictate the number of stags taken by each estate following reference to the population model or act as Arbiter in the case of a disagreement over a cull proposal put forward by a member. It was agreed that all culls should be agreed following discussion at DMG meetings and through email circulations as currently undertaken.

3.4 Population Model

Copies of the population model were circulated at the meeting and briefly discussed. It was proposed that they would be discussed in more detail at the next meeting following an update of the 2019 calving and stag cull figures.

Following further adjustment of the population model post meeting, the Summer 2019 population for the whole group may indicate a drop of up to 37% in stag numbers and hinds may be 13% above the target population agreed in the DMP for 2020 as shown in the table below:

Population Model - Comparison - Whole DMG			Whole Group				
2019 Summer Population v 2020 Target Population			Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Density
2017	SNH Aerial Count	Spring Population	1,279	2,033	885	4,197	7.5
2017	Population Model	Summer Population	1,624	2,447	856	4,927	8.8
2019	Population Model	Summer Population	941	1,919	485	3,345	6.0
2020	Target Population	Summer Population	1,487	1,702	576	3,765	6.7
Variance - 2019 Summer Pop'n v 2020 Target Pop'n			-546	217	-91	-420	-0.7
2019 Variance (%)			-0.37	0.13	-0.16	-0.11	-0.11

It also appears that although the density is likely to be broadly in line with what was agreed within the DMP at 6 – 7 deer/sq.km, the stag : hind proportion is now likely to be 1 : 2. It is widely recognised that where a higher number of hinds are maintained within an open range population, the hinds can tend to favour the better grazing and push stags off the ground. The stag : hind proportion proposed as a target for 2020 in the DMP is 1 : 1.15 which was to be achieved by a co-ordinated and gradual reduction in hind numbers compared to stag numbers over the 5 year period of the plan.

3.5 HIA Monitoring

Lochcarron, Applecross and Ledgowan Estates confirmed that they had undertaken further HIA in 2019 and that the information would be forwarded to the Secretary for inclusion in the annual HIA report.

(AP 2: Members to submit HIA data collected in 2019 to Secretary)

3.6 Public Interest

Ledgowan and New Kelso Estates confirmed that they had embarked on Peatland Restoration schemes in 2019. In the case of Ledgowan this was Phase 2 of a larger scheme.

Kinloch and Applecross Estates confirmed that they are considering further Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) applications to the south of Shildaig / Loch Torridon. Lochcarron Estate also confirmed that they are considering an FGS application.

The Secretary re-highlighted the Forestry Co-Operation Option (FCO) which is available for the scoping of schemes where two or more adjoining owners are considering woodland management and/or expansion schemes. The grant funding is to encourage collaborative landscape scale management planning and is available up to a maximum of £10,000.

Discussion followed on woodland management and expansion. It was identified that there is little scope for commercial woodland within the DMG and that many members have already undertaken or are considering new native woodland schemes with conservation as a primary objective. The importance of maintaining a mosaic of trees and landscapes was discussed along with the importance of using fencing to exclude herbivores from woodland and conservation areas.

During this discussion it became apparent that conservation is becoming one of the primary objectives for many DMG members and that in most cases it is adopted in balance with economic activity in order to help maintain biodiversity. Shaun Macdonald made the point that food still needs to be produced alongside carbon capture and that grazing cattle in woodland can lead to an improvement.

Richard Munday confirmed that the key objective at Kinloch is conservation and that additional stags will be culled within fenced woodland areas over the winter period. He also reported that there has been an increase in roe in the Shildaig area which is leading to woodland damage.

Malcolm Turner confirmed that conservation was now the primary management objective for Ben Shildaig, in order to preserve the existing Scots Pine and Birch woodland and to promote regeneration. He confirmed that the intention was to find a local deer manager to undertake future culls and that there were plans to expand the woodland area and undertake HIA on the open hill area.

The importance of setting baselines was discussed, and it was acknowledged that progress can then be measured from that point and that without an agreed baseline it is difficult to

conclude whether a project has been successful or not. It was identified that a consistent long-term policy may be needed to enable owners to decide on when fences around new woodlands should be removed in order to maintain the mosaic and diversity.

Sinclair Coghill provided information in connection with Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve (NNR) which adjoins SWRDMG to the north east and confirmed that the proposed cull was 15 stags and 15 hinds based on a 2019 count of 70 stags and 40 hinds. This focused cull is in response to HIA undertaken since 2012 supported by dung counts undertaken in 2019, which have indicated high impacts and deer numbers within the NNR. A difference has been seen within the last 5 years and the continuing culling effort will eventually reduce the deer population within the NNR to 2 deer / sq.km.

Deer Vehicle Collisions (DVCs) were discussed with Ledgowan reporting a hotspot on A890 near Luib, possibly due to a third-party feeding deer.

Network Rail mortality was discussed given previous reports of mortality between Achnasheen and Strathcarron. The Secretary undertook to try and obtain data with the contact details provided by SNH.

(AP 3: Network Rail data to be requested)

3.7 Training Requirements

Training requirements were discussed, and it was identified that 4 – 5 members required first aid training and two required quad training. The Secretary undertook to obtain details of an appropriate training course and to circulate them to all members.

(AP 4: First Aid and Quad training course to be organised)

4.0 SNH 2019 Assessment and The Deer Review

Sinclair Coghill reported that SWRDMG had secured a good score in the 2019 Assessment and that progress made by the industry as a whole was also good. A report had been compiled by SNH and sent to the Cabinet Secretary for ECCLR.

Sinclair Coghill also reported that the report being produced by the Deer Working Group was still in production and was expected to be delivered to the Cabinet Secretary at the end of November 2019.

A response and feedback from the Cabinet Secretary is expected to be issued once both reports have been fully considered.

5.0 Venison Update

The members present suggested that they were happy with the arrangements they had with game dealers with no issues aired.

6.0 AOCB

The Secretary reported that a request had been received from a consultant preparing a report on the instruction of Scottish Environment Link. This report will investigate the progress made by DMGs against their agreed population models and DMPs. It was agreed that no information should be provided until such time as the feedback had been received in relation to the 2019 Assessment and Deer Working Group reports.

7.0 Dates of Next Meeting

Autumn Meeting - Friday 15 November 2019

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8.0 Action List

Ref:	Detail	Action
1.0	<i>Undertake whole group foot count – Spring 2020</i>	
2.0	<i>Members to submit HIA data collected in 2019 to Secretary</i>	
3.0	<i>Network Rail data to be requested</i>	
4.0	<i>First Aid and Quad training course to be organised</i>	
5.0		
6.0		