

Northern Deer Management Group

Minutes of the Meeting on Friday 20th August 2021 at 2.30pm at Kildonan Hall

Present: Chair - Howard Palmer (HP) (Latheronwheel West), Treasurer - Anson MacAuslan (AM) (Langwell & Braemore), Secretary – Helen MacIntyre (HM), Tom Chetwynd (TC) – ADMG, representatives from: Achentoul, Badanloch, Bighouse, Braehour & Backlass, Dunbeath & Glutt, Fountain Forestry, RSPB, Scottish Woodlands, SGRPID Armadale, Shurrery, Skelpick, Suisgill, Torrish.

Apologies:, Holly Deary (HD) – NatureScot, Achkeepster, Dalnawillan & Rumsdale, FLS, SSE Strathy North & South.

1. Welcome and apologies. HP welcomed everyone to the meeting. See above for apologies.

2. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 18th March 2021 and matters arising

No matters arising. Minutes approved.

3. Chairman's Report – Howard Palmer

The deer count didn't go as well as we had hoped in Spring, with South sub-group 2 not managing a full count due to weather conditions. All other sub-groups had full counts. Next year the counts will be held as usual: the first Monday in March for North and South sub-groups, with West sub-groups counting in late February.

The Scottish Government response to the Deer Working Group Report was to accept most of the report's recommendations. We need to continue to work together to count, plan our culls, monitor our habitats. If not deemed satisfactory, NatureScot may step in to direct/licence culling etc., despite currently having few resources for this.

Land management is coming under greater scrutiny due to the climate crisis. A study will be undertaken by the James Hutton Institute to measure the greenhouse gas emissions from wild deer in Scotland.

It is important that our group has a Fire Plan so that we are well prepared for future fires in the area. HM has found a fire plan we can produce a template from. We will include contact details, equipment lists, areas with no phone signal etc.

Finally, thank you to my officers, Anson as Treasurer and Helen as secretary for all their good work during my time as Chairman.

4. Resignation of Chairman and Proposal of Diana Darwall as succeeding Chair, and Election of other Office Bearers

Diana Darwall has kindly agreed to put herself forward as the next Chair of the group. No other nominations for Chair have been received. Proposed by HP, seconded by DP, Diana has been elected as Chair and we wish her all the best in the role.

HP proposed that Anson MacAuslan remain as Treasurer, seconded by DP. Anson was re-elected.

HP proposed that Helen MacIntyre remain as Secretary, seconded by DP. Helen was re-elected.

5. Treasurer's Report

AM reported that the group has some cash in hand and has managed to collect some of the outstanding debts with the rest expected imminently.

Group subscriptions will allow the group to build up a small reserve for the future. Potentially the group could get a professional to update the deer management plan. There may also need to be a contribution towards a helicopter count. NatureScot are looking to reduce their helicopter counts due to the expenses and carbon emissions. They are carrying out trials of alternatives, such as satellite and drones. **Action:** AM to send out subs invoices after the meeting.

6. Culls and Counts

a. Planned 2022 counts – As stated above in the Chairman’s Report.

b. Proposed culls for 2021/22 – Scottish Woodlands are now managing Strathmore Forest in South sub-group 2 and Altnabreac across the railway line in North sub-group. The forests are currently not securely fenced but they are looking to repair these fences. Their cull targets are estimates which will be kept under review based on deer damage to plantations.

FLS Braehour are also planning to repair their fences. Concern was expressed that if Braehour is re-fenced then they need to be careful not to enclose some of the stags from neighbouring areas in the forest. Some members were concerned that FLS are culling many more stags than hinds.

AM asked if culls on RSPB west will be high enough to keep deer numbers under control. BJ said they will certainly consider increasing the cull. Action: RSPB to get back to the group regarding their cull target. The RSPB Knockfin access issue is still ongoing, but is hopefully very close to being resolved.

c. Population modelling -

Since we didn’t get a complete count of South 2 sub group this spring, both the whole group and south 2 population models do not include count figures. This obviously makes those models slightly less accurate this year.

TC suggested we look at the whole group population model rather than the sub-group models. It is likely there is a larger number of hinds than is being counted. From looking at the numbers of deer culled over the past four years and the fact that total deer numbers counted are fairly stable it would suggest that there could be 6000-7000 hinds rather than the ~4500 counted each year. A model is only as good as the data that goes in. TC recommends the group does a carefully co-ordinated count over a couple of days. HP thinks there are a lot of hinds to the east of the A9 that may be accounting for an increasing population. TC is seeing more exaggerated deer movements in other groups than in the past. A build-up of hind numbers can then lead to a displacement of stags into other areas. In order to get a better count, how do we count the deer in unfenced woodland? TC said NatureScot are trialling military grade UADs (drones) using infrared imaging, but this is still quite costly. Satellites are also being considered and are now down to 5 metre squared imaging. There is some chance of getting a reasonably accurate deer count but not by gender. They use AI to analyse the images.

7. Habitat Impact Assessments

There has been an increase in the number of group members doing HIAs. Langwell & Braemore, Achentoul, Strathmore & Blar, and Bighouse have all started this year. Others who have continued their HIAs are: Dunbeath & Glutt and Latheronwheel. Suisgill did a big HIA a few years ago. JN pointed out that the whole group is assessed on their actions, so he strongly encourages members to start doing HIAs if they are not already.

8. Group Deer Management Plan

The Working Plan now includes new sections on population modelling and HIAs. **Action:** HM to update the HIA section to reflect the work done and progress made by members this year. HP commented that it is important to

show NatureScot what we are doing.

Badanloch said the number of walkers they are getting is impacting their ground and disturbing the deer. HM explained that estates can use the Heading For The Scottish Hills (HFTSH) website to inform the public about responsible access routes and stalking dates. JN had a rambler call to ask if there was stalking or if he could go for a walk.

Action: HM to work out where to put a section on responsible access.

9. NatureScot Update – Holly Deary could not attend the meeting so no update was given.

10. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report

Tom Chetwynd gave the update.

At the AGM in June a new Chair, Tom Turnbull, was elected. He is a young estate owner from Argyll.

ADMG are looking at future roles of DMGs and methods of continuing the assessment process. DMGs have an important role in the next 12-18 months, with the Deer Working Group report being taken forward by the Scottish Government. There will be a period of consultation before changes are implemented, and ADMG expect to be fully consulted.

Venison – There has been a slight increase in price, particularly for SQWV members. There is a push to promote Scottish venison at a local level.

ADMG are working with the Country Food Trust, which was set up to use pheasant/partridge for meals for the needy. Of 1.2 million meals, 400,000 of those had venison in them. They are looking at an initiative with Highland Game to use more venison in their meals. A condition is that all venison will be culled with lead-free ammunition. Major game dealers have said that as of July 2022 they will only purchase venison shot with lead-free ammunition. Pressure is coming from the restaurant trade and the public.

TC said supplies of lead-free ammunition from America are in short supply so if you can get it then do stock up.

11. Any Other Competent Business

One member said he has contested his sporting rates on the fact that to do it on an acreage basis is illegal. TC said these non-domestic rates will be reviewed every 5 years. A lot of deer managers are now undertaking conservation but still paying non-domestic rates on this. It was asked if RSPB are exempt from sporting rates. TC said yes, charities are exempt.

JN thanked HP for all the work that he has put in over the past 5 years as Chair.

12. Date of Next Meeting

A provisional date of Thursday 5th May was set. The meeting will be held at Kildonan Hall.