

# Northern Deer Management Group

## Minutes of the Meeting on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2023 at 1.00pm at Kildonan Hall

Present: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer

Representatives from:

- Achentoul, Armadale Farm, Backlass, Braehour & Strathmore, Badanloch, Bighouse, Dunbeath, Glutt, Imrichie & Casan, Latheronwheel, Sandside, Shurrery, Suisgill, Syre, Torrish
- ADMG, Forestry and Land Scotland, Fountain Forestry, NatureScot, RSPB, Scottish Woodlands

### 1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone and introduced the new NDMG Secretary. The Chair thanked the Secretary and Treasurer for their hard work and attendance.

### 2. Approval of Minutes of Meeting on 17th August 2022 and Matters Arising

Minutes were proposed, seconded and approved by all. There were no matters arising.

### 3. Chair's Address

Good afternoon everyone. May I extend a very warm welcome to our new Secretary, who has bravely taken on the role and has hit the ground running with great efficiency. There is a zoom link for this meeting and I am recording the meeting onto my laptop. If there are any objections to this, please say now.

We are grateful to NatureScot for undertaking the recent helicopter count. It is disappointing to see that there has been a significant increase in numbers since 2013. The numbers over the last few counts have been pretty consistent. Conditions on the day may have skewed the numbers. 50% snow cover could have pushed all the deer down onto coastal estates. There may have been gaps in the count and some areas added in from estates not in our group.

Sporting rates are a hot topic now and present a potential conflict of interest. We will have a brief discussion on a member's paper regarding this, but as he is unable to attend today, we will have a more detailed discussion at the August meeting.

I hope everyone is continuing with their regular Habitat Impact Assessments. If you have not initiated this practice, it is well worth doing. Training opportunities have been provided. There are grants available to improve your habitat, so it need not be an expensive process. After all, our purpose as a group is to strive to improve habitats. If anyone has commissioned an Environment Assessment since the last meeting, please can you let the Secretary know so she can add it to the map.

As it is a busy weekend, with roadworks etc. please let's try to keep this meeting brief and to the point. Very many thanks.

### 4. Treasurer's Report

The report was circulated. Only one subscription outstanding. Nothing to note.

## 5. Culls & Counts 2023

**a. Culls and foot count** – The Chair thanked everyone for sending in their cull returns. The datasheet was circulated. Please note the amendment for Strathmore (30 hinds not 3).

**b. Helicopter count** – The representative from NatureScot gave a detailed report on the planning, analysis and execution of this operation which was a two-helicopter task funded by NatureScot to the tune of £60K. The key points being:

- The high level of confidence in the count given the almost perfect white ground conditions; the challenges of movement, double-counting and forested cover notwithstanding. Group members who had been in the helicopters agreed that visibility was excellent and the flights captured an accurate “snapshot” of what was there on the day.
- Maps had not been produced in time for the meeting but are imminent. There will be two – one showing the helicopter routes and group areas and one showing density.
- A limited survey east of the Causewaymire suggests a significant amount of deer in this area.
- An apology for Sandside not being counted (human error)
- The previous system of offering an observation seat to the keeper of each estate is no longer practical so seats were offered on a per-flight basis.

They also fielded questions from group members about the challenges of the helicopter count and the seeming disparity with what they see on the ground. They also addressed questions about possible use of drones - currently limited by legal restrictions; satellites and fixed wing options – cheaper but with double-counting and differentiation problems; thermal imaging – very expensive and with differentiation problems.

They welcomed input from group members to refine the data in terms of areas and stressed that NatureScot has an “open door” policy for anyone attending their offices in Inverness to come and discuss the data. They are happy to arrange a local consultation in Kildonan Hall or attend a group member’s estate.

There was some discussion about the accuracy of deer numbers generally. Group members all agree that the actual deer population is higher than any counts suggest due to the inherent problems of counting, movement, forested “hiding places” and weather.

A member highlighted deer incursions into crofting areas and increased road traffic accidents; adjacent forested areas with porous boundaries being particularly problematic. Another member highlighted the difficulties of culling at a higher than maintenance level – even intensive shooting 5/6 days a week in season is proving insufficient. A member raised the reality of culling on the flat terrain of Caithness; often a “one-shot deal” with commercial clients and almost impossible to make meaningful reductions. NatureScot said that train strikes are also increasing every year.

There was general agreement that culling has to be stepped up by everyone and a realistic plan and targets are required. The ADMG representative strongly recommended population modelling using the helicopter count data to inform cull targets.

Group members felt that deer management is incurring increasing costs (ammunition, chillers, rises in sporting rates) and that the Scottish Government have to do more to incentivise deer management and offer creative strategies for increasing venison prices and consumption.

**ACTION:** Any group member wishing to engage with NatureScot to discuss the helicopter count can email them to arrange this.

## **6. Habitat Impact Assessments**

These have been undertaken by some group members. The Chair encouraged members to engage with this process and reminded them that training and grants are available.

## **7. Group Deer Management Plan**

Group members feel that deer population levels are reaching a critical stage and a realistic plan must be implemented very soon. It was noted that this plan would also have to allow for areas with “bad neighbours” who do not cull or maintain boundary fences or participate in the group.

### **ACTION:**

- Population modelling is essential – this will inform targets for group members. NDMG to engage an external contractor to carry this out.
- The results of this will be distributed to group members who will then submit their cull targets in advance of the next NDMG meeting (17 August 2023). The Secretary will gather and collate these and send out reminders.

## **8. Fire Plan**

No updates.

## **9. NatureScot Report**

There was a brief report on current relevant matters, the main points being:

- Political: The Scottish Government has a new Deer Management Strategic Board. “This project board has been established under the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Programme, and the board will agree priorities to improve the sustainability of Scotland’s deer management systems, with actions split across four work streams: legislation; regulation; incentives; and operational delivery.”
- Legislative: Proposal to allow thermal scopes for culling at night. Also to reduce copper ammunition to 85 grain bullets.

## **10. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report**

The AGMG representative gave a brief summary of the ADMG Report (appended to these minutes). They agreed to take the member’s paper on sporting rates to the next ADMG meeting.

## **11. Any Other Competent Business**

A member suggested sharing the sporting rates paper with a person conducting research for the Scottish Venison Association

**ACTION:** The Chair to forward this on as suggested

## **12. Date of Next Meeting**

A date of Thursday 17th August was set. The meeting will be held at 2.30pm at Kildonan Hall.