

West Lochaber Deer Management Group

WEST LOCHABER DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP Spring Meeting

Friday 11st June 2021
10.00 – 11.30hrs
Virtual meeting via Zoom

Minute

Attendees:

Alistair Gibson – (DMG Chairman) (ADMG rep),
Glenfinnan
Bruce Taylor – (DMG Secretary & Treasurer), Fassfern
Andrew MacMaster – NatureScot local liaison officer
Craig Higgins - Glenfinnan
Henry Dobson – WTS Loch Arkaig
Jessica Maxwell – WTS Loch Arkaig
Gary Servant – Arkaig Community Forest
Alan Currie – Fassfern/Achdaliu
Alex MacDonald - Achnacarry south
James Coulston – Arisaig
Robert Spence - Scamadale
Sandra de Ferranti - Meoble,
James de Ferranti, Meoble

For rail fence discussion:

Iain Morrison – Network Rail (Projects manager.
Works delivery off-track, Scotland)
James Morrison – Network Rail (Ecologist, Works
delivery off-track)
Sam MacIlvaney – Network Rail (Works Delivery Off-
track)
Craig Keith – Network Rail (Works Delivery Off-track)

Apologies:

Pete MacLaren – Ranachan
Simon Laird – Achnacarry South
John Jackson – F&LS, Glen Loy and Gairloch forests
Ian Leith – Glenfinnan
Jane Mitchell - Glenfinnan
Cathy Mayne – representing Ardnish
Michael Rhoden - Fassfern/Achdaliu
Harry Nicholson - Fassfern/Achdaliu
Paolo Berardelli - Glen Mamie
Richard Tulloch - Fassfern
Peter Stewart-Sandiman - Ardnish
Victor Clements – DMP Consultant
Ian Collier – Scottish Forestry

Non- attendance:

Raymond Fraser – Meoble
John MacDonald – West Highland Hunting -
Scamadale
Graham Nairn – Annat/Achanellan/Glen Fada
Niall Rowantree - Ardnish

No.	Summary	Action
1	<p>Apologies and Introductions As recorded above.</p>	
	<p>Presentation by Network Rail This part of the meeting was arranged at short notice to allow the Network Rail proposals for fencing the railway with a statutory 1.35m fence to be presented and fully discussed given the urgency now needed to reach a resolution with owners. Network Rail has nearly 3000 miles of railway in Scotland, or 6,000 miles (9,650km) of fencing to</p>	

maintain. 200-300km are replaced annually. The Mallaig line fence is well past its date for needing to be replaced. The ORR (Office of Rail Regulator) specify the fence and this is a 1.35m height from ground to top wire. There can be no variance on the height but the following options are available :

1. Stock fence with plain wires to bring height up to 1.35m
2. Stock fence with lightweight rail replacing top wire
3. Stock fence within a ditch to have ground level near to stock fence height to effectively create a deer leap. Any guide fences to gather deer towards these sections to be a neighbouring landowner's responsibility.
4. Stock fence with alternate short and long stobs and deer fence height strainers supporting 3 plain wires above stock fence height. Deer net to be neighbouring landowner's responsibility and Network Rail only maintains the 1.35m fence going forward.

There is a restricted budget for implementing these additional cost options so prioritising requested. Decisions on each section are **requested by 31st August 2021** to the Network Rail Asset Works Offtrack Managers, James Morrison and Sam McIllvaney. The timescales are relatively short but the process of getting the work organised takes 12 weeks after the decision as possession needs to be taken of the track for rail safety reasons.

Within DMG response it would be useful to have possible railway access points offered by neighbouring landowners to expedite works.

Network Rail have the option to erect the fence within their own legal boundary rather than on the march to avoid disputes and discussion. However the preference is to come to an agreement and make the Mallaig line a pilot project for good examples in a situation where livestock are minimal but wild deer the main interest, which is unusual in Scotland.

It is permissible for neighbouring landowners to top the railway stock fence with a deer fence eg HT6/90/30 net on alternate long stobs plus strainers to convert to 1.8m high fence. While in the past this has been rejected (eg Glenfinnan, 1995) a common sense approach is now taken.

Enquiries and agreements on any additional specifications should be made to Network Rail via the West Lochaber DMG.

ALL

2 Members Reports.

- i) 2019/20 Hind Culls**
- ii) Condition Report**

Estate	Hinds			Calves	Stags (forestry)	Comments
	No.	Av Wt(kg)	Av Age			
Glenfinnan	43			22		Yield hinds down 3-4kg on 2019. Condition tailed off in January. 50-60 stags feeding
Forest Enterprise	0			0	1	No report
WTS Loch Arkaig	15	38.5		5		Good condition compared to 2019/20. Cull only from west forest area so expect increase next year when all areas will be controlled. Thermal imaging drone used to assess population (a useful tool for picking up deer under canopy)= 29 red deer. 1 sika stag shot end of May

Glen Loy Forest					Achnacarry Sporting Lease
Ranachan	15			5	
Meoble	51			10	Cull at west end of estate in late Sept under licence from NatureScot, allowing extraction by helicopter when otherwise v.difficult. Plenty of calves. Hind difficult to find. No mortality of significance.
Achdaliu	68			38	Condition fell off towards end of season. Mortality on railway worthy of recording as stags head to foreshore for grazing. 2 dead yesterday. Hill mortality 6 stags, 7 hinds, 4 calves
Fassfern Forest	49			32	8
Achnacarry South Hill	32			16	Lots of calves in good condition. Feeding 120 deer on Ach.S .Good dev of antler noted . Mortality low at 8 stags,3 hinds, 3 calves
Glen Loy (Nairn)	21			11	No report
Glen Mamie	28			8	No report
Ardnish	8			2	No report
Scamadale	4			3	Reduced cull this season. Lots of deer moving onto bog above Arisaig noted
Arisaig	64			20	More culling over winter with focus on Glen Beasdale. Condition fell away late in season as late Spring had an impact. More calves and notably more males than females. Survival good.

Commentary : long & cold Spring in 2021 with dry conditions giving rise to a prolonged period with minimal vegetation growth and high fire risk. Two serious fires – firstly at Carnoch, Arisaig on 19th May and then at Glenfinnan on 27th May. The Arisaig fire would have spread into the SSSI/SAC but fortunately the wind direction took it elsewhere for 3 days of burning. The condition of the deer has generally been good despite the reduced vegetation.

3

Count Report

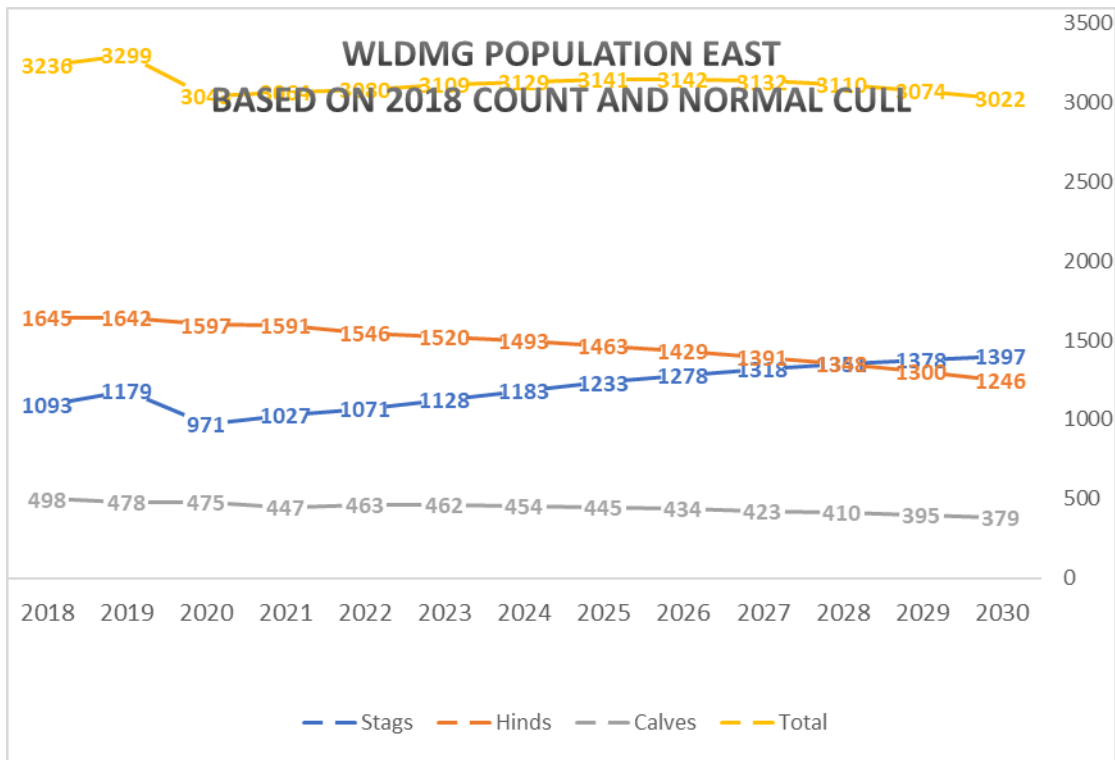
2021 West Count	2021				2018			
	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total
Ardnish	79	103	21	203	100	93	35	228
Arisaig	145	302	123	570	201	408	136	745
Glenfinnan	106	216	84	406	100	235	63	398
Kinloid				0	13	20	5	38
Glenmamie	38	168	62	268	31	137	44	212
Meoble	204	461	173	838	383	891	265	1539
Ranachan	36	138	42	216	65	158	48	271
Scamadale	22	63	20	105	44	12	3	59
Totals	630	1451	525	2606	937	1954	599	3490

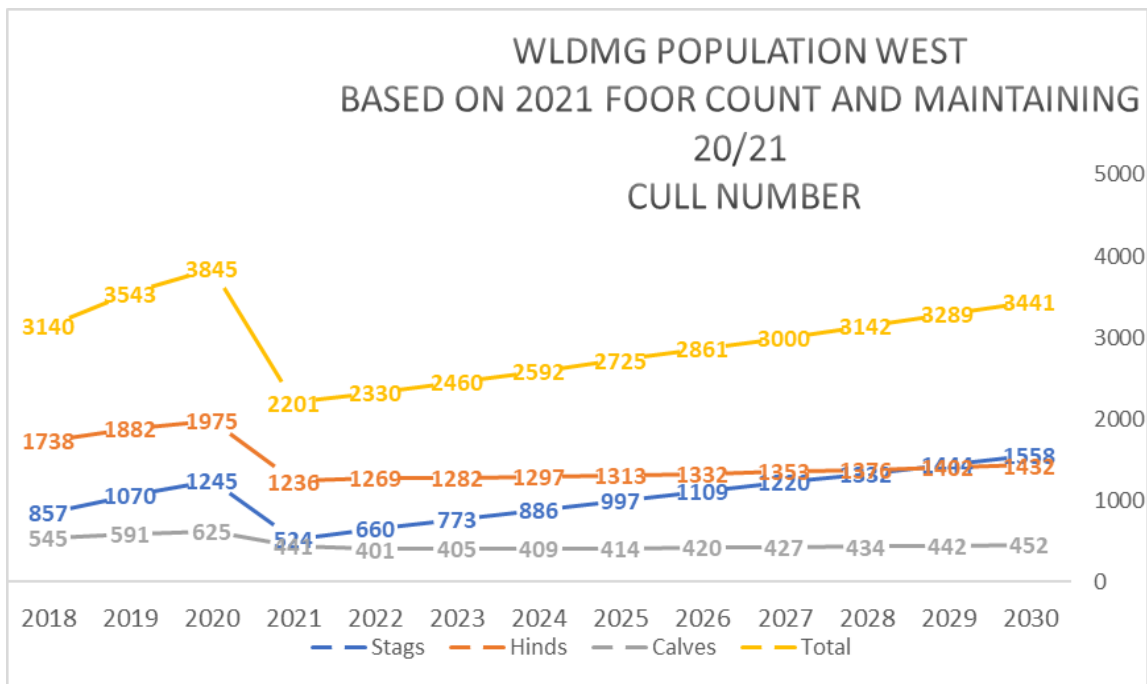
A full foot count was carried out to the west of the DMG from Glenfinnan to Ardnish. A partial count was carried out at Fassfern and Achnacarry South to check the previous year's numbers. West : Delayed by two days due to low cloud but proceeded when cloud lifted to over 2,500'. A good count was achieved despite some of team not being available on the day. Meoble and Arisaig counted on same day to ensure completeness and accuracy. More deer on Meoble side of march than usual due to wind direction and no deer observed at Kinloid where there are normally 30-40 hinds. Only a few deer at Scamadale
Both Arisaig and Meoble agreed to continue to count annually on same day in future to ensure good quality data for population management. Meoble may also achieve a recruitment count in summer via helicopter. Cathy Mayne has been appointed at Meoble to give a more detailed survey of the habitat than the more broad-brush survey being carried out elsewhere in the DMG this Spring.

Noted that the count is much less than in 2017/18, especially at Meoble where numbers are down by 50%. NatureScot noted the discrepancy and trend which is in contrast the neighbouring DMG population trends.

4 Population Model and Trends

The Population models were updated following the Spring count and cull data over the past 12 months. The East model continues to show a static situation in terms of populations size based on good management by keepers on the ground. The West of the DMG has shown more variance but the trend in increased culling, especially of hinds this season, and possible outward migration to neighbouring areas has resulted in a reduced population count and a more manageable situation becoming apparent. The increased level of habitat monitoring, recruitment, mortality and population counting will continue to provide the information needed for management while demonstrating a willingness to respond to the concerns expressed by NatureScot on the density of deer relative the areas carrying capacity and impact on designated sites such as Glen Beasdale.





Note: The hind population is changing at a slower rate than stags due to the heavier focus on hind culling to the west of the DMG to manage the trend of population growth and ultimately bringing hind and stag numbers into line.

5 ScottishNature report on habitat assessment at Glen Beasdale SSSI/SAC

The full report from the survey consultants has still to be received but a brief resume was given. The fundamental results are that palatable tree species such as oak, rowan and hazel are absent from the regeneration but other less palatable species such as alder are present. The pressures on the site that are limiting to recovery include rhododendron, herbivores and fire. Once the full results are received these will be discussed with the owners and a way forward agreed.

6 Habitat Assessment 2021 : Dwarf Shrub Heath

Cathy Mayne was appointed to carry out the DSH habitat monitoring this season. Her interim report was summarised to the meeting.

Fieldwork started on May 11 and ended on June 5 with a total of 23 days in the field with 120 plots assessed. With Meoble undertaking a more comprehensive survey on their own account their 30 plots were reallocated to other West estates to achieve greater monitoring intensity. Similarly to the East as a result of there being minimal DSH in the grass-dominated areas of Glenfinnan and the western part of Fassfern; these plots were reallocated to other eastern sites.

In the absence of a Best Practice grassland methodology, the plot-based system was replaced with a walk-through methodology devised by Prof Rory Putman that is applicable to a range of heath or grassland upland habitats. Therefore, the results for the group contain 120 plots plus a substantial area covered by walk-through survey.

High impacts on heather are highest where there is sparse heather in the sward, where heather is recovering from fire or near concentrations of deer, such as close to feeders or adjacent to unfenced woodland edges. Most of the impacts are more or less evenly spread between the low and medium classes. Walk-through results also deliver low or medium impacts for current herbivory. The sparseness of heather is considered to be a product of historic high grazing, most likely by livestock (sheep) and burning. This can be best seen from the historic tracking, clearly

visible in aerial images but mostly not actively used by the current herbivore population.

Impacts from trampling tend to be highest in areas where deer use is limited by fenced woodland on the lower ground, where movement is concentrated by fencing or other barriers or where there has been significant recent fire. Current tracking is otherwise light, with tracks often hard to follow, almost always vegetated and petering out after a short distance.

Fire is considered to be one of the most damaging historic and current impacts in the DMG area. It is clearly visible in the open ground and woodland fringes in the western end of the group. During the period of the survey a fire, apparently caused by the steam train, broke out near Arisaig on a day when there was no diesel engine support.

Heather beetle is a significant factor affecting heather health and abundance. It is prevalent throughout the group area, with large tracts of heather killed as well as there being regular signs of presence on a smaller scale of impacts. It is probably at least as important as other herbivores in affecting heather health within the group area.

A record was taken of numbers, location, gender and condition of all deer observed during the survey period. Few deer were encountered, mostly in small groups. All deer looked healthy and good condition, particularly in the context of such a late and cold spring. Mortality was surprisingly low, with only 7 carcasses seen and most of those were mature animals, rather than calves or young deer.

The plot-based data, the walk-through surveys and all other indicators seen during the survey suggest that the current deer population within the group area covered is sustainable for the open ground habitats. While there are obviously occasional hotspots of impacts, and perhaps one or two places where a reduction might be beneficial to habitats, nowhere stood out as being of major concern

7 Deer Management Plan Review

Victor Clements has been appointed to prepare a new DMP which will be a completely new document rather than a review of the existing. His work will be funded via a Forestry Cooperation Grant from Scottish Forestry for which application will be made. For this purpose each owner/member must give Victor authorisation via a Rural Payments Advisory Agent mandate form to carry out work on their behalf. This form will be sent by email shortly for signing and return. The grant application process itself could take around 3 months but it is hoped that a draft plan will be available for the WLDMG AGM scheduled for 3rd December.

8 Any other business and Correspondence

- SCOPE newsletter available
- The ADMG AGM scheduled for 23rd June via Zoom at 10.30am. The attendance registration link is https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_HIJYIemyTvitYwXM3cS5Pw

Agenda <https://www.deer-management.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ADMG-AGM-Agenda-23.6.2021.pdf>

- Venison markets : The cessation of business by Fyne Game on the retirement of Gordon Slaughter has left a gap for others to fill, although competition is slim with options mainly being Highland Games or Simpson Game. Noted that premiums of 40/kg being paid by

Highland Game for SQWV on the base price of £1.10/kg. Indications are that there will be further price increases as season progresses. Simpson Game appear to be at there limits and not available to respond to new business enquiries.

- WTS next woodland habitat survey due in 2 years time so no new data will be available.
- Arisaig collects woodland grazing toolbox data annually, which is available, and is now reviewing the Estate DMP via Gary Servant of Upland Ecology.
- Feral pigs - 8 boar shot in Achnacarry South forest during year plus 1 female and 3 juveniles. Over the whole estate, 29 culled over year to June. No feral pigs shot elsewhere although evidence of one passing through Fassfern, at least one at Scamadale/Arisaig and sightings at west end of Loch Morar at Kinlochberaid.
- Arkaig Community Forest – planning a new deer larder to allow local venison sales. Butchering experience sought!
- Steam train fires - Fires on both 19th May at Arisaig (3 days burning) and Glenfinnan on 27th May, enhanced by prolonged period of dry, cold weather and absence of fresh growth. Question the Risk Assessment process given that the steam train was running without the diesel engine backup on the day of the fires. Recorded that Ian Stone, Network Rail Infrastructure Ltd’s Customer Manager (who is the interface between the railway and heritage train operators), was on the train on 19th May and suggested that the train is unlikely to have started a fire in that location where the track is level and the steam engine therefore not under pressure. At Glenfinnan however the viaduct is the lowest point on that section of the railway and the train was heading up hill southwards into a cutting. A helicopter was used to put out the fire at Glenfinnan; estate staff defending backburns to protect oak woodlands and plantations. 2,000 semi-mature Caledonian Scots pine and 2,500 native trees were lost. At Arisaig the Glen Beasdale SSSI was highly at risk but for the wind direction taking fire elsewhere into heather dominated habitat. Both estates have long experience of fires associated with both the railway and public road destroying 15-25 years of tree growth; a significant disincentive to planting or regenerating woodlands in these locations.

9 Date of next meeting

AGM will be held on Friday 3rd December 2021