

West Lochaber Deer Management Group

WEST LOCHABER DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP AGM

Friday 2nd December 2022
Lochaber Rural Education Trust
Lochaber Rural Complex
Torlundy

10.00 – 12.30hrs

Minute

Attendees:

In person:

Alistair Gibson – (DMG Chairman) (ADMG rep),
Glenfinnan
Bruce Taylor – (DMG Secretary & Treasurer), Fassfern
Victor Clements – DMP consultant
Cathy Mayne – Ecologist : Mountain Environment
Services
James Colston - Arisaig
Sandra de Ferranti, Meoble
Raymond Fraser – Meoble
Craig Higgins – Glenfinnan
Ewan MacKelvie - Glenfinnan.
Ian Leith and Jane Mitchell – Glenfinnan
Sandy Walker – retired keeper
Mark Hurst - keeper
John Morrison - Achnacarry Sporting
Alex MacDonald - Achnacarry south
Alan Currie – Fassfern/Achdaliu
Lorna Stewart - Fassfern
Henry Dobson – WTS Loch Arkaig
James Rainey – Ecologist, Arkaig Community Forest
and Loch Arkaig Pine Forest Advisory Board.
John Jackson – FLS
Gary Servant – Arkaig Community Forest
Andrew MacMaster, NatureScot

By Zoom

Peter Stewart-Sandiman – Ardnish

Apologies:

Pete MacLaren – Ranachan,
Richard Tulloch - Fassfern/Achdaliu
Michael Rhoden - Fassfern/Achdaliu
Ian Collier – Scottish Forestry
Niall Rowantree – Ardnish
Simon Laird - Achnacarry Sporting
James Morrison – Network Rail (ecologist)
PC Hugo Martin (Mallaig) Wildlife Crime Officer
Paolo Berardelli - Glen Mamie
James de Ferranti, Meoble
Robert Spence - Scamadale
Graham Nairn – Annat/Achanellan/Glen Fada

No.	Summary	Action																																																																						
1	Apologies and Introductions As recorded above.																																																																							
2	Election of Chairman and Office Bearers, and any co-options There being no nominations from the floor, the committee remains as follows: Alistair Gibson : Chairman Bruce Taylor :Secretary/Treasurer (proposed Ian Leith; seconded Sandra Ferranti)																																																																							
3	Wildlife Crime, Poaching, Road Traffic Accidents - Police report No report in current year.																																																																							
4	Minutes of the last AGM and any Matters Arising Minutes proposed for acceptance and there were no matters arising. (proposed Raymond Fraser; seconded James Colston)																																																																							
5.	Members Reports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) 2022 Culls ii) Condition Report etc iii) Proposed Hind and Stag Cull for 2022/23 <table border="1" data-bbox="108 1216 1385 2076"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="108 1216 300 1317">Estate</th> <th colspan="3" data-bbox="308 1216 651 1317">Stags</th> <th data-bbox="659 1216 858 1317">Hind Cull</th> <th data-bbox="866 1216 1002 1317">Recruitmt</th> <th data-bbox="1010 1216 1385 1317">Comments</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <th data-bbox="308 1249 443 1317">No.</th> <th data-bbox="451 1249 539 1317">Av Wt(kg)</th> <th data-bbox="547 1249 651 1317">Av Age</th> <th data-bbox="659 1249 858 1317">To date/Target</th> <th data-bbox="866 1249 1002 1317">%</th> <td></td> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1328 300 1473">Glenfinnan</td> <td data-bbox="308 1328 443 1473">29</td> <td data-bbox="451 1328 539 1473">92</td> <td data-bbox="547 1328 651 1473">8</td> <td data-bbox="659 1328 858 1473">50+ (15 td)</td> <td data-bbox="866 1328 1002 1473"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1328 1385 1473">Incl 6 woodland stags. Slightly reduced calving rate at approx. 30%. Windy & wet stag season but good condition. Hinds also in good condition.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1485 300 1552">FLS Loy and Gairlochy</td> <td data-bbox="308 1485 443 1552">11 + 1</td> <td data-bbox="451 1485 539 1552"></td> <td data-bbox="547 1485 651 1552"></td> <td data-bbox="659 1485 858 1552"></td> <td data-bbox="866 1485 1002 1552"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1485 1385 1552">3 roe</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1563 300 1664">WTS Loch Arkaig</td> <td data-bbox="308 1563 443 1664">21</td> <td data-bbox="451 1563 539 1664"></td> <td data-bbox="547 1563 651 1664"></td> <td data-bbox="659 1563 858 1664">40+20</td> <td data-bbox="866 1563 1002 1664"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1563 1385 1664">Hind cull based on thermal imagery assessment of population using drone.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1675 300 1731">Glen Loy Forest (Tilhill)</td> <td data-bbox="308 1675 443 1731"></td> <td data-bbox="451 1675 539 1731"></td> <td data-bbox="547 1675 651 1731"></td> <td data-bbox="659 1675 858 1731"></td> <td data-bbox="866 1675 1002 1731"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1675 1385 1731"></td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1742 300 1776">Ranachan</td> <td data-bbox="308 1742 443 1776">6</td> <td data-bbox="451 1742 539 1776">83</td> <td data-bbox="547 1742 651 1776">9</td> <td data-bbox="659 1742 858 1776">15</td> <td data-bbox="866 1742 1002 1776"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1742 1385 1776"></td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1787 300 1888">Meoble</td> <td data-bbox="308 1787 443 1888">37</td> <td data-bbox="451 1787 539 1888">89</td> <td data-bbox="547 1787 651 1888">9.5</td> <td data-bbox="659 1787 858 1888">60-70 (30 td)</td> <td data-bbox="866 1787 1002 1888"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1787 1385 1888">Excellent condition. Early rut in Sept. Poor weather in season</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1899 300 1966">Achdaliu</td> <td data-bbox="308 1899 443 1966">39</td> <td data-bbox="451 1899 539 1966">90</td> <td data-bbox="547 1899 651 1966"></td> <td data-bbox="659 1899 858 1966">60-80</td> <td data-bbox="866 1899 1002 1966"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1899 1385 1966"></td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1977 300 2076">Fassfern Forest</td> <td data-bbox="308 1977 443 2076">40</td> <td data-bbox="451 1977 539 2076">66</td> <td data-bbox="547 1977 651 2076"></td> <td data-bbox="659 1977 858 2076"></td> <td data-bbox="866 1977 1002 2076"></td> <td data-bbox="1010 1977 1385 2076">25 in season and 15 out of season</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Estate	Stags			Hind Cull	Recruitmt	Comments		No.	Av Wt(kg)	Av Age	To date/Target	%		Glenfinnan	29	92	8	50+ (15 td)		Incl 6 woodland stags. Slightly reduced calving rate at approx. 30%. Windy & wet stag season but good condition. Hinds also in good condition.	FLS Loy and Gairlochy	11 + 1					3 roe	WTS Loch Arkaig	21			40+20		Hind cull based on thermal imagery assessment of population using drone.	Glen Loy Forest (Tilhill)							Ranachan	6	83	9	15			Meoble	37	89	9.5	60-70 (30 td)		Excellent condition. Early rut in Sept. Poor weather in season	Achdaliu	39	90		60-80			Fassfern Forest	40	66				25 in season and 15 out of season	
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Achnacarry South Hill	51	15	9	80-90 (38 td)	V.good stags – excellent, best year yet. Hinds good
Glen Loy (Nairn)					
Glen Mamie	19			30	
Ardnish	12	31		15	Quite a few more sightings of Sika deer this season.
Scamadale					1 sika stag
Arisaig	16			50 (18 td)	Early rut in mid-Sept. V.wet and calves poor. Walkers and MTB causing disturbance : hinds gather in large grps/stags disperse.

Condition report:

Weather conditions were extremely wet during most of the stag cull. The rut started early and stag condition was very good; this is also being reflected in the hinds as the season gets underway. Some poorer calves reported and possibly a reduced calving percentage.

6 Count organisation for 2023

Full foot count agreed to be as soon as possible after the hind cull season and latest by the end of March 2023. This will be a foot count over 5 days. Same day proposed for:

1. Glenfinnan, Fassfern and Achnacarry.
2. Meoble, Arisiag, Scamadale, Ranachan, Glen Mamie

- Co-ordinators :Alistair Gibson and Craig Higgins
- 12 men required from all Estates. 3 From Fassfern & 3 from Glenfinnan.
- Meoble organised with a team. To coordinate with neighbours.
- FLS can assist with personnel so will coordinate with AG and CH
- Those not able to supply can assist by paying for contract personnel.
- Weather dependant.

AG/CH

7 Venison Markets

SQWV obtains 30- 40p/kg a on top of the standard £1.40/kg. Reductions for late season stags and mature carcasses. Market overwhelmed during stag cull so need to spread back the season to ensure market demand for quality is met and a good price is obtained to reflect this. Transport problems by Simpsons during season but no carcasses rejected after delayed pick-up.

Discussion around lead-free ammunition and market demand for venison that is not contaminated by any heavy metal. Many have had good success with copper bullets despite risk that the round will pass straight through as it does not flatten or fragment in the same way as lead. Need for greater accuracy with shot and awareness that it does not travel same distance. Various calibres of rifle used by members : . 243, .308 and .270. Research and development continues but, for the stalker, the need to have confidence in every element of the toolbox is essential both for deer welfare and professional standards.

8 ADMG - Report and Discussion

The ADMG Autumn Update circulated to members provides a comprehensive summary of ADMG activity, support for DMGs and working with agencies and the Scottish

Government in the interests of the deer sector.

9 **Delivery of Public Interest Objectives in DMP**

Habitat Monitoring and Assessment of results

Cathy Mayne has been contracted by the DMG and individual member estates to conduct the open hill DSH and BB surveys over the last 2 years. This is a repeat of the more intensive open hill survey habitats carried out in 2017 and 2018 by Taylor Wildlife, so we now have two sets of data on which to base an analysis.

Cathy gave a report of her work covering 219 plots which shows mainly moderate to low impacts on the natural vegetation types but, given the general absence of DSH in the eastern half of the DMG area where Molinia and grass are dominant (likely due to past burning and sheep grazing practice) the survey method adopted was that devised by Prof. Rory Putman for similar west coast situations. SNH Best Practice guidance (MacDonald et al) for Habitat Monitoring does not provide for grassland habitats. It is agreed that short/smooth hill grass swards have become relatively scarce since sheep reduction and associated reduction in the grazing pressure needed to prevent other species such as bracken on low ground becoming dominant. There was much debate about the need for a grassland monitoring approach when the main species indicators for browsing pressure are ericaceous. Again, there was no consensus between the ecologists present although reference was made to red deer monitoring on Rhum where, at 5 different densities, there was no obvious variance recorded on DSH or BB habitats.

Ultimately pragmatism and need to cover the ground to get an overview of the browsing pressure over a very large area could preclude the more detailed survey method required in the MacDonald methodology. The WLDMG habitat records derive from both detailed and more general survey methods but it is the interpretation of these results that still needs more meaningful conclusions to be useful for those on the ground tasked to manage deer populations in a sustainable and economically viable way.

Conclusions to date show that deer play an important part in habitat outcomes but West Lochaber has an exceptional record of fires and the consequences of past heavy sheep grazing are still evident in the vegetation composition that we now see. Tracking along deer fences and water erosion are impacts that arise even at low deer densities.

The WLDMG population models in the East of the group show that balance is being achieved while the extent of movement in the west from high to low ground during the winter is a matter that needs coordinated resourcing to protect the coastal native woodland habitats.

Deer Management Plan Review

Victor Clements was contracted in 2021 to review the 5 year DMP with funding obtained from the FGS Forestry Collaboration Fund. The value of this funding will allow Victor to consider in some detail the main issues:

- Significant proposals for Woodland Creation or enclosure at both East and West of DMG area
- Problems with Designated Woodland habitats
- The status of native woodlands generally based on a review of the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (NWSS) results from 2007-13

Three woodland creation proposals are known to be in the planning, the largest being at Achnacarry but spread over 20 years. This will include restoration of existing native woodlands, some of which is designated on the shore of Loch Arkaig but extremely difficult

to access. Given that the individual blocks proposed are within core red deer range and enclose areas of 150-200ha, a significant compensatory deer cull would be expected. More detail is needed before any conclusions can be drawn on the medium term impacts on deer populations. Neighbouring Muirshearlich Crofters are looking at options although likely to be smaller scale due to peat depth limitations on site choice. A riparian scheme appears possible to the south of the common grazing area. In the west, Arisaig Estate also has larger scale woodland creation plans associated with an ongoing aim to expand the area of native woods while restoring designated woodland habitats towards "Favourable condition".

Arisaig Estate includes the Glen Beasdale SSSI (also partly within Glen Mama and Ardnish) which lies on the coast south of the railway and A830 public road. Described by Victor as the most difficult native woodland site in Scotland to resolve issues highlighted by Estate and NatureScot's site monitoring including extreme topography, rhododendron (within and via Network Rail corridor), fires and at least seasonal deer pressures. In the period 1998-2017 there have been 13 fires covering large areas of 180-360ha. Woodland HIA becomes irrelevant with such fire frequency as recovery has barely occurred before the next set back. A comparison may be made with the new native woodlands between Druimindarroch and Rhu; 250-300ha of woods that are not burnt and show good establishment of oak, hazel, birch, and Scots pine. There is an extensive cohort of more recent birch regeneration. There is potential to release the pressure on Glen Beasdale oakwood by opening up those established woods to deer and culling more heavily within the designated woodland area to discourage use. At Arisaig there is advantage to be had from having an engaged owner and manager with a long history of large scale woodland establishment success. Confidence was expressed that much more could be achieved although this will take years' firstly in the form of ground vegetation recovery followed by a birch pioneer crop into which successor oak can get established. A 5 year strategy is to be put forward in the review to record what can be achieved within the foreseeable future and the mechanisms that could be available for supporting the plan.

The NWSS puts WLDMG right at the bottom of the 46 DMGs in regard to area shown "red" as highly impacted native woodlands. In the last 10 years there have been changes that should bring the status upto at least the middle of the pack. For example WTS Arkaig work on native woods, Fassfern enclosing PAWS (ancient woodland) sites for replanting following fellings, Glenfinnan fire areas recovering from what they would have been then, and Arisaig with significant rhody control plans in progress, deer control increased and woodland enclosure plans in discussion. Birch regen grows thick on establishment so good chance of many trees getting away. Oak less so, being more difficult to regenerate, mast years sporadic, slow growth and more palatable to deer, but occupying large areas in west. The aim will be to produce a map of the native woodlands that shows hectares in detail with a revised health status.

Management of Non-native Invasive Species

James Colston reported that the follow up work is being progressed on the Phase 1 rhododendron control programme undertaken in Glen Beasdale in 2021 with the support of FGS grants. Phase 2 control works are now being planned for areas to the west and around Druimindarroch. Comment made on the grant approval costs to fund clearly eligible and essential work for the designated habitat.

There is in NatureScot’s Nature Restoration Fund suggested by AMcM as another good source of funds worth looking at further especially in regard to financial support to restore the Atlantic Rainforest. The Strategic Deer Board are looking at the integration of funding sources, increased support for deer management and working with the Voluntary deer management sector to achieve the targets of the Scottish Government.

Feral pig – activity recorded from East to West on all estates but in low numbers and on generally on the move so difficult to track but more evidence of presence than previous years. WTS Arkaig monitor activity but no culling. One boar culled at Achnacarry. Brief discussion around whether such pigs are indigenous or should be considered so.

Sika deer : also generally more widespread, again low numbers but less easy to find when present. Culls at Glenfinnan (2 stags), Scamadale (1 stag)

Phytopthera ramorum -no reports except in garden rhodies, Arisaig. Likely elsewhere but at sub-lethal level or strains.

Non-native conifer regen being tackled at WTS Arkaig and ACT ownership.

10 NatureScot/SNH- Report

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy is being prepared following a period of public consultation which closed on 22nd September’22. This will be a long-term ambition and vision of what our natural environment needs to look like in 2045. The overall aim of the new strategy is to deliver the transformational change needed to protect and restore terrestrial, freshwater and marine biodiversity in Scotland. From 2025 the integration and revision of rural funding will allow an improved focus on restoring natural habitats; currently promoted by the Nature Restoration Fund, Forestry Grant Scheme, Agr-Environment Schemes and others.

The updated NatureScot Best Practice guidance on the management of feral pigs was recently circulated to members.

The target of an average of 10 deer/sqKm over all areas of Scotland will be interpreted and adjusted in relation to local HIA results but allows a basis for discussion.

For information on the NatureScot Restoration Fund, see <https://www.nature.scot/funding-and-projects/scottish-government-nature-restoration-fund>). This will support good projects that are not eligible for other Rural funding (eg FGS or AECS). Projects requesting a grant of £25,000 - £250,000 to be delivered over a maximum of 2 years are initially invited, although projects delivering over a single financial year are welcome. Another Competitive Fund for projects requesting a grant of over £250,000 that can be delivered over 3-5 years will be launched later in 2022. Any application would need owners to collaborate.

NatureScot are aiming to organise a meeting with Network Rail before steam train starts in 2023 eg February/March.

ALL

11	<p>Deer Management Plan - review</p> <p>Victor Clements will focus on this over the next two months and hopes to have a draft document available for the end of January 2023.</p>	VC
12	<p>Administrative matters: Constitution, bank account, membership & subscriptions, Email/contact details</p> <p>The Treasurer's Report showed a deficit of income over expenditure for the year as both habitat monitoring and DMP review costs incurred ontop of usual ADMG subscription and admin costs. Grant funding will allow reserves to be topped up as the Forestry Collaboration project is concluded. WLDMG subscriptions will continue to reflect the ongoing costs and future expected outgoings.</p>	
13	<p>Any other business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NatureScot : Herbivore Impact Assessment "Lite" being rolled out • Deer (Firearms etc) (Scotland) Order 1985 being amended to reduce the minimum bullet weight (of both lead / non-lead bullets) for all species to 80-85 grains S in .243 calibre rifles to kill deer in Scotland. • Night vision trials by FLS with NatureScot. Unlikley to be a game changer as deer react to shot/noise not light. • For information on the Alliance for Scotlands Rainforest, see https://savingscotlandsrainforest.org.uk/ 	
14	<p>Date of next (AGM) meeting</p> <p>1st December 2023.</p>	ALL