

West Lochaber Deer Management Group

WEST LOCHABER DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
Spring Meeting
Wednesday 14th. June 2023
10.30am– 12.30pm

Minute

Attendees:

Alistair Gibson – (DMG Chairman) (ADMG rep),
 Glenfinnan
 Bruce Taylor – (DMG Secretary & Treasurer)
 Victor Clements – DMP Consultant
 Andrew MacMaster – NatureScot Wildlife officer
 Craig Higgins – Glenfinnan
 Euan MacKelvie - Glenfinnan
 Henry Dobson – WTS Loch Arkaig
 Kati Karki - Arkaig Community Forest Nursery
 Michael Rhoden - Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Alex MacDonald - Achnacarry south
 James Colston – Arisaig
 Graham Nairn – Annat/Achanellan/Glen Fada

Apologies:

Pete MacLaren – Ranachan
 Simon Laird – Achnacarry South
 John Jackson – F&LS, Glen Loy and Gairloch forests
 Ian Leith – Glenfinnan
 Jane Mitchell - Glenfinnan
 Harry Nicholson - Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Alan Currie – Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Lorna Stewart- Fassfern
 Robert Spence - Scamadale
 Raymond Fraser – Meoble
 Sandra de Ferranti - Meoble,
 James de Ferranti, Meoble
 Ian Collier – Scottish Forestry

Non- attendance:

John MacDonald – West Highland Hunting -
 Scamadale
 Niall Rowantree - Ardnish
 Paolo Berardelli - Glen Mamie
 Peter Stewart-Sandiman - Ardnish

No.	Summary	Action
1	<p>Apologies and Introductions As recorded above.</p>	
2	<p>Members Reports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) 2022/23 Hind Culls ii) Condition Report 	

Estate	Hinds			Calves	Stags (forestry)	Comments
	No.	Av Wt(kg)	Av Age			
Glenfinnan	50			12		+ 2 Sika stags. Small calve down to 17kg
Forest Enterprise	26			16		6 roe buck, 4 does, 5 kids and 3 sika stags
WTS Loch Arkaig	26					Good condition and much improved on first year in 2019/20 when no management.
Glen Loy Forest						Achnacarry Sporting Lease
Ranachan	16			6		
Meoble	55			14		
Achdaliu	73			34		Good condition and minimal mortality
Fassfern Forest	28			8	27	5 roe buck
Achnacarry South Hill	76			30		Mortality minimal 3 roe buck, 5 does, 3 kids and 1 sika stag
Glen Loy (Nairn)	35			17		
Glen Mamie	24			10		
Ardnish	12			4		
Scamadale	10			5		1 Sika stag, 2 Sika hinds + 1 Sika calve,
Arisaig	55			21		1 Sika stag,

3 Count Report

2023 Count	2023				2018			
	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total
Achnacarry	445	920	370	1735	643	739	200	1582
Fassfern	300	549	179	1028	203	459	156	818
Glen Fada	237	325	115	677	163	198	73	434
Ardnish	114	93	24	231	100	93	35	228
Arisaig	167	264	108	539	201	408	136	745
Glenfinnan	113	241	79	433	100	235	63	398
Kinloid				0	13	20	5	38
Glenmamie	38	167	51	256	31	137	44	212
Meoble		No count			383	891	265	1539
Ranachan		No count			65	158	48	271
Scamadale		No count			44	12	3	59
Totals					937	1954	599	3490

Achnacarry counted 222 stags in Glen Mallie. The count at Glen Loy and Fassfern was carried out the day after Achnacarry counted so around 100 stags moved across in the West wind from Glen Mallie into Achanallen and Glen Dubh Lighe (Fassfern). The overall number is much the same as in previous years.

No count was taken at Ranachan or Meoble (yet). The lack of a full count creates problems coordination and it is important to get numbers. Without continuity the result is less meaningful.

NatureScot will prioritise a Helicopter Count in spring 2024 to get a new population baseline figure on which to base decision and better determine the population trend since the 2018 Helicopter count. West Lochaber is a Priority area given concerns that the population is increasing with resulting consequences for designated habitat impacts as well as deer welfare.

Woodland Trust Scotland carried out a thermal drone survey. This did not have 100% coverage due to dense Sitka spruce in Glen Mallie. Evidence of good recruitment in woods so increase in numbers over the summer expected. Count 30 in Glenmallie Forest where there are dense conifer and 15 in "The Gusach" (South Loch Arkaig) where wood is more open.

4	<p>Woodland developments within DMG</p> <p>All included in item 5.</p>	
5	<p>Deer Management Plan and Population Model and Trends</p> <p>The basis of the plan is to work out how to get from a known number of deer at present to a target number of deer within the 5 year plan taking into account both uncertainty and changing land use. The East and West ends of the DMG have differing issues and resources to manage. Sub-groups have been suggested as a way to allow more focused discussions and management going forward.</p> <p>Proposed that there are smaller reporting units for cull and counts so larger estates are split up into areas eg Meoble east and west of river; Arisaig North and South of railway; Achnacarry :North and South off main river and Moy Croft separately; Fassfern: woodland blocks separately reported.</p> <p>West</p> <p>Fires cover and average of 150 hectares per annum average demonstrating a high risk. Deer densities are generally higher in the West as shown by the 2018 Helicopter count; the most reliable data that currently exists in the absence of coordinated annual foot counts.</p> <p>Numbers generally increasing with episodes of high mortality keeping numbers in a cycle. The last big mortality was in 2013.</p> <p>Climatic variation between Glenfinnan and Arisaig is significant eg 70 inches of rainfall at Arisaig and 147” at Glenfinnan. Also habitat quality and differences so potential for higher deer populations and recruitment parameters.</p> <p>Deer numbers are out of balance with sporting demand by a long way Demand is currently 100 stags and 100 Hinds so a major reduction cull is needed to get to 10 deer per square km eg 2.5 x current cull. Arisaig is carrying out 30% of the annual cull. The government trajectory or direction of travel is 10 deer/sq Km, or even 4/sq Km in designated habitats to be achieved by culling or deer fencing. Note that future rural grants and subsidies will be dependent on action.</p> <p>Noted that only one member from the West is in attendance at this meeting.</p> <p>East</p> <p>Achnacarry proposing a large woodland restoration project proposed. Implementation timescales are now changing, spread out over 20 years. There mixed signals as to what Scottish Forestry will require in the way of deer reduction; be it a general cull to achieve 10 deer/sq Km or simply a localized compensatory cull to remove deer the utilize the ground being enclosed.</p> <p>Years 1-5 : 170 ha and Glen Mallie enclosed for natural regeneration and 200 hectares of woodland creation. Years 6 -10: 250 ha and Upper Glen Mallie and an unknown area in Glen Loy.</p> <p>NatureScot advise that the SSSI, Loch Arkaig Pinewood (490ha), is in Unfavourable Condition. The area was enclosed in the past and there has been natural regeneration of oak and Scots pine outside fenced area. NatureScot are concerned about increased deer utilisation arising after enclosure of large areas elsewhere on the Estate. NatureScot would object to any new FGS scheme if SSSI is not deer fenced as a priority before enclosures elsewhere.</p> <p>Achnacarry has 16 deer/sq km so well above the 10 deer/sq km that Scottish Forestry</p>	

Conservancies elsewhere may suggest is needed before approval of a new Forestry Grant Scheme proposal. Highland Conservancy could only require a compensatory or reduction cull before enclosure.

The recent foot count suggests that stag numbers are stable (assuming movement across estates) and hind numbers have increased since 2018 by 25%. Missing stag numbers suggests that there is a connection between the forestry blocks and the hill as the population model is not working with the available data.

A reduction cull at Achnacarry only while others maintain their normal annual cull would not necessarily achieve the required result due to the extent of deer movement between adjoining estates. If Fassfern, Achnacarry, Glen Loy and Arkaig considered together as one unit, there were 12 deer/ sq km in 2018, increasing to 14.5 deer/sq km in 2023.

The increased population suggests a 33% is required to get to 10 deer/sq km. The Estate plan is to increase the cull to 130 hinds in 2023/24 but 195 hinds is not achievable due to varying conditions in the period November-February. A west wind will drive deer out of Glenn Mallie onto Fassfern and Glen Loy while, in an east wind, there will be plenty eg 200 deer. A reduction cull will therefore need the neighbouring estates to shoot more and be happy with the plan to reduce numbers to 10 deer/sq km. The Achnacarry woodland planning process will need a project specific deer management plan that is agreeable to all those affected, especially neighbouring estates and deer managers.

A helicopter count now is essential and people with experience are needed in the helicopter at the time of the count to ensure that there will be confidence in the result. In 2018, unusually extreme weather conditions prior to the count and the very last minute plan resulted in some anomalies and a less reliable result than could have been achieved with more coordinated planning.

6 Sub-groups for West and East

Included in item 5 above and for further consideration at AGM.

7 Network Rail meeting 18th April summary of outcomes

James Morrison the West Senior Asset Engineer (Lineside) for Network Rail met with the DMG on the 18th April. Their agenda is decarbonization of the track by 2035 implying electrification off the Central Belt to Inverness and from Inverness to Tain and Aberdeen. Hydrogen operated trains will be planned for the Oban and Mallaig lines where ecological concerns exist and electrification is more difficult. Network Rail in west Scotland cover c.1800 miles off track out of the nearly 3500 lineside miles of railway in Scotland.

Network Rail has an ecological team of 3-4 people and a Local Off Track team which do small scale work along the track. There is a national Technical team who do the larger scale projects to control trackside trees and rhododendrons.

Biodiversity Net Gain has been adopted by Network Rail but not yet in Scotland as there is no recognised endorsed metric by the Scottish Government. Network Rail have captured information on all land within 1 Km either side of the track to enable Natural Capital decision making. This could be used for instance to support where compensatory investment will do the most good. For example, if the cutting of trees from trackside needs trees to be replaced elsewhere, where will the most connectivity be achieved? This tool can support these decisions.

The extent of INNS management required on the network is beyond the budgets available to remedy but allocating resource into the right areas where there is a joint up approach is something that NR will aim to do.

Request that Network Rail be advised of recent Rhododendron control works in Glen Beasdale, associated public and private costs, areas and what remains to be done to eradicate the species. Satellite and Lidar technology area used by Network Rail to manage trackside vegetation is a growth area and hopefully we can use this technology to benefit INNS removal and biodiversity projects.

Glen Beasdale is of importance and huge potential for biodiversity credits.

	<p>Fires are a further reason to invest in Biodiversity Net Gain.</p> <p>Fences : While a statutory 1.35m fence is being proposed there are no livestock adjacent to the Mallaig line there is less of a priority to replace the delapidated fences. A fence with alternate short and long stobs to deer fence height strainers can be erected but the to deer net will then become the neighbouring landowner's responsibility and Network Rail will only maintain the 1.35m fence going forward. Deer leaps off track still considered to be a good idea and a pilot scheme on this line is being implemented where owners are keen to participate.</p> <p>80-100 deer per annum are killed on the Mallaig line but Network Rail are not obliged to keep deer off the track and there is no liability to compensate train operators for damage to rolling stock.</p>	
<p>8</p>	<p>AOCB & correspondence</p> <p>For the AGM :</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A review of the basis of subscription. Higher cull numbers are currently penalised and big developments on individual estates create additional demands on DMG resources without any additional contribution to the increased DMG costs. Revised subscription options to be presented for AGM discussion. 2. Review how external consultants are appointed. 3. Training: Habitat assessment of native woodlands. Native woodland habitat survey planned for 2025 so training would be a good idea. Noted that the percentage of grass in the east of the DMG is high and there is no habitat assessment method that applies. Suggested that the native woodland survey is carried out after any deer reduction rather than and 2024. 	
<p>9</p>	<p>Date of next meeting</p> <p>AGM will be held on Friday 1st December 2023</p>	