

# West Lochaber Deer Management Group

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## WEST LOCHABER DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP AGM

**Friday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023**  
**Lochaber Rural Education Trust**  
Lochaber Rural Complex  
Torlundy

**10.00 – 12.30hrs**

### Minute

**Attendees:**

**In person:**

Alistair Gibson – (DMG Chairman), Glenfinnan  
Bruce Taylor – (DMG Secretary & Treasurer)  
Victor Clements – DMP consultant  
Tom Turnbull – ADMG Chair  
Robert Spence - Scamadale  
Hamish Spence- Scamadale  
Pete MacLaren – Ranachan,  
Colin MacDonald– Ranachan,  
Sandra de Ferranti, Meoble  
James de Ferranti, Meoble  
Raymond Fraser – Meoble  
Craig Higgins – Glenfinnan  
Ewan MacKelvie - Glenfinnan.  
Ian Leith and Jane Mitchell – Glenfinnan  
Sandy Walker – retired keeper  
Paolo Berardelli - Glen Mamie  
John Morrison - Achnacarry Sporting  
Alex MacDonald - Achnacarry south  
Alan Currie – Fassfern/Achdaliu  
Lorna Stewart - Fassfern  
Henry Dobson – WTS Loch Arkaig  
Andrew MacMaster, NatureScot

**By TEAMS**

Niall Rowantree – Ardnish  
James Morrison – Network Rail (ecologist)

**Apologies:**

Richard Tulloch - Fassfern/Achdaliu  
Ian Collier – Scottish Forestry  
Simon Laird - Achnacarry Sporting  
Graham Nairn – Annat/Achanellan/Glen Fada  
James Colston – Arisaig  
Peter Stewart-Sandiman – Ardnish  
Oscar Stewart-Sandiman – Ardnish  
John Jackson – FLS  
Gary Servant – Upland Forestry Ltd

No.	Summary	Action																																																																																											
1	<p><b>Apologies and Introductions</b></p> <p>As recorded above.</p> <p>Condolences were recorded for "Locheil," Donald Cameron, 27th Clan chief, who died on 3rd October'23.</p>																																																																																												
2	<p><b>Election of Chairman and Office Bearers, and any co-options</b></p> <p>Alistair Gibson, Chairperson, stood down at the meeting. There being no nominations, the position is now vacant. There were no nominations for Vice-chair so this position also remains vacant. Bruce Taylor agreed to continue as Secretary/Treasurer.</p>																																																																																												
3	<p><b>Wildlife Crime, Poaching, Road Traffic Accidents - Police report</b></p> <p>No report in current year in the absence of PC Hugo Martin (Mallaig) Wildlife Crime Officer</p>																																																																																												
4	<p><b>Minutes of the last AGM and any Matters Arising</b></p> <p>The Minutes of the 2022 AGM were considered and proposed for acceptance. There were no matters arising. (proposed Paolo Berardelli ; seconded Craig Higgins)</p>																																																																																												
5.	<p><b>Members Reports</b></p> <p>i) 2023 Stag Culls  ii) Condition Report etc  iii) Proposed Hind and Stag Cull for 2023/24</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="108 1115 1382 2087"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="108 1115 296 1216">Estate</th> <th colspan="3" data-bbox="296 1115 644 1216">Stags</th> <th data-bbox="644 1115 852 1216">Hind Cull</th> <th data-bbox="852 1115 1015 1216">Recruitmt</th> <th data-bbox="1015 1115 1382 1216">Comments</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <th data-bbox="296 1149 443 1216">No.</th> <th data-bbox="443 1149 539 1216">Av Wt(kg)</th> <th data-bbox="539 1149 644 1216">Av Age</th> <th data-bbox="644 1149 852 1216">To date/Target</th> <th data-bbox="852 1149 1015 1216">%</th> <td></td> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="108 1216 296 1294">Glenfinnan</td> <td data-bbox="296 1216 443 1294">33 (+ 4 woods)</td> <td data-bbox="443 1216 539 1294">83.5</td> <td data-bbox="539 1216 644 1294">8.5</td> <td data-bbox="644 1216 852 1294">70+ (20 h +8c td)</td> <td data-bbox="852 1216 1015 1294"></td> <td data-bbox="1015 1216 1382 1294">Lighter stags and early start to season. 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Ardnish	12	92	7	15(11h +4c td)		
Scamadale	10	68	8	12(3h +1c td)		Late rut. Good condition. Hinds also in good condition and look fat.
Arisaig	19			80 (19h td)		

**6**

**Count Planning 2024**

A helicopter count is to be prioritized by Naturescot as the DMG is in the “top tier” for of aerial count list. A foot count will nevertheless be planned as a prudent measure to add to knowledge. The foot count needs logistical planning well ahead to ensure, for example, a boat is available for Meoble. Usually Mon-Wed : 3 days from east to west. Individual estates with employed manpower count their own. Others contribute financially to day rates for count team. Achnacarry, via Bidwells, may organize their own aerial count (Ian Stewart)

**7**

**Venison Markets**

Tom Turnbull reported that ADMG have been talking to, and supporting, Scottish Venison with the joint aim to improve marketing. Scottish Venison launched the Scottish Venison Strategy in November. John Forteith Consulting gave a detailed report identifying areas for improvement and confirmed that that the market is there to be developed if the product can be promoted to a wider audience. . ADMG will be asking for more support for the venison sector going forward given that Scottish Venison support amounted to £20,000 last year compared to the marketing of lamb budget of about £2 million a year. ADMG supported the Scottish Venison summit and John Forteith will be speaking at the online AGM.

Locally, Arkaig Community Forest are developing the ‘hill to table’ process within the community following the award of funding from the Rural & Island Communities Ideas into Action (RICIA) fund to assist with the purchase of butchery equipment and installing required drainage in the deer larder.

Achnacarry have been supplying carcasses from 1st July to 30th September at premium rates having attended a meeting in Inverness in March with Ardgay Game that highlighted the problem of markets getting overwhelmed with stags during the rut. Ardgay Game were urging estates to shoot across the board so Achnacarry put nearly 100 stags into the food chain by the 30th of September to add over £1/kg to the price. Another 40 stags were supplied later in the season at lower rates.

**8**

**Deer Management Plan progress update by Victor Clements.**

Victor described that there were many matters to take into account within the DMG including doubts about numbers, big projects proposed in the east and potentially also in the West. The preparation of the new DMP has therefore been a difficult exercise. Differentiating between East and West:

**East**

Achnacarry proposes enclosure of ancient woodlands and woodland creation. WTS Loch Arkaig also have plans. There is already a large forestry interest in the East eg Fassfern, Achnacarry and FLS. Having met with the membership and others to work out a plan that everyone can buy into, the conclusion is to aim for 10 deer/sq Km within five years across eastern side as a whole. A reduction cull is needed at Achnacarry to compensate for the areas being enclosed for woodland regeneration and planting. Currently the Achnacarry proposals are for the enclosure of 170 hectares of pinewoods in Glen Mallie and another 200 hectares of woodland creation in this first 5 year period. The FGS applications are going forward on that basis of this 5 year target and population model. In the absence of information about the Loch Arkaig SSSI it was very difficult to incorporate this site in the modelling. But this and any other proposals that may come forward in future will require to carry out a compensation cull to ensure the target of 10 deer/sq Km is maintained. There will have to be ongoing discussion going forward about any new woodland enclosure schemes. There are a lot of unaccounted deer in woodland areas. It is clear from recent foot counts that the population has been going up over the last few years and there are now a lot more here than in the 2018 helicopter count. The model takes this increase into account. If things change, or an aerial count in 2024 gives results that are not what was anticipated, then obviously things have to change and numbers adjusted accordingly. But the general level of around 10 deer/sq Km across the whole area should give people roughly what they want and possibly add some additional cull. With the large scale land use changes being proposed some adjustment can be expected but it's probably not

going to be 0-5 years; rather 6-10 years and maybe beyond that. There is time to adjust and use to good effect to work out what needs to be done on your own terms. As the count numbers come in these can be related to the target level to ensure that the plan is being delivered. Agreed that any population change needs to be in the form of a trend rather than a one-off count before you can react to it.

## **West**

The western part of the DMG includes Glen Beadale Atlantic Oakwood, one of the largest designated woodland sites in Scotland. The site is challenging because of its very large scale and the frequency of fires that has left the structure of the woodland in very poor condition. The ground vegetation becomes very attractive to deer because it gets burnt so often.

A issue of deer numbers and impacts has been highlighted by Naturescot. The 2018 count recorded 18 deer/sqkm; a high figure by any standards. Factoring this in with relatively culls that have taken place since then, the population should be going up significantly. Discussion locally suggests that this may be the case but certainly the size of the population is now relatively unknown. This needs to be addressed with an appropriate cull, whatever that may be. A helicopter count for the Western end of the DMG will be extremely important in making sensible decisions with any certainty. The draft plan assumes there is currently a population of 18 deer/sqKm. There could be more or possibly less but assume 18 and then the question is what has to be done take it numbers down towards 10 deer/sqkm ?

The demand for sporting stags is less than 100 mature animals and this does not require a larger population to achieve that annual supply. The model shows that the numbers required to get it down to 10 deer/sqkm over a period of years is a cull of 360. The current cull number is 230 so around an additional 130 animals. These figures have been discussed with the members in the West but there is not the same buy-in to such a plan as exists amongst the membership in the east. The actions now needed include an immediate start to higher culling this winter and, critically, a helicopter count in early Spring'24 to identify the current population density.

Thereafter to set a target density and the timeframe for achieving it. These are the two elements needed for a plan and then to allocate the for the West to bring the population down to 10 deer/sqkm within 5 years which would then be exactly the same as the east in terms of density and the timeframe. The 10 deer/sqkm should be sufficient to give a supply of sporting stags. Meoble have given written intent to work towards 10 deer/sqkm but require greater flexibility the timeline of achieving that target. Increased culling by other estates also shows intent, which is important, but the cull level remains low compared to what is required to make a difference.

Glen Beasdale, being an upland oak woodland, is the most difficult type of woodland in Scotland to regenerate. Successful regeneration establishment of oak and other palatable species needs 1-2 deer/sqKm; not 10 deer/sqKm. It is difficult to see how such low population levels can be achieved without other funded interventions as any deer management solution would be very brutal indeed and would probably affect estates back to Glenfinnan. But the first step is to get the deer population down to a level that people can work with. Once that is achieved then consider actions that are needed to get the woodland into "Favourable condition" The funding mechanisms that are required may not currently exist. Beyond that, the frequency of fires from the steam train, which is unusual anywhere else in Scotland, and past crofter activity, implies very high risk to any deer fencing within the oakwood. Online satellite imagery shows 12 wildfires over 25 years covering around 80% of the site which will have been burned multiple times (apart from the mature shoreline oakwood which is not suitable for regeneration). The owners are rightly reluctant to commit to fencing enclosures within the woodland in the face of this threat and liability. A perimeter deer fence cost will run into a six figure sum in this type of rocky, coastal terrain so a large investment and high potential loss if fire occurs. However, there is no problem with seed supply - there are seed supplies everywhere and large numbers of germinating oak seedlings can be found in mast years. The site has good ecological potential and there is no problem with growing conditions for regeneration.

Naturescot's concerns with the current upward trajectory of population growth extend beyond Glen Beasdale to designated native woods and habitats over a wider area as deer migrate and cause impacts on other property. Naturescot is taking a high level view on the required culling effort and any management interventions that may be needed in the future. The opportunity exists now for the DMG to find solutions, and Naturescot want this to be achieved in the context of delivering the public interest.

The future expectations of The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (in consultation) which suggests a target of 2 deer/sqKm target for "priority woodlands". Naturescot will have to elaborate on next steps to how this can be achieved but, in regard to Glen Beasdale expressed confidence that there would be backing for a solution for such an important site while recognising the extremely challenging issues of road, rail, fires, terrain etc.

There was discussion around the Nature Restoration Fund which aims to deliver a habitat improvement over 5,000 hectare scale with £5 million pa . Both the RSPB and WTS have benefited from such funding locally (£1.4 million in two projects in 2022) but private sector and deer related applications are not having the same success. A lot of development time can go into developing ideas that go nowhere. There is NRF "Development funding" grant of upto £20k subject to conditions and a detailed project brief that demonstrates that the project can

	<p>deliver in terms of habitat designation, biodiversity etc.  The Forestry Grant Scheme now includes an additional £1 million for Atlantic Rainforest works but the Scottish Government has reduced the FGS budget as part of cost savings measures.  Both funding options were considered to be “a drop in the ocean” compared to what needs to be done and even in terms of Scottish Government planting and environmental targets .</p> <p>If the idea to sub-divide the DMG is taken forward then anyone can be at any meeting. The proposal is suggested to save people sitting in meetings that are not particularly relevant. For example, discussing Glen Beasdale is quite specific to the West of the DMG and the Achnacarry woodland plans are more relevant to the East. Glenfinnan sits in the middle will need to attend both! Overall, it is necessary for all to pull together to learn and respond to the diverse range of issues that are being addressed. Both need to be working to the same Deer Management Plan implying agreement on the deer population target, the annual cull allocation between estates and achieve this collaboratively.</p>	
<p><b>9</b></p>	<p><b><u>Management of Non-native Invasive Species</u></b></p> <p><b>Feral Pig</b> - Since the 29th of September 10 culled on North and South Achnacarry, the heaviest being 121 Kg. Another 4 seen recently and there was one down the lochside which had kids  At Meoble signs of feral pig were seen during the count from Oban to Loch Bearaidh. They have also been seen around the Lodge but none yet shot despite efforts at night.</p> <p><b>Rhododendron</b> - a lot of work has been done in Glen Beasdale wood and almost eradicated. Follow up treatment to be carried out next year which should finish the job. Network Rail are planning to do some rhododendron clearance work on the railway through the woodland area and also to erect a deer fence along the railway boundary which will give something to work from in future.  Achnacarry Estate have done a lot of rhydy control work in the last year via a joint NRF habitat restoration project which aims to eradicate all the rhydy from the Loch Arkaig catchments in the next three years. FLS are committing to doing similar on their ground.</p> <p><b>Sika deer</b> - One sika stag shot at Scamadale this season. One observed on Glenfinnan</p> <p><b><i>Phytopthera ramorum</i></b> -no reports</p>	
<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>Publicity of DMG matters:</b>  No report</p>	
<p><b>11</b></p>	<p><b>ADMG - Report and Discussion</b></p> <p>As per the appended ADMG Autumn Update 2023, there is a lot happening at the moment.</p> <p>1. Legislation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changes to the secondary legislation for deer so that's the there's no longer a close season for stags.</li> <li>• The use of image intensifying sights has now been allowed</li> <li>• reduced bullet weight for non lead ammunition.</li> </ul> <p>ADMG pushed back against the first two in the consultation response and were quite disappointed with the consultation process. The very quick turn around suggested a fait accompli before the consultation. Given the current consultation workload, this is frustrating.</p> <p>2. Consultations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landfill consultation</li> <li>• Forestry Grant Scheme consultation,</li> <li>• Agricultural consultation,</li> <li>• Scottish biodiversity strategy Action Plan consultation, which closes on the 14th of December which This covers everything (100 pages long) and there's a very small section that refers directly to deer. As many as possible should respond to that section (no need to respond to the whole of the process). Included is an intention to reduce deer and other herbivores densities (including sheep).</li> </ul> <p>There are broad targets set out in the Biodiversity Strategy consultation including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 deer/ square kilometre. a priority woodland target of ADMG have asked for more information on the definition of “Priority woodland” and an indication of how that target is going to be applied. If Glen Beasdale is a “priority” then the requirements could extend well beyond the</li> </ul>	<p><b>ALL</b></p>

woodland margins and have an impact on significant areas. So that's something to watch out for.

- 5-8 deer per square kilometre in Cairngorms National Park - already well publicised and known.
- 10 deer per square kilometre nationally by 2030. This is interesting because most DMGs can get close to that but outside of the management group area it is a significant challenge, particularly in heavily afforested areas. ADMG will be making a full response to that and others should do that also. The more responses that are submitted from the deer sector as a whole, the better.

A national deer management programme and increased monitoring capacity are to be welcomed. The Highlands and DMGs are well ahead compared to lowland Scotland. Deer population densities are well known and efforts are being made, as this Group are, to reduce numbers down to the Scottish government targets.

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ADMG have responded to all consultations to on behalf of the membership and these are available on the website. Obviously people are going to have varying opinions but

#### New legislation

- the Environment Bill consultation to be introduced in an Environment Act to replace the 1996 Deer Act This will introduce potentially new powers of intervention from the Scottish Government. I think that's going to be announced in the New Year and will implement the Deer Working Group recommendations. There are 90 recommendations within the Deer Working Group report and people would like to respond to that would be very helpful.

#### Events

- a very successful London event for landowners and land managers who live outwith the Highlands and can't always get to DMG meetings. Hosted at the Fishmonger Hall due to the Fishmongers interest in improving riparian woodlands for salmon and sea trout.
- Regional Meeting: Tuesday, on the 5<sup>th</sup> December at 5pm including a report on Scottish venison, ADMG update, a discussion around Common Ground project and Affric Highlands work that Trees for Life have been doing.

#### Other:

#### Common Ground forum and Common Ground projects

ADMG have been supporting this, as have other organisations. This aims to get over some of the conflicts that occur in some Deer Management Groups and to get a better conversation around deer management, from every perspective, respecting other people's objectives and trying to work for mutually beneficial solutions where it possible 27 organisations have signed up to a Common Ground Accord. In addition, a number of businesses and estates have joined and ADMG ask that Deer Management Groups also sign up in due course.

As an example of a common purpose, in regard to venison, ADMG, and Environment Link signed a letter for the first time which went to the minister on behalf of Scottish Venison Association, requesting a venison subsidy in the region of £1/Kg. This fund will help incentivize deer management and assist where deer reductions are taking place. This has come directly out of the Common Ground Forum and a pilot project could be implemented in the Cairngorms National Park. This then needs to be rolled out across the whole of Scotland and especially in the Lowlands or on the fringe of the DMGs where deer reductions need to take place over the next few years.

Heading for the Scottish hills - given the likely extent of access issues in West Lochaber, to signing up to the "Head to the Scottish Hills" website and renewing information including the hind stalking season. ADMG have set up a deer management group on the National Access Forum to convey the message that access can impact on deer management. The more that sign up to Heading to the Scottish Hills the better.

The ADMG will offer to provide a Chair for the Group while a new Chairperson is being sought. This has been done elsewhere for other groups. ADMG can help in identifying ways forward if an impasse situation was to arise with Naturescot for example on deer densities and management to a target figure. A pilot project for mediation is being worked on via the Common Ground forum which is going to be announced shortly. Common Ground projects are also looking at ways to improve how DMGs operate.

	A protocol is being written (which currently sits with FLS) for chairs and secretaries where there are difficult situations how to deal with them.	
<b>12</b>	<p><b>NatureScot/SNH- Report</b></p> <p>Many of the issues have been covered. The good turn out was commented on the general positivity with people offering solutions to move things forward. As per the draft DMP discussion, 10 deer/sq km is an upper density. The Scottish Biodiversity Action strategy will be key to achieving targets and to stop the habitat condition decline by 2030. The benchmark highlights the scale of the challenge but, simply, the management aim is not to make anything worse. That is the Naturescot objective. Thereafter, for 2045, the aim is for the regeneration of habitats across Scotland for which the policies and legislation are being put in place at the moment. In terms of the government's priority for deer, the Wildlife Officer team has almost doubled. We are in the spotlight and the Ministerial direction is that Naturescot are expected to deliver in the public interest. They will be looking at using legislation to get results.</p>	<b>ALL</b>
<b>13</b>	<p><b>Administrative matters: Constitution, bank account, membership &amp; subscriptions, Email/contact details</b></p> <p>The treasurer's report showed a positive balance despite expenditure exceeding income by over £1,300 during the year. Income expectations in 2024 will allow the DMG to meet its commitments subject to a subscription review in regard to normal RPI considerations and any exceptional costs to be incurred in regard to appointing a chairperson or other committee support.</p>	
<b>14</b>	<p><b>Any other business</b></p> <p>Andrew MacMaster indicated that, of the 7 DMGs that he covers, the West Lochaber DMG is quite an anomaly because it is a high priority for attention in the Naturescot matrix, but the DMG has some of the most progressive schemes potentially eg at Achnacarry. The DMG has good habitat monitoring records and quality in terms of the aims to deliver targets via experienced deer managers. So lots of positives and being able to work collaboratively together and making progress is in everyones' interest.</p> <p>Alistair Gibson, standing down as Chairperson, thanked Victor for all his help and to Tom for taking the time to turn out in person and with an offer to help. Alistair closed the meeting with a reminiscence of when he was a 19 year old boy and Sandy Walker took him aside to introduce the world of deer. "Thank you". During the AGM, Alistair was presented with a gift by Paolo Berardelli, on behalf of the DMG, in gratitude for has many years of service to the Group.</p>	
<b>15</b>	<p><b>Date of next (AGM) meeting</b></p> <p>6th December 2024</p>	<b>ALL</b>