**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Autumn Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Wednesday 13th November 2024 at 2pm**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (Secretary), Annette Parrott (West Shinness), David Shaw (Keodale), Richard Wright (Achnabourin), Mark Jamieson & Billy Lobban (Nature Scot), Iain Robertson (MOD), Roddy Watt & Martin Dignan (Merkland), Rachel Sutherland (Tongue Estate), Sian O’Brien (Strathnaver Common Grazings), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra Estate), Derick Sutherland & Donny Gray (Shinness Estate), Megan Bregazzi (FLS), Calum Fraser Gobernuisgach/ Reay Forest), David Allison (Reay Forest), Harsh Joshi & Abe Humphries (Gualin Estate), Lana Richardson & Steven Liddle (Wildland),

1. **Apologies**

Ian Thomson (Rhigolter), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Craig Rigby (Syre, North Loch Naver), Clovis Fletcher (Shinness), Donald Reid (Wildland), Robert McHardy (Poole).

1. **Minutes of May 2024 meeting**

The minutes were taken as read, proposed by Annette Parrott, and seconded by Pieter Bakker.

1. **Matters Arising**

David Shaw would be standing down as vice chair, due to him having taken up a role with Nature Scot as a deer officer and that having created a potential conflict of interest.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts**

The bank balance was currently £2517.03. Invoices for 2024 had not yet went out, but would do so after the meeting. The invoices were now a hybrid, the ADMG element being raised on a 5- year rolling average for each property, and the agreed DMG cost element being calculated on a proportion of area.

A number of properties had outstanding invoices. TC to work with Treasurer to make sure that all outstanding invoices were paid.

The meeting agreed that the DMG should adopt online banking, to make administration easier, this to be taken forwards now as soon as possible.

1. **2024 Stag Season Review**

Altnaharra only had one stag this year, down from 60 ten years ago. Season had been set aside to prioritize other work, given that there were no mature stags left at all now to work with. The estate had cleared their hill ground of hinds on the boundary with Wildland to try and create some space to retain some stags, but this was not working as stags would still be culled if they went further north. No collaboration was in evidence, and Altnaharra now had fewer employees.

Keodale had 31 stags. Fewer mature stags available now. Authorization in place to take hinds earlier in season, but not used much this year.

There had been 42 stags culled on the Strathnaver crofters’ ground, mostly younger animals, with OOS/ night shooting used as required. Deer numbers are generally down in the area.

West Shinness had nine red stags and one sika stag to date.

FLS had 45 stags in total, with more effort now being put in on open hill ground, with different stalking input in that area.

Tongue Estate had seen a reduction in younger animals, but some older ones still in evidence.

Shinness had 13 red stags and 5 sika stags. Not seeing significant numbers of sika at the moment.

Merkland had 12 stags, four of which were in woodland area. They used to have 20-25 stags, but 50% reduction in overall numbers now. Merkland had more younger stags in the West Sutherland area.

Achnabourin had 12 stags, with a number of blank days. Have a few hinds to date as well using OOS authorization.

Gobernuisgach had 15 stags, with more younger animals now after the reduction cull.

Reay Forest had 69 stags, including those at Gober. Numbers were in line with expectations, with some good animals as well.

Wildland had not started until August/ September, when numbers moved in. There were more deer again now than present at the helicopter count in the spring. There had been c 140 stags culled since then, with differential culling intensity between higher and lower priority areas. The majority of stags culled are younger animals. Wildland happy to share map of high and low priority areas with DMG.

MOD Cape Wrath had 18 stags, with a target of 38 hinds. Seeing fewer hinds now.

Gualin now had a very much reduced population, with only two animals seen this season. No animals culled.

Kinlochbervie had 7 animals, mostly quite young.

*Miscellaneous comments*

Altnaharra expressed concern about Wildland reducing their hind cull again while continuing to cull stags. Wildland said they were not managing for higher hind density, and that hind groups were much smaller now. This was much better for management purposes. DMG asked for more information on regeneration monitoring.

There was a discussion about the use of grid references for deer culls, with most people being able to record and verify these now. FLS reported that accuracy and process for collating GIS information were now much better than a few years ago. GIS co-ordinates were generally much more useful to individual properties than the DMG. Going forwards, a number of properties would be asked to break down their reported culls in to smaller reporting units. Eg Reay Forest, FLS Borgie, possibly Wildland.

1. **Area Updates & 2024-25 Cull targets**

All members have updated hind cull targets in the summary spreadsheet, which will be updated on a monthly basis through the season as in previous years.

*Far NW Area*

It is likely that deer population in this area is fairly stable, and culls had been allocated on this basis. Keodale were trying to reduce their population to 3 per sq km, to tie in with protecting SSSI site and to reduce pressure on sheep grazing. They would be increasing hind cull to 63 animals. MOD seeing fewer deer on ground at present. Kinlochbervie maintaining an active stalking presence. JMT at Sandwood had a new contact again who we will add to DMG email list. Keodale and JMT have an access agreement to facilitate deer management, and that seems to be working well.

*South Area*

The south area had undertaken another drone count in November, with results tying in with previous two counts. Knowledge of sika deer had improved very significantly, and it seems like current culls or slightly more should allow the population to be reduced. Red deer were much more transient, but culls were increasing.

*North East - West side of Strathnaver*

There were 6 X properties subject to the Section 10 agreement, with culls agreed for coming season. It seems like the population using the strath is reducing, and the crofters are taking some encouragement from that. Communications were much better now, and another thermal imaging count would be taking place shortly. Deer seemed to be moving further north where there was less potential for conflict. Achnabourin are having their sporting objectives squeezed to a significant extent, but participating in the overall reduction effort.

Skelpick were involved in the Section 10 as well. They were repairing their boundary fence on the Naver side, and the Northern DMG as a whole would be increasing their hind cull by 2000 animals this winter.

The FLS Borgie Forest produces a lot of deer, with 150 animals being counted by thermal drone in April, against an ongoing cull of c 160. FLS now had greater stalking input to their open hill area. They were renewing their Land Management Plan at the moment, but were reluctant to do any more restocking until their deer density had been brought under control within the forest area.

*North East- Rest*

The difference in management approach between Wildland and Altnaharra had been touched on earlier. Wildland would be felling the large Lodgepole Pine plantations on the boundary with Altnaharra, and restocking with native broadleaves. They had yet to decide whether to try and do this without fences, or if some sort of strategic fence would be necessary. A consultation process would be required, overseen by Scottish Forestry. All neighbours would be notified about that.

Tongue were looking at doing another winter count. They had a lot of mobile deer, and some sort of strategic fence may be required. Problems on crofting ground were reducing now.

Merkland’s let stalking days had reduced from c 30 to just 4, which was a very significant change in how they were able to operate.

There was a general discussion about letting fees, with the view expressed that deer stalking was undervalued, and that higher fees could be charged. There was an increasing demand, especially if ponies were available as part of the package. People were starting to value deer more, although there was a concern among some in the group that stalking should not become too expensive and exclusive.

Prices of £450 for hind stalking and £700-1000 for stags were quoted in some areas now, with people happy to pay this.

*Foinaven area*

The Foinavon SSSI/ SAC was the single most important natural heritage consideration in the area with a large number of designated features in unfavourable condition.

There had been a good meeting at Achfary back in May, and all the properties agreed culls for coming season.

Reay Forest had reduced their deer density by c 40%, bringing their sporting cull down by c 25%, which was in line with expectations. Recruitment looked like being very low this year, and this would need to be fed in to population models. Reay Forest may reduce their hind target to help mitigate this, which is a logical approach to take when trying to maintain a stable population.

DA to check to see if Reay were planning to count in spring 2025.

Merkland are looking at opening up their woodland plantation to try and help keep more deer closer to home. They are looking at more woodland creation and peatland restoration as well.

Gualin was not holding many deer at all at present, it being unlikely they will get their target 20 hinds. Their objectives were largely environmental.

Nature Scot were happy with progress in the area around Foinavon at the moment, and it was not on their radar as a potential problem area.

1. **Habitat Monitoring 2025**

It was decided that as a DMG, all members would look to undertake blanket bog monitoring in summer 2025, along the lines carried out in 2021 when we had good participation through most of the group. There was a fairly wide window for doing this, June- September. All DMG members had capacity for doing this, either through their own staff, or through contractors. There was a particular issue for those who were leasing ground, it being unreasonable to expect them to take monitoring on as an additional expense.

1. **ADMG Update**

The autumn 2024 ADMG report had previously been circulated.

The legislative process was ongoing, with some sort of natural environment bill due for publication in the spring. ADMG would be meeting minister on 3rd December.

The 3 X incentivization schemes were taken place at present. Uptake was low overall, so a review afterwards was important.

The Common Ground Forum had held 2 X well attended events for stalkers, and a chairs’ meeting more recently at Tomatin.

Scottish Venison and SQWV were getting merged to help streamline oversight of the venison market, and provide better support to members.

An access film had been developed, with a link in the autumn report.

The DMG was distributing E Scope magazine, and all encouraged to read this.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

Mark Jamieson would now be the full time Nature Scot deer contact for NWS DMG. His time to date has been mostly concerned with Strathnaver, but he is able to widen out his focus now and looks forward to meeting with others elsewhere within the group, and supporting them where required. The Foinavon area seems to be going forwards at the moment with a more appropriate density hopefully having been achieved.

Mention again for incentive schemes, being trialled because of low venison prices. Uptake was low so far, and it will be important to try and work out why this is. GPS locations had to be taken for reporting cull locations. It had been reported from lowland areas that many people were very suspicious about this, and that this might be a significant barrier to uptake. There may be other problems with scheme as well, so feedback will be important to ensure successful arrangements going forwards.

Licencing for grouse shooting and muirburn were now required, even if people were involved with this at a low level.

1. **AOCB**

There was a discussion about why the price of venison was so low, when the price of other red meat was so high. Partly to do with marketing effort & budget, partly because the sector was very small in comparison to others, partly because of cultural reasons and attitudes to venison.

Reay Forest were selling c 25% of their venison to local market. The value can be increased 9 X if processed and marketed effectively.

Sara Harkins provided this link about an influencer who was helping raise the profile of venison. <https://www.emilydesousa.com/> Such endorsements could prove to be very effective.

Reay Forest would be running a trapping training workshop in February, and DMG members welcome to attend. DA to advise on details in due course.

Thank you as always to Annette for booking the hall and organizing the catering.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting would take place on **Thursday 15th May, 2pm** in Lairg Community Hall. This date has been adjusted from the previous day, due to hall being unavailable.