

SOUTH GRAMPIAN DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

OCTOBER 2025 DRAFT

DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN 2026 – 2035 Background Information & Policies

PREFACE

This Deer Management Plan has been developed for the South Grampian Deer Management Group (SGDMG). The Plan is funded through the FGS Woodland Co-operation Grant, with some DMG administrative time also allocated to this purpose. The Plan runs from 2026- 2031 in detail, and to 2035 in outline, and has been formally endorsed by all the Members of the Group. It has been designed to be readily updated as needs arise and will be reviewed on a six-monthly basis or as required, with a systematic review taking place at the end of the first five year period.

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Upper Glen Isla

Part One - INTRODUCTION

1. Purpose of Plan

The purpose of this Plan is to provide:-

- (a) an agreed statement of the shared views of the members of the South Grampian DMG about the management of wild deer within the area;
- (b) an agreed set of principles to try and ensure that deer management in the area is in line with those shared views;
- (c) an agreed set of actions that will identify and deliver relevant public interest and benefits throughout the area;
- (d) an agreed pattern of arrangements to try and ensure that the actions are implemented and their effectiveness monitored;
- (e) a document that acts as a ready source of information for DMG members, agency staff and the general public alike, setting out essential background & analysis, clarifying points of contact, and setting out how deer related issues can be addressed.

Maps and other documents referred to in this document can be located at:

<https://sgrampiandmg.deer-management.co.uk/deer-management-plan/>

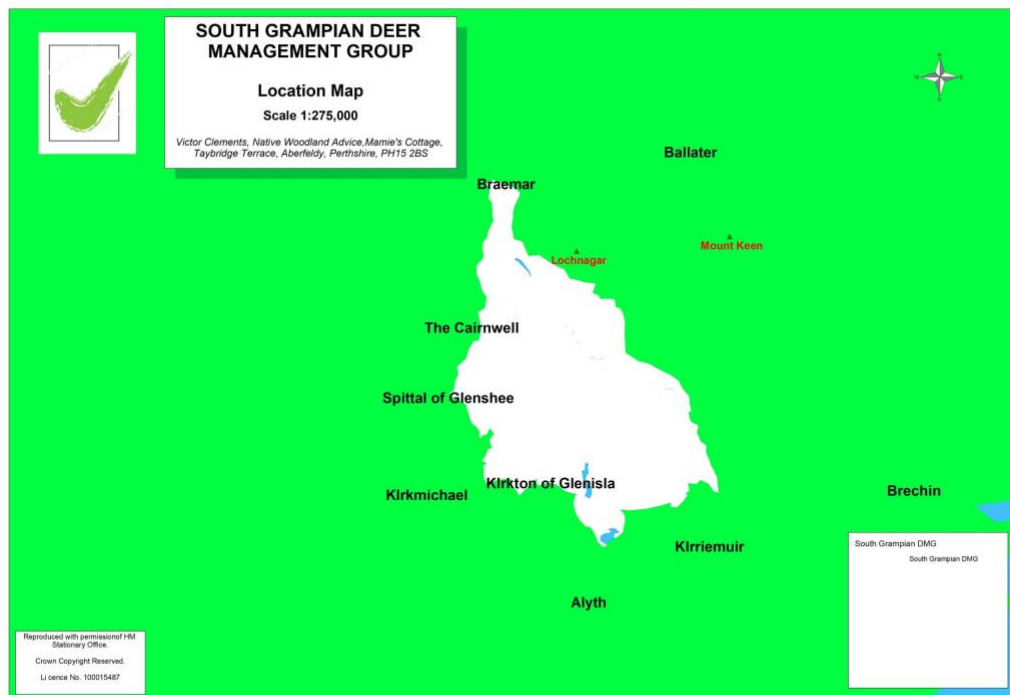
In the text below, maps on the above website are referenced in **purple**, Excel spreadsheets in **green**, and text documents in **black**. There are no hyperlinks included, but the main maps are copied in to the body of this report where appropriate.

2. Group Area

The South Grampian Management Group (SGDMG) area covers just over 49,000 ha (**1.SG Location Map**). It has eleven active members, several of which report over more than one management unit. There are an additional five properties within the overall area who are not currently subscribing members of the Group, but who are contributing to the development of this plan. South Grampian DMG is not part of any other local association, and operates under its own constitution (**SG Constitution**). It was however a key sub area of the former East Grampians DMG up until a few years ago when that group divided up to become a series of independent groups. The group does not currently subscribe to the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), but does work closely with them. Currently, resources are prioritized for running the group, but that position will be kept under review.

The boundaries of the area are:

- From Braemar, following the A93 south, over the Cairnwell to Blacklunans,
- Then east, skirting the lower end of Glen Isla and the hill area more generally to Cortachy/ Dykehead,
- Northwards in to Glen Clova, following the road on the south side of the glen up to Glen Doll,
- Finally, following the hill area/ watershed in a general north west direction via the Broad Cairn, Cairn Bannoch and Loch Callater to the Invercauld/ Ballochbuie boundary, and then back to Braemar.



Along the southern edge of the DMG are a series of smaller arable and livestock farms who do not contribute to the deer group, but where deer will be present on occasion, sometimes in significant numbers.

Population modelling over many years suggests that the group boundaries are very porous, with a very mobile deer population moving around between the hill ground and adjacent agricultural & forested land, and this provides a particular challenge in coming to terms

South Grampian DMG

Background Information & Policies

with some of the issues within the group area itself. The principle of such interactions are understood by all, but the detail is difficult to quantify and plan for.

SGDMG marches with the West Grampian DMG to the west, and the South Deeside/North Angus DMG to the north. The Upper Deeside/ Donside DMG lies to the north west.

You can see from the map below that the land to the south and east of the SGDMG group is not in any deer management structure. This area is good quality farmland, mostly arable, interspersed with hill grazings and wooded areas, and perfect habitat for deer. The farm sizes in this area are very small in relation to the hill area within the deer group, and achieving effective control over very mobile red deer populations is extremely difficult. Roe deer are very abundant in this area as well, and fallow deer are also locally numerous.

The location of SGDMG right on the very edge of traditional red deer range is important in understanding some of the issues within the area, especially as adjacent land is so fertile and fragmented in its ownership pattern and objectives.

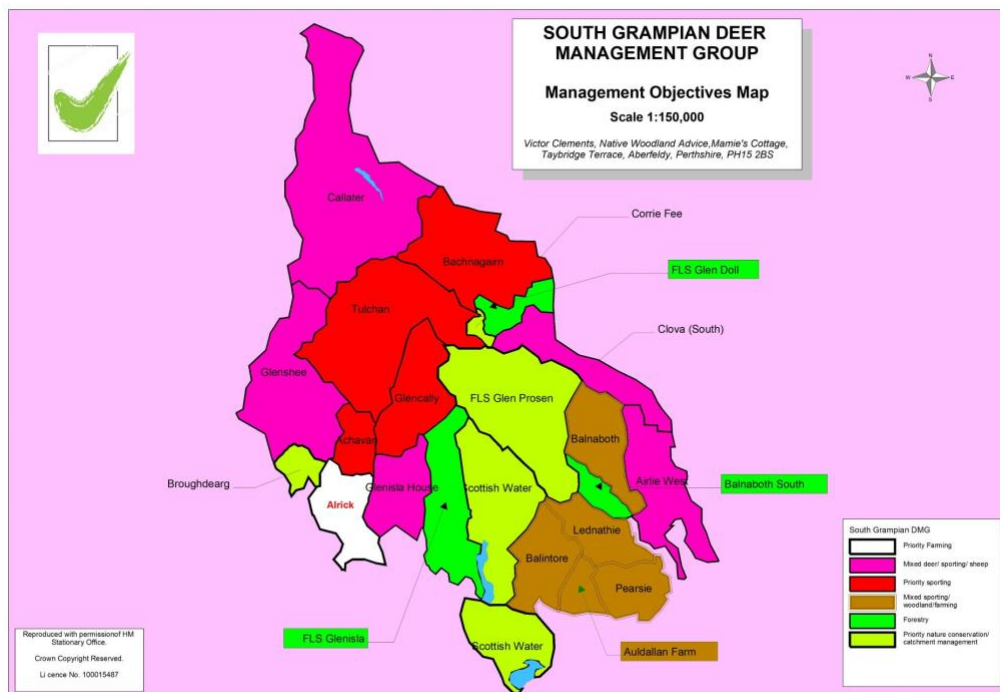
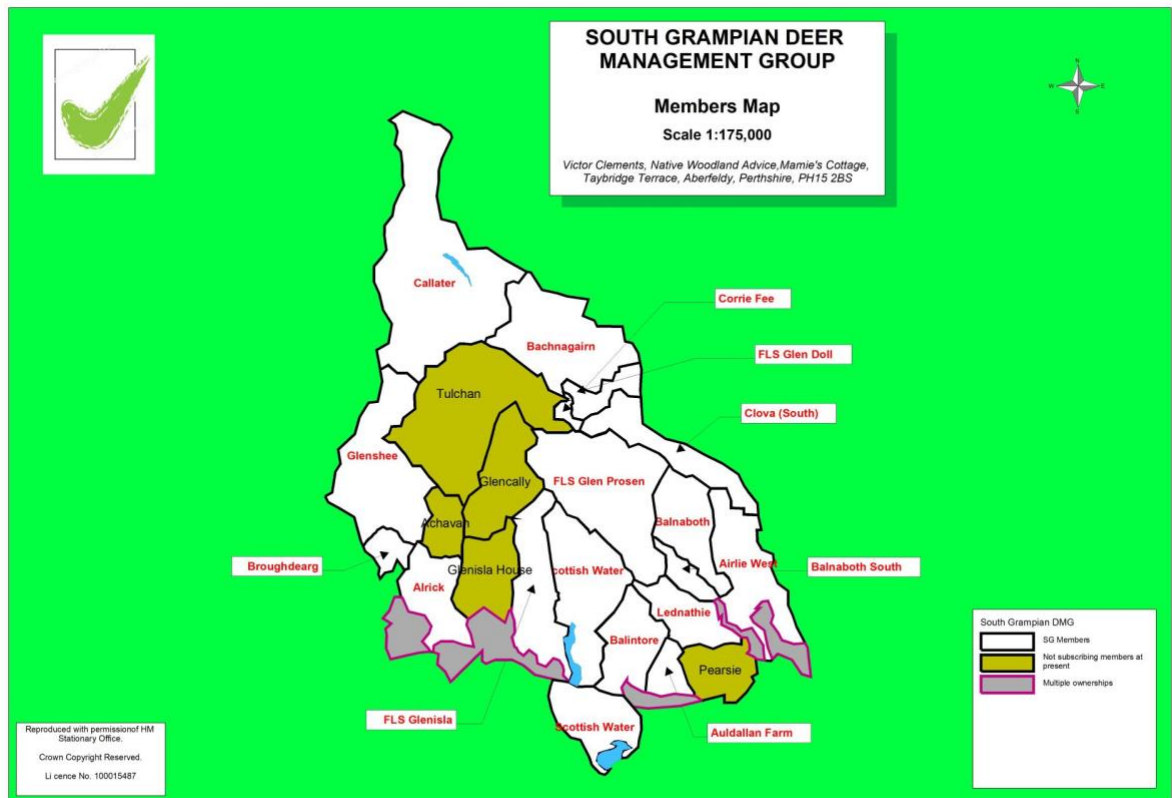


Illustration from ADMG website

3. Group Membership

SGDMG enjoys a very strong level of participation from among the members of the group (**2. SG Members map**), although for reasons outlined later in this document, five properties are not currently subscribing members, but are contributing information for this plan. There are seven main management regimes within the group area, set out in the **3. SG Management Objectives map**. What is listed below are broad categories, but they give an indication of the range of management priorities within the area.

Ultimately, everyone has deer, woodland and conservation objectives, albeit in different proportions, and the majority of members have agricultural interests as well.



- Five reporting units have mixed deer/ sporting/ agricultural interests, but with some woodland interest as well. This area comprises 16,415 ha, or 33% of the DMG area
- Four management units have predominantly sporting interests, with deer as a key component of that, although all these properties have conservation interests as well. Together they cover 11,233 ha or 23% of the DMG area.

South Grampian DMG

Background Information & Policies

- Three management units have forestry or woodland management interests as their core objective. This area covers 3,435 ha or 7% of the DMG area.
- Five management units have mixed sporting/ woodland/ agricultural interests, but where red deer are a more minor or non- essential part of the mix. These areas cover 6599 ha or 13% of the DMG area.
- Five areas have water catchment management or nature conservation as their core objective, although forestry, farming and deer management are also activities within those areas, with a tenanted farming interest as well in two cases. These areas cover 8118 ha or 20% of the DMG area.
- Finally, one reporting unit has sheep farming as their core objective, but deer control is also carried out, and recent woodland planting is also in evidence. This area covers 1565 ha or 3% of the DMG area

These areas are shown on the **3. SG Management Objectives Map**, above.

The following table lists the properties which lie within the SGDMG area. There are a number of smaller properties within the area who do not contribute to the deer management group or provide deer cull information. They largely lie around the periphery of the group area, mostly along the southern edge where the DMG merges in to the surrounding area of agricultural land, and the DMG boundary is considered to be largely porous there.

Table 1 SG DMG Members & Principal Management Objectives

Property	Main Objectives	Size (ha)
<i>Achavan*</i>	<i>Deer/ sheep</i>	<i>810</i>
<i>Airlee (West)</i>	<i>Mixed farming/ sporting/ woodland</i>	<i>2386</i>
<i>Alrick</i>	<i>Priority sheep</i>	<i>1106</i>
<i>Auldallan Farm</i>	<i>Mixed sporting/ farming</i>	<i>603</i>
<i>Bachnagairn</i>	<i>Priority sporting</i>	<i>3401</i>
<i>Balintore**</i>	<i>Mixed sporting/farming</i>	<i>1689</i>
<i>Balnaboth</i>	<i>Mixed farming/woodland/sporting</i>	<i>1975</i>
<i>Balnaboth South</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>300</i>
<i>Broughdearg</i>	<i>Nature conservation/ farming</i>	<i>400</i>
<i>Clova (South)</i>	<i>Farming/ deer/ woodland</i>	<i>1627</i>
<i>Corrie Fee (Nature Scot)</i>	<i>Nature conservation</i>	<i>166</i>
<i>Forestry & Land Scotland****</i>	<i>Woodland management</i>	<i>7238</i>
<i>Glencally Estate*</i>	<i>Priority sporting/deer</i>	<i>2075</i>
<i>Glenisla House*</i>	<i>Mixed farming/deer/ woodland</i>	<i>1544</i>
<i>Invercauld Estate***</i>	<i>Mixed sporting/ sheep</i>	<i>10,635</i>
<i>Lednathie</i>	<i>Mixed sporting/ farming</i>	<i>1315</i>
<i>Pearsie*</i>	<i>Mixed sporting/farming/woodland</i>	<i>1260</i>
<i>Scottish Water</i>	<i>Water catchment management</i>	<i>4815</i>
<i>Tulchan*</i>	<i>Priority sporting</i>	<i>4926</i>

Total area covered: 49,056 ha

**Achavan, Glencally, Glenisla House, Pearsie and Tulchan are not subscribing members of the DMG at present*

***Balintore is leased by Lednathie Estate, and is not a member by itself*

****Invercauld Estate covers the Callater and Glenshee beats, which are considered separately as part of this plan*

*****Forestry & Land Scotland manage three separate areas at Glen Doll, Glen Prosen and Glen Isla.*

3a. Member Details

The following section gives a brief overview of the essential management information relating to each of the group members.

Achavan Not currently a subscribing DMG member

Achavan is a relatively small property lying near the top of Glen Isla, and managed in conjunction with Glencally Estate. It has deer stalking and wider sporting objectives, including grouse, and lies within the Caenlochan Section 7 area. There is no agricultural interest. There is a significant area of woodland creation along the boundary with Alrick. The two areas used to be managed together, but are now under separate ownership and management.

Airlee (West)

Airlie West (also known as Tarabuckle or Cortachy) is let out on a long term sporting lease, with hill red deer, grouse, roe stalking and fishing as important components. Red deer are an important part of the overall package.

The area has two tenant farms, with extensive hill grazing for sheep, but no cattle. There is a significant amount of woodland within the estate boundary, most of which is deer fenced. Extensive areas are currently being restocked after damage from Storm Arwen. The area includes the Crossbog Pinewood SSSI site, currently listed as being in Favourable condition, with deer not cited as a pressure.

Alrick

Alrick lies within Glen Isla. It is predominantly a sheep farm, with some summer grazing for cattle, and recent woodland creation is also in evidence. Alrick take no commercial interest in deer stalking, and have rarely any hinds on the property, but stags do come to the improved grassland fields and improved hill areas which have been converted to grass in the last 30 years or so. The focus on deer is management only, both to reduce grass usage and also to make a contribution towards the overall Caenlochan Section 7 culls. In reality, having no hinds, Alrick is very much peripheral to that situation, although listed as part of the core control zone.

Auldallan Farm

Auldallan Farm has a mixture of farming and sporting objectives, and is currently looking at taking forwards some woodland creation projects. There is no commercial interest in red deer at all, which are only present on occasion, and often outwith the period when they could be utilized more effectively. However, there are very mobile herds of red deer in the wider area, and sometimes, they just happen to be on Auldallan, with potential for damaging grass, crops and hill grazing interests. Roe deer have arguably a higher value to the property. The primary interest is in low ground shooting, and in developing the woodland/ natural capital value of the property, with some grouse interest on the open heather hill. There is one agricultural tenant for the whole property.

Bachngairn

The priority at Bachnagairn is sporting, and based largely around red deer, and grouse when they are available. There is however a focus on conservation of natural habitats and species more generally. There is no agricultural interest on the property. Bachnagairn is well used by walkers, with people often returning to the Glen Doll carpark from this direction. The

estate lies just to the east of the main Caenlochan area, and is a signatory to the current Section 7 agreement.

Balnaboth

Balnaboth lies at the lower end of Glen Prosen. The estate objectives are a mixture of tourism, farming, woodland and support for local community initiatives in the glen. The estate itself does not have any sporting objectives, but the hill area is let out for deer management/ grouse, and there is a sporting cull associated with this.

That area of Balnaboth lying on the south side of the river Prosen has recently been sold for forestry development, and that process is now underway. That area extends to c 300 ha, and will be included in this deer plan as a separate unit if the new owners wish to become DMG members or at least to contribute management information to the group.

Balnaboth South

This area has been recently sold by Balnaboth Estate, with a view to it being developed as a deer fenced woodland block. It extends to c 300 ha. Any new woodland will be a mixture of commercial conifer plantation and native woodland.

Additional information may be reported here should the owners wish to join SGDMG. An approach has been made in that regard.

Broughdearg

This area has been purchased by new owners in 2025, having previously been part of the Invercauld beat of Glenshee. The new owners are still defining their overall plans, but the priorities will be nature conservation and cattle grazing. There are no sporting objectives. Invercauld will deal with deer management in the short term.

Clova (South)

Clova Farms covers both sides of the glen, with the south part being in the SGDMG area, and a signatory to the current Section 7 agreement. Business objectives are centred around tourism at the Glen Clova Hotel, and land management is largely co-ordinated and integrated in to that. Land use is a mixture of livestock farming and sporting, of which red deer are an important component, along with a pheasant shoot. Most guests stay at the hotel. There are several woodland areas on the property, and extensive new woodland creation schemes have been in development now for a number of years, with c 150 ha planned for the Clova South area.

Corrie Fee (Nature Scot)

Owned and managed by Nature Scot, this is a very small property at the head of Glen Doll, and designated as a National Nature Reserve. It is perhaps one of the most important sites in the country for montane willows on account of the number of species present, including woolly willow where it is the single most significant site. Slightly less than half of the site was enclosed by a deer fence in 1990, although those fences are now becoming redundant.

The core objective is to protect and improve the site, along with managing visitors, and providing for educational/ research opportunities. The site is largely viewed as being stable in condition in recent years, although there was a significant dieback of willow a few years ago. The cause is unknown, but possibly some sort of insect infestation or very late frost. The site has more or less recovered again just now.

There is no sporting, farming or other woodland management interest on the site. Deer management is undertaken by Forestry & Land Scotland who operate on the adjacent ground in FLS Glen Doll.

Forestry & Land Scotland (FLS)

FLS manage our public forests in Scotland, sometimes referred to as the National Forest Estate, with 3 X properties lying within the SGDMG area. In total, they are the second largest landholding in the group after Invercauld estates. The objectives in the three areas are slightly different.

FLS Glen Doll is a planted conifer woodland that has been extensively damaged by windblow within the last few years. A significant effort is now going in to felling and restructuring this area, with the opportunity being used to introduce a wider suite of species, including broadleaves, and to develop a riparian corridor. There is also likely to be a modest woodland expansion.

The existing species mix means there is a strong commercial element to forest management, although the forest is fairly remote in its location.

Visitor management is hugely important, with the large carpark at FLS Glen Doll being used to access the local mountain areas, as well as being an access point for Jock's Road heading across to Braemar.

There is no agricultural interest, and no tenants within the area.

The restructuring of the woodlands at Glen Doll will create significant changes for neighbouring properties as the woodlands were previously used extensively by deer for shelter. This will no longer be possible over much of the area, so there will need to be local deer reductions to allow this to happen.

While FLS have long owned and managed a large conifer plantation in Glen Prosen, they have recently also purchased the former Glen Prosen Estate, previously managed as a sheep/sporting estate. The management objective is to plant this as a large native woodland scheme, with 900 ha of planting planned in the next five years, which is then envisaged to regenerate over an equivalent size of area when these trees are old enough to bear seeds themselves. Approx 85% of the area will be deer fenced. The highest ground at the top end of Glen Prosen will not be fenced, but deer will be managed there to try and promote better growth of montane vegetation, this area lying adjacent to the Caenlochan SSSI/ SAC and Corrie Fee NNR.

The native woodland plantings will be focused on providing woodland habitat, amenity value and as a mechanism for reducing downstream flooding.

Cattle will be used for conservation grazing, and a small sheep flock will be retained.

The existing buildings will be leased on a commercial basis, in particular as a distillery, but a bothy will also be leased out to mountaineers.

The existing plantation will be managed for commercial timber, and will be restocked accordingly, although a higher proportion of broadleaves will be used in subsequent rotations.

In the main FLS Glen Isla forest blocks, there is a much greater emphasis on commercial forestry, made possible by a good internal roading system. There is a high % of larch within the area, and this may have to be felled prematurely should it become diseased. There will be additional restocking and therefore deer management commitments should this become necessary. At present, these forest blocks are well fenced, but it is believed that deer can

access in places.

FLS have plans for an additional 284 ha of new woodland creation in the 5 years ahead, and this will need to be accommodated with additional deer management planning around that. The purpose of this is to connect existing woodland areas.

There are fallow deer in this area, the only ones reported within the SGDMG boundaries as yet.

Glencally, Fergus & Glenmarkie Estate **Not currently a subscribing DMG member**

Glencally Estate lies at the top of Glen Isla, formerly part of the Glenisla House estate, and a key signatory to the current Caenlochan Section 7 agreement. Objectives are largely based on sporting, with red deer as a key component of that, but red grouse are important as well, and a significant amount of time is spent on moorland management. There is no agricultural interest in the property, sheep having been removed about 20 years ago when the property was purchased. At that point, it was owned by neighbouring Glenisla House to the south.

Glencally is managed alongside Achavan, which lies on the other side of the Glen Isla road.

Glenisla House **Not currently a subscribing DMG member**

Glenisla House lies on the eastern side of the river Isla. It is predominantly an agricultural unit with both sheep and cattle, but there are also c 400 acres of forestry, some of it commercial, and sporting is also important, with red deer as an important component of that. The estate considers itself to be well integrated, with farming/ forestry/ sporting being given equal prominence, and operating as an overall package. Sporting guests use the local hotel.

The neighbouring Glencally Estate used to be part of Glenisla House.

Invercauld Estate

Invercauld Estate own the Callater and Glenshee beats, both of which have long term sporting tenants. The priority for both beats is mixed sporting, focused primarily on grouse and red deer, but sheep grazing is an integral part of this, and there is a mixture of secure tenancies and shorter term lets. The sheep provide a tick mop, as well as being commercial flocks in their own right. Callater and Glenshee are two of the three largest reporting units in the DMG, lying on the northern and western edges of the group.

Of the two beats, Glenshee has the more fertile underlying geology, and this is reflected in the numbers of animals carried. Glenshee is a key property in the overall Caenlochan Section 7 agreement, of which Callater is also a part, but deer numbers there are much lower. Callater contains a number of designated upland sites, and has extensive woodland planting at its northern end, leading towards Braemar.

The Glenshee beat and its neighbours to the west are currently scoping out an extensive riparian woodland scheme, and this is likely to become one of the more significant woodland schemes in the DMG over the next 5-10 years. Part of the beat at its southern end was sold during 2025, and is now known as Broughdearg.

While the two beats have their own independent sporting management, it is Invercauld Estate who is the SGDMG member.

There are very significant woodland creation and regeneration efforts at the northern end of

Callater, and elsewhere on Invercauld. Exploring natural capital options, and providing the necessary protection for designated sites is something the estate is very dedicated to achieving.

Lednathie (& Balintore)

Lednathie lies on the lower south side of Glen Prosen, and is a relatively small mixed property, with sporting, farming and woodland interests, and a strong focus on amenity. The sporting is a mixture of low ground and grouse shooting, and supports a number of employees. The farming operation is given equal priority. The woodland areas are mostly open to deer. Objectives are the provision of fuelwood for estate use, and the management of larch plantations to provide sawn timber for construction projects on the property. Lednathie lease the neighbouring Balintore, which has a similar mix of objectives. The farming operation at Balintore includes cattle as well as sheep.

Balintore are currently exploring renewable energy and woodland options, the latter of which may have a significant impact on deer going forwards.

While roe deer are an integral part of the overall sporting operation, red deer are very transitory, and are only culled on a recreational basis by the owner. They have no commercial value on the property.

Pearsie Not currently a subscribing DMG member

Pearsie lies in the south east corner of the DMG. Management objectives are a mixture of sporting, farming and forestry, with the sporting comprising low ground shooting and grouse on the hill, and some limited roe bucks as well. Red deer are more transitory, and are often present in damaging numbers, and not at times of year where they might realize the estate any value. The focus is therefore very much on the management of red deer numbers, although this is very difficult as they are mobile in a much wider landscape.

Scottish Water

Scottish Water own and manage two properties at Glenhead/ Damph and Lintrathen. The management objective is water catchment management for the 2 X resevoirs at Backwater and Lintrathen, but there are a significant number of tenanted farms, forestry and, up to now, sporting, including red deer.

Scottish Water have recently been reviewing these objectives, and with one tenanted farmer removing his hill sheep in 2025, there will be a stronger emphasis on native woodland creation/ catchment management on the higher ground. It has been decided that there will no longer be any commercial let stags, and leases have been changed to reflect this. Roe buck stalking is still important on lower ground, and red deer control will still be necessary.

Agricultural protection is also an important consideration in making these changes.

Tulchan Not currently a subscribing DMG member

Tulchan is a priority sporting estate, with red deer as an important component of that. Low ground shooting and grouse are part of the overall package. There is no agricultural interest at Tulchan, there having been no sheep on the property for many decades. The estate have developed and implemented a range of fairly significant woodland creation schemes recently, and have also been looking at a range of peatland restoration options.

Tulchan lies at the top of Glen Isla, and is perhaps the most important property within the Caenlochan Section 7 agreement area, with Caenlochan Glen itself lying on Tulchan.

3b. Reporting Units *(For most properties, these refer to entire estate as before)*

In recent years, South Grampian DMG has been split up in to three zones in relation to the ongoing Caenlochan Section 7 agreement, with properties not included in this being listed separately.

This review of the deer management plan provides an opportunity to look at how properties are laid out within the DMG, taking account of the variety of management issues involved, not just Caenlochan.

For this exercise, two sub- divisions of properties have been made:

- 1 The unenclosed area of FLS Glen Prosen will be reported separately from the main area to be enclosed over the next 2 years or so
- 2 The Clova South property will be divided in two, roughly along the western boundary of Balnaboth, to be called Clova West and Clova East.

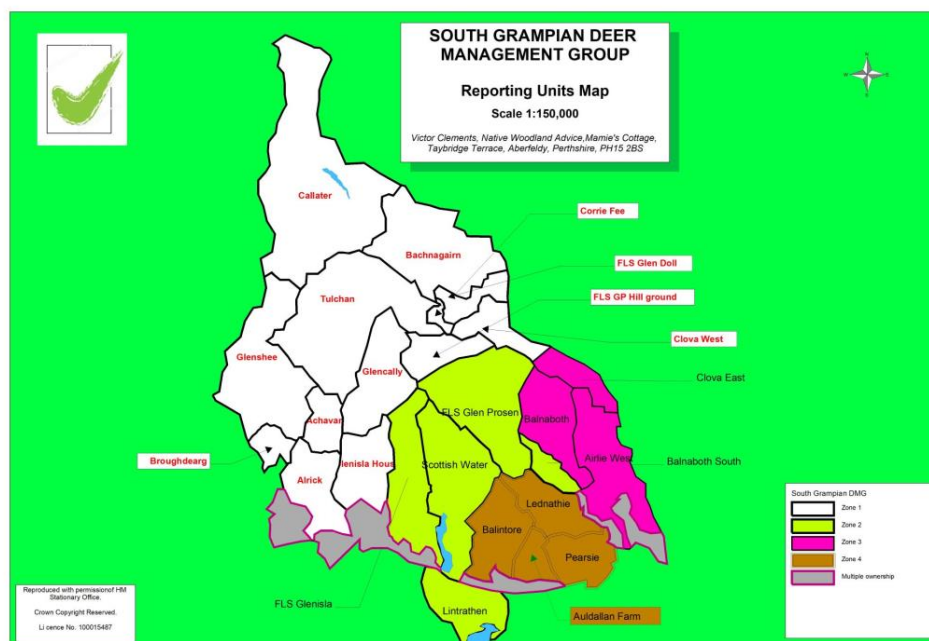
Four zones have been suggested, which can be noted in the Tables 2-5 below and the **4.SG Reporting Units Map**.

Zone 1 is the open ground properties lying to the north and west of the DMG who will have most influence on Caenlochan and the other designated upland sites.

Zone 2 is the properties running through the middle of the the DMG area, which will be largely (but not entirely) deer fenced, and where the management priority is forestry/ woodland management, or catchment management. There are a number of tenanted farms in this area as well, emphasizing a focus on deer control.

Zone 3 is the eastern end of Clova Estate, Balnaboth and Airlee (West), where woodland and farming are key objectives, but where a red deer sporting cull is also required, and it is understood that there is limited interaction with Zone 4.

Zone 4 contains those properties where red deer are present, but where they are either not wanted, or where any activity involving them is largely opportunistic, recreational or management of numbers. On all these properties, farming, grouse moor management or low ground shooting are much more important, and red deer do not have much in the way of commercial value.



These zones are listed in the tables below:

Table 2 : Zone 1 Deer Management Units (area figures are approximate)

<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Extent (ha)</i>	<i>Priority</i>	<i>Deer Management</i>
Achavan	810	Deer/ sheep	Glencally
Alrick	1106	Priority sheep	Alrick
Bachnagairn	3401	Priority sporting	Bachnagairn
Broughdearg	400	Nature/ farming	Glenshee
Callater beat	6973	Sporting/ sheep	Callater
Clova West	994	Priority sporting	Clova
Corrie Fee	166	Nature protection	FLS
FLS Glen Doll	702	Forestry	FLS
FLS GP Open Hill	903	Nature protection	FLS
Glencally Estate	2075	Priority sporting	Glencally
Glenisla House	1544	Farming/deer/woodland	Glenisla House
Glenshee Beat	3662	Sporting/ sheep/river	Glenshee
Tulchan	4926	Priority sporting	Tulchan
Total:	27,662 ha		

Table 3 : Zone 2 Deer Management Units (area figures are approximate)

<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Extent (ha)</i>	<i>Priority</i>	<i>Deer Management</i>
Balnaboth South	300	Forestry	TBC
FLS Glen Isla	3533	Forestry	FLS
FLS Glen Prosen	3414	Woodland	FLS
SW Glenhead/ Damph	3121	Catchment man	Lease
SW Lintathen	1690	Catchment man	Lease
Total:	12,058 ha		

Table 4 : Zone 3 Deer Management Units (area figures are approximate)

<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Extent (ha)</i>	<i>Priority</i>	<i>Deer Management</i>
Airlie (West)	2386	Mixed	Lease
Balnaboth	1975	Farming/ sporting	Lease
Clova East	803	Deer/farm/forestry	Clova
Total:	5,164 ha		

Table 5: Zone 4 Deer Management Units (area figures are approximate)

<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Extent (ha)</i>	<i>Priority</i>	<i>Deer Management</i>
Auldallan Farm	603	Sport/farm	Iain Robertson
Balintore	1689	Misc objectives	Lednathie
Lednathie	1315	Sporting/ farm/ woods	Lednathie
Pearsie	1260	Sporting/ sheep	Pearsie
Total:	4,867 ha		

While these zones may not capture discreet deer populations, they should support each area to have their own focused discussion about deer management at meetings and as such, should help ensure that the full range of issues are addressed across the DMG area, and the focus moved away from simply a discussion about Caenlochan. The concentration of fenced/ forestry through the centre of the group in many ways creates these separate zones.

4. Deer Management Statistics

There is a plethora of helicopter count information for the deer group, with 29 X counts having taken place since 2000. The counts have taken place over different areas and at different times of year, and have arguably complicated our understanding of the deer dynamics within the group area. Cull data has been collated over this time period as well, and has been available to compile this report, but again, they are not consistent in their presentation. A fuller description of count and cull information is given later in this document.

The data on deer counts and culls supplied by Members to SGDMG has always been based on their overall land holdings. Members agree, however, that for the purposes of implementing this Plan they will report counts and culls and set cull targets at the Reporting Unit scale (see above). This will allow a better analysis of the information provided in and around those areas of differing management objectives.

Members will agree on the deer management records that will be kept by all Members for sharing with the Group, including count and cull data, recruitments counts, and mortality counts where appropriate, and the format in which these sets of data will be presented. The agreed formats are included in **SGDMG Deer Cull Information**.

Recommended cull record sheets are appended to this document.

All SGDMG members agree to make sufficient resources available to carry out the culling programme outlined in this plan.

All culling operations will be conducted in a low key manner, and priority always given to spreading activity throughout the normal seasons using existing resources.

5. THE DESIGNATED SITES IN THE SOUTH GRAMPIAN DMG AREA

Within the SGDMG area there are five different types of designation. The sites relevant to this plan are discussed in detail in **SG Designated sites information**.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

Special Protection Areas (SPA)

National Nature Reserve (NNR)

National Scenic Area (NSA)

The northern part of the DMG area lies within the Cairngorms National Park. Much of the DMG area is also classified as wild land.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) represent the best of Scotland's natural heritage. They are 'special' for their plants, animals or habitats, their rocks or landforms, or a combination of such natural features. Together, they form a network of the best examples of natural features throughout Scotland, and support a wider network across Great Britain and the European Union.

Scottish Natural Heritage/ Nature Scot (SNH/NS) chooses sites after detailed survey and evaluation against published scientific criteria. SSSIs can include freshwater, and sea water down to the mean low water mark of spring tides, as well as land. At 31 March 2008, there were 1,456 SSSI's, covering a total area of 1,036,000 hectares or 12.9% of Scotland.

SNH/NS designates SSSIs to protect the best of our natural heritage by making sure that decision-makers, managers of land and their advisors, as well as the planning authorities and other public bodies, are aware of them when considering changes in land-use or other activities which might affect them.

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 provides the legislative framework around which all SSSI sites are administered.

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are areas designated under the European Directive commonly known as the 'Habitats' Directive. Together with Special Protection Areas, which are designated under the Wild Birds Directive for wild birds and their habitats, SACs form the Natura 2000 network of sites. Most SACs on land or freshwater in Scotland are also underpinned by notification as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The additional SAC designation is recognition that some or all of the wildlife and habitats are particularly valued in a European context.

Special Protection Areas (SPA)

These areas can be designated where more than 2% of the total UK numbers of a particular bird species is located or heavily dependent on a particular geographic area.

National Nature Reserves (NNR)

The first National Nature Reserves were designated 50 years ago, and at that time they were the cornerstone of nature conservation policy, safeguarding sites of national conservation importance as well as providing interpretative material and allowing the public to enjoy these sites. All NNRs are now designated as SSSIs to strengthen their protection. There are currently 65 National Nature Reserves in Scotland.

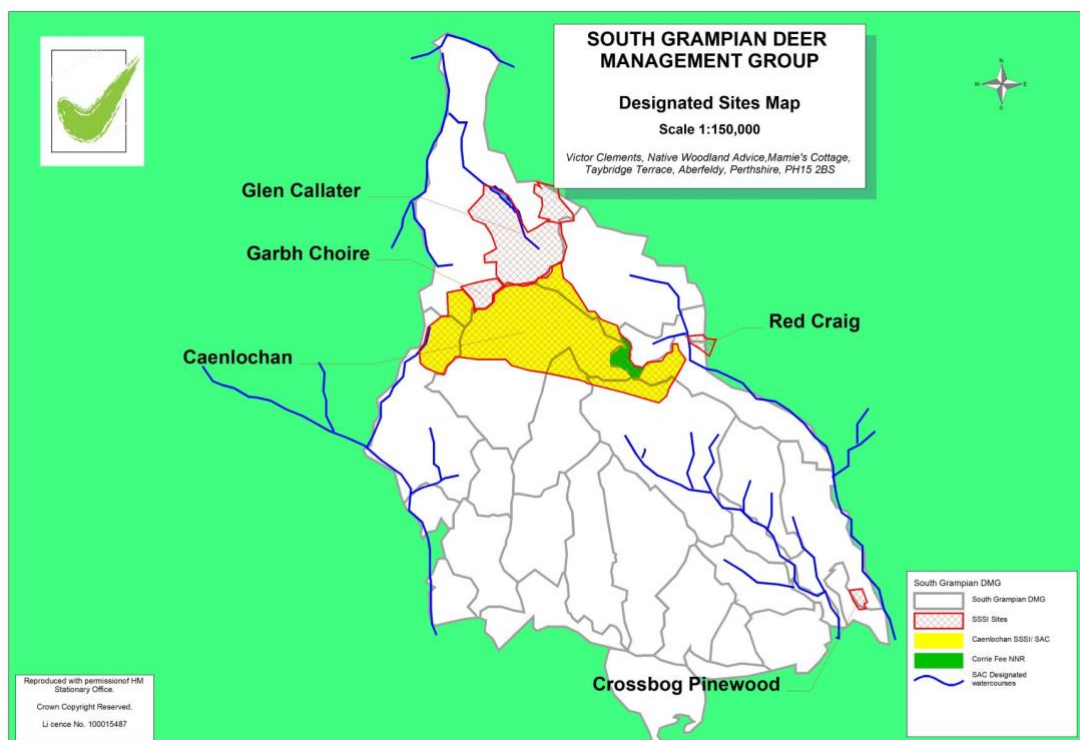
National Scenic areas (NSA)

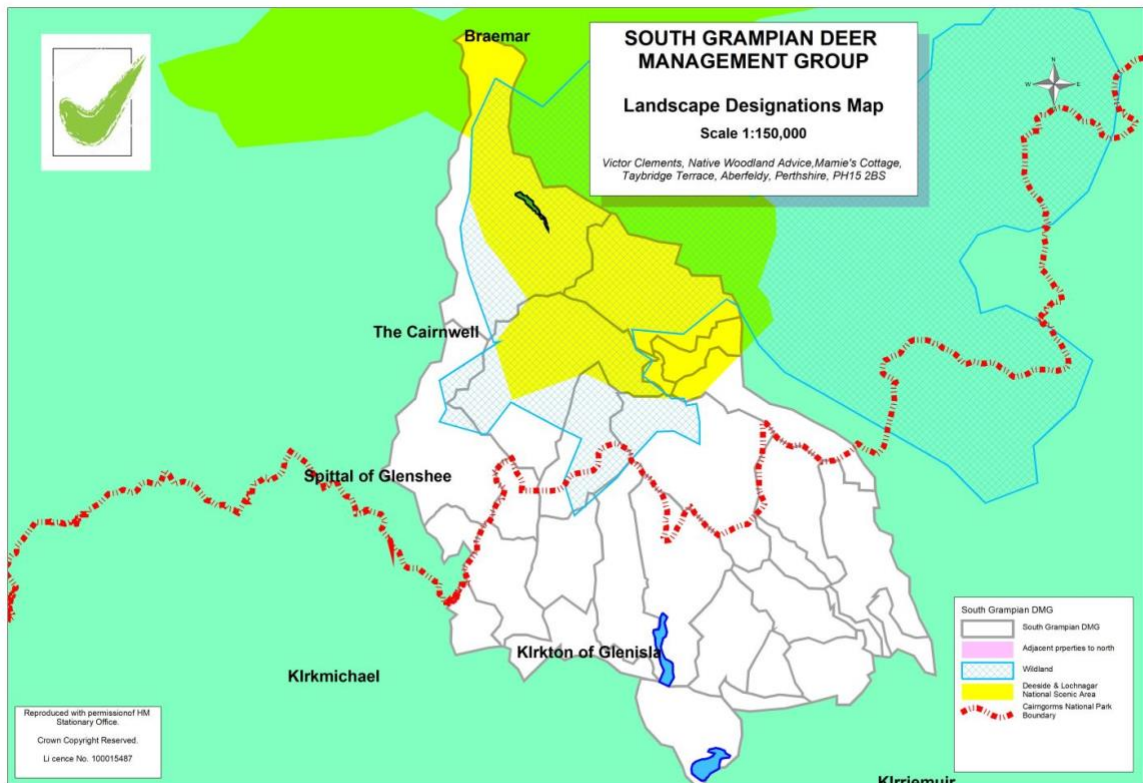
National Scenic Areas are Scotland's only national landscape designation. They are those areas of land considered of national significance on the basis of their outstanding scenic interest which must be conserved as part of the country's natural heritage. They have been selected for their characteristic features of scenery comprising a mixture of richly diverse landscapes including prominent landforms, coastline, sea and freshwater lochs, rivers, woodlands and moorlands.

There are currently 40 X NSA's in Scotland, covering a total land area of 1,020,500 ha and a marine area of 357,900 ha.

The SSSI & SAC designated sites along with the Corrie Fee NNR can be seen on the **8. SG Designated sites map**. The Caenlochan SPA incorporates the Caenlochan SSSI/ SAC area, plus an additional area extended to the north west of that site.

The area covered by the National Scenic Area, as well as the wild land area classification and the national park boundary can be seen on **9. SG Landscape Designations Map**.





A full account of all these sites, their current status and what properties are involved is given in **SG Designated Sites Information**. In addition, the spreadsheet **SG Monitoring of Designated features**, details the current known status of all the individual features, and notes those for which grazing pressure may be relevant.

Commentary

There are 47 X designated features within the South Grampian DMG area.

Of these, some 19 X features are not likely to be relevant from a grazing perspective, leaving 28 X features which could be impacted by grazing pressure.

Of these 28 features, 15 or 54% are in Unfavourable condition, several of which are declining in the assessment. An additional 4 X features are in Unfavourable condition, but are deemed to be recovering because of management in place. Only 9 features or just under a third are in favourable condition.

The proportion of designated features in Unfavourable condition is very high for a DMG area, and especially so as those features tend to be the very extensive open ground habitats that define the montane area in particular. All of these features are clustered together in the Caenlochan, Glen Callater and Garbh Choire sites. An appropriate grazing regime would benefit all three sites. Caenlochan is the site that has a national profile, but it is the combination that is important.

Administration

Nature Scot (NS, formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) are responsible for the administration of designated sites.

In the context of this plan, Graeme.Taylor@nature.scot is the wildlife management officer with primary responsibility for all matters relating directly to management of deer in the SGDMG area, and is the main contact for the Caenlochan Section 7 agreement. He is assisted by James.Irvine@nature.scot who liaises with estate staff with regards to implementation of agreed culls.

Part Two - OVERALL AIMS & OBJECTIVES

6. Long Term Vision

Members support the long term vision for deer populations and their management as laid out in *Scotland's Wild Deer – A National Approach*. Members also fully support the *Code of Practice on Deer Management*, and all work is carried out in accordance with *Best Practice Guidelines*, which continue to evolve.

- Deer populations will be managed sustainably so that their management is fully integrated with all local land uses and land use objectives.
- Such management will ensure high standards of deer welfare and public safety, and play a constructive role in the long term stewardship of local habitats.
- Local deer management will continue to deliver and further develop its positive contributions to the rural economy. Deer management and wildlife management more generally within the Group will be seen as an attractive and worthwhile occupation associated with high standards of skills and employment practice.

7. Strategic Objectives

The main objectives for the Group's deer management during the period of this Plan, are as follows, in all cases adhering to Best Practice Guidelines:-

- (i) To safeguard and promote deer welfare within the SGDMG area
- (ii) To ensure the financial viability of properties to deliver the following objectives
- (iii) To achieve an appropriate balance between deer and their habitat, and between deer and other land uses, to minimize damage to agricultural, forestry, sporting or natural heritage interests, and to provide a conflict mediation role where significant differences in management objectives arise.
- (iv) Within the constraint of (ii) and the necessary management culls associated with this, to fulfil the annual sporting and venison production objectives of individual Members. This currently amounts to some **378** stags and approx **XXXX** animals overall.
- (v) To market such activity and produce to best advantage.
- (vi) To establish up to **3500 ha** of new woodland creation within the area over 5-10 years
- (vii) To adjust local deer densities within the period of this plan, 2026-31, to facilitate extensive woodland creation and improvement in the condition of designated sites, and to facilitate an overall grazing regime that will gradually improve the overall condition of the upland open ground habitats more generally. It is anticipated that the target summer population should be some **XXXX animals**, and numbers will be maintained at this level through to 2036, subject to ongoing reviews of group objectives and regular habitat condition monitoring.
- (viii) To ensure such resources, training and monitoring capacity that is required are made available to achieve the above objectives.
- (ix) To establish a thorough and robust set of working arrangements whereby access provision can be managed within the group area, taking account of current guidelines and industry initiatives.
- (x) To facilitate the implementation of any other deer-related management agreements within the group area, and to provide a mechanism for dealing with any disputes.

- (xi) Where appropriate, to provide site specific management advice or information.
- (xii) To ensure full participation from throughout the area in the deer management group.
- (xiii) To maintain and improve local employment, be that specifically in deer management or wildlife management and agricultural activity more generally within the area.
- (xiv) To ensure that an effective system of communication is in place for the internal purpose of members, for the wider community of the area and for external agencies and other interested parties. The Group will seek to be pro-active in all their communications.

Part Three - MANAGEMENT POLICIES & INFORMATION

8. Red Deer

Red Deer Population

There have been an astonishing number of publicly funded helicopter deer counts in the general Caenlochan/ South Grampian area, with 29 X counts having taken place since the year 2000, in addition to co-ordinated DMG foot counts that have taken place in most years. Many years show both spring and summer counts. In addition to this, several estates have been conducting monthly counts on their ground to try and keep track of their own situation. They deem this to be necessary because a high proportion of deer numbers are in larger groups, and these groups are exceptionally mobile, with only occasional presence on some properties. Some analysis around this takes place later in this document.

The data is very extensive but inconsistent in that counts are at different times of year, sometimes partly through the deer cull season, and in different years, the areas counted have been different. In the latter years, the deer count is broken down in to stags, hinds and calves, but the former counts show a lot of Unclassified animals, and assumptions have to be made around those. In all cases, there is very likely to be a varying number of animals not counted, either hidden in forestry within the DMG area, or located on other properties around the periphery of the area. The dataset available is difficult to penetrate, and is in fact overwhelming when it comes to trying to abstract relevant information from it. This has undoubtedly led to much of the confusion and frustration about what has been going on at Caenlochan, and how that site relates to other parts of the DMG, and indeed to peripheral areas outwith that. In understanding Caenlochan and the wider problems within SGDMG, the sheer weight of information available is part of the problem. At the same time, properties further east in the DMG can reasonably claim to have been ignored, or treated as an afterthought to an issue that does not involve them directly.

For this reason, no attempt is going to be made here to re- analyse or present past count data, beyond the most recent two counts in 2022 and 2025.

A good analysis of past count data has already been undertaken, and we can take some essential information from that.

In June 2020, Nature Scot took editorial control of a report which was not published, but which was made available to DMG members at the time. That report set out to review and analyze deer count and habitat response data from the beginning of the Section 7 process in 2003 up to 2019, which included extensive habitat survey work in 2018. The contractor removed their name from the report, seemingly because of some of the final

recommendations edited out by Nature Scot which NS deemed went beyond the stated remit. South Grampian DMG at the time commissioned an independent consultant to look at the differences between the edited and unedited reports, with the only substantive differences being in how the final recommendations were presented. The final report is regarded as being a very substantive piece of work, and extremely useful to understanding the problems that exist today. The data analysis, while making various assumptions and caveats, is very comprehensive, and is unquestionably the best account available now. That part of the report had been accepted by Nature Scot without any changes being made, so there is no dispute about the general direction of travel over the years concerned.

The report is called:

Caenlochan Section 7 agreements: Herbivore Impact Assessments and Deer Population Assessment- Caenlochan SAC and Glen Callater SSSI- a review of monitoring undertaken and progress made over the period 2003-19.

For the purposes of this document, this report will now be referred to as the **2020 Caenlochan Review Report**, which can be located on the SGDMG website: <https://sgrampiandmg.deer-management.co.uk/deer-management-plan/>

In terms of deer populations, and mindful of the various caveats above, there are six broad periods to consider within the area, which has been defined in different ways across the years, sometimes with some properties included, and other times not. The deer densities below refer to spring time densities.

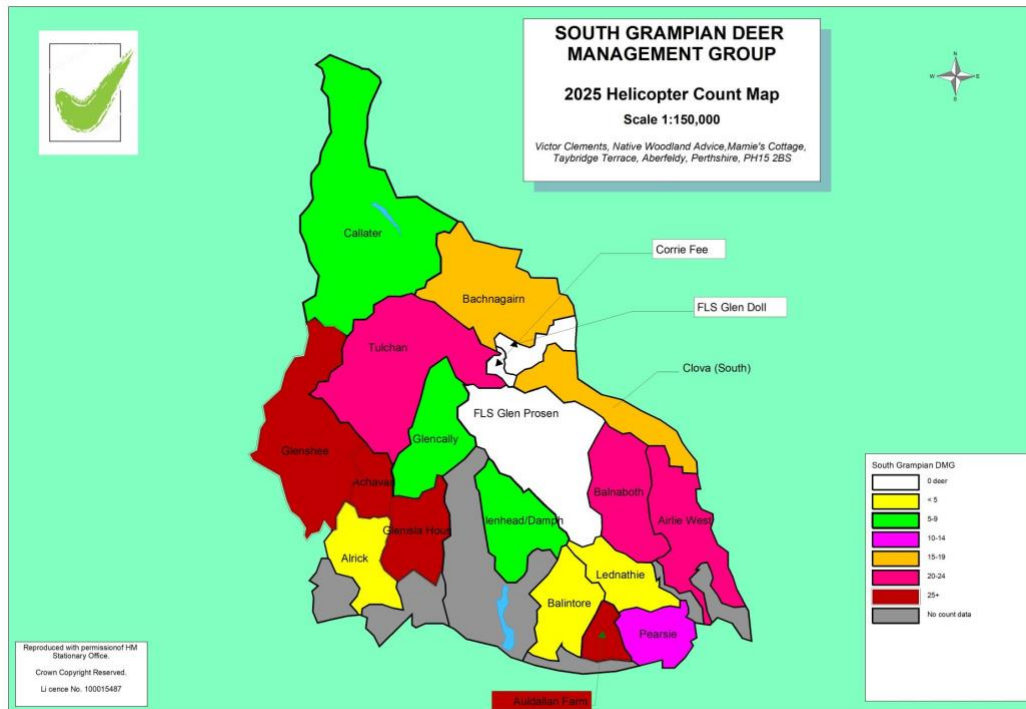
- 1 In the 1960s and 1970s, the deer population is generally accepted to have been much lower, with count densities ranging from 7-15 deer per sq km. Such counts are likely to have been an under-estimate, arising from foot counts, but there is no doubt actual numbers were significantly lower than what they were to become. However, it is evident that sheep numbers then were much higher then, and spread over almost all the hill area. That is not the situation today.
- 2 Prior to Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS) involvement at Caenlochan in 2003, the deer population had increased through to 25-30 per sq km. However, the density figures depend on what area was being counted, and at what time of year. Figures as high as 40 deer per sq km have been quoted, with a high of 44 per sq km recorded. Whatever the precise case, the numbers had grown much higher than they had been previously, and by 2003 will have been among the highest deer densities in Scotland. The latter counts will have featured helicopters for the first time, and this is very likely to have resulted in more animals being located and recorded.
- 3 The deer density was reduced through a period of very heavy management culling under Section 7 through to 2006 or so, with public agencies supplying significant resources to this exercise, but with the vast majority of culling being undertaken by estate personnel. The density at this point was 19 deer per sq km. It is probably a fair summary to say that in this period, the deer population in the area was reduced by 50 percent.
- 4 For quite a long period after this, from 2007-16, the spring density was very stable c 17-20 deer per sq km, reinforced by a DMG commissioned plan in 2014 which suggested that 19 deer per sq km was an appropriate level for such a fertile environment if measures were implemented to try and draw deer away from the more vulnerable habitats. Holding the density at this level for almost ten years has been very useful in retrospect for informing our knowledge now of what might be required going forwards.
- 5 By 2018, the deer density had increased again to 23-24 deer per sq km, with a big

South Grampian DMG

Background Information & Policies

reduction cull undertaken that year to try and resolve this. By the helicopter count in 2022, the deer population had reduced again to 18 deer per sq km.

- 6 Since then, another Section 7 agreement has been in place, with a population model to reduce numbers to 10 per sq km by spring 2026. Despite culling to this model, and overseen by Nature Scot, the population in spring 2025 was still at 16 deer per sq km. This can be seen on the **18. SG 2025 Helicopter Deer Count Map**.



The central question in this plan is to determine what density is required going forwards in different parts of the DMG area, and how to get there.

When looking back over things, it is worth noting that the 2003-6 reduction effort arguably halved the deer numbers around the Caenlochan area, albeit 19 deer per sq km was still very high, and there was an expectation at the time that environmental improvement should arise because of this. Maintaining a steady population at this level would have been seen as the right thing to do, to see what habitat response came through on the back of this. We might do something else now, looking back in retrospect, but the approach taken will have seemed logical and measured at the time. That the population was steady for almost ten years, before being taken down further, suggests that the DMG properties had the capacity and discipline to be pro-active and deliver this, and that they were willing, however reluctantly or sceptically, to respond to direction. This is important going forwards.

However, the **2020 Caenlochan Review Paper** highlighted that the 2018 habitat survey work showed no real change in habitat condition since 2008. Intervention efforts had reduced the deer numbers, but there had been no obvious response from the assessed habitats, where impacts remained very high. This conclusion will have informed the current Section 7 process that a much more significant density reduction was required.

The other factor to be aware of, is that the above account is not an accurate summary of what will have been going on in the rest of the DMG area over that period. Population data there is more sketchy, sometimes included in counts, and sometimes not. However, what we do know is that by spring 2025, deer densities in the rest of the DMG have been very

similar to the core Section 7 properties, and plans should now be made on this basis.

Overall, there were c 1700 animals more animals counted in spring 2025 than population models suggested there should be. An explanation of this is attempted later in this document.

In 2025 therefore the average red deer density on open ground across much of the DMG area is 15-16 deer per sq km. This plan will pick up on the variations within that average and will advise on what might be applicable going forwards,

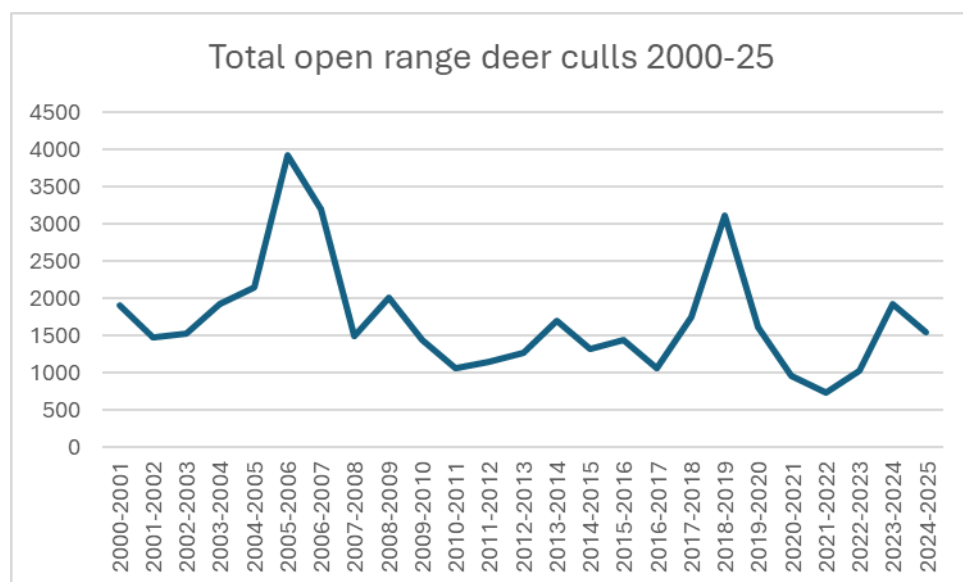
Red Deer Cull Data

For the purposes of this document, red deer cull information has been examined going back to just before the first Section 7 agreement, from 2000-1, and covering the whole DMG area.

The data supplied via statutory cull returns has been broken down in to Open Range, Woodland and Agriculture, and these 3 X categories will be looked at separately. It is very likely that the data supplied will be incomplete, but it is possible to get a feel for what activity was taking place during the period concerned. Data for roe, sika and fallow deer was also obtained.

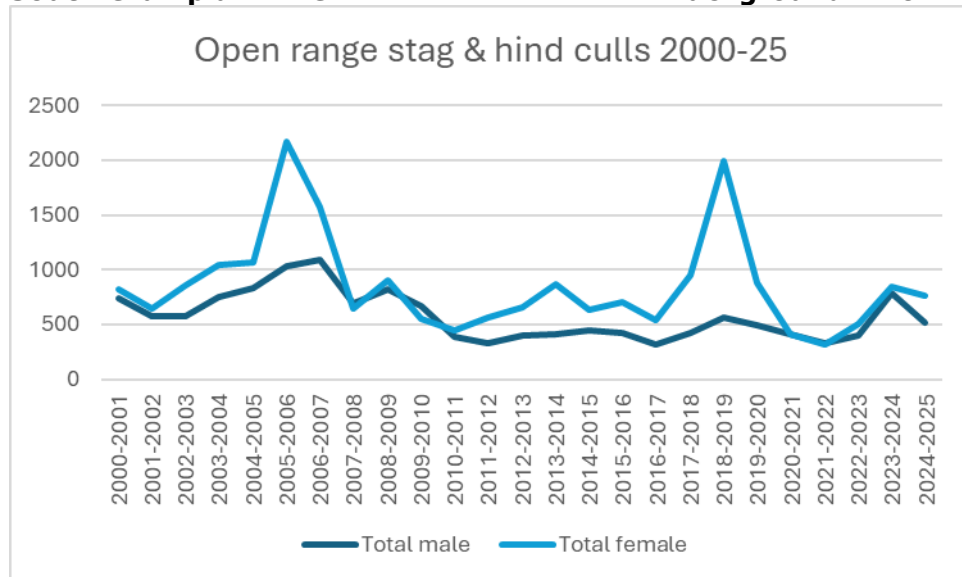
The graph below shows the total open range deer culls since 2000-1.

42,774 animals are recorded, including 14,411 stags and 21,361 hinds. 85% of the stags were culled in season, plus 95%+ of hinds.

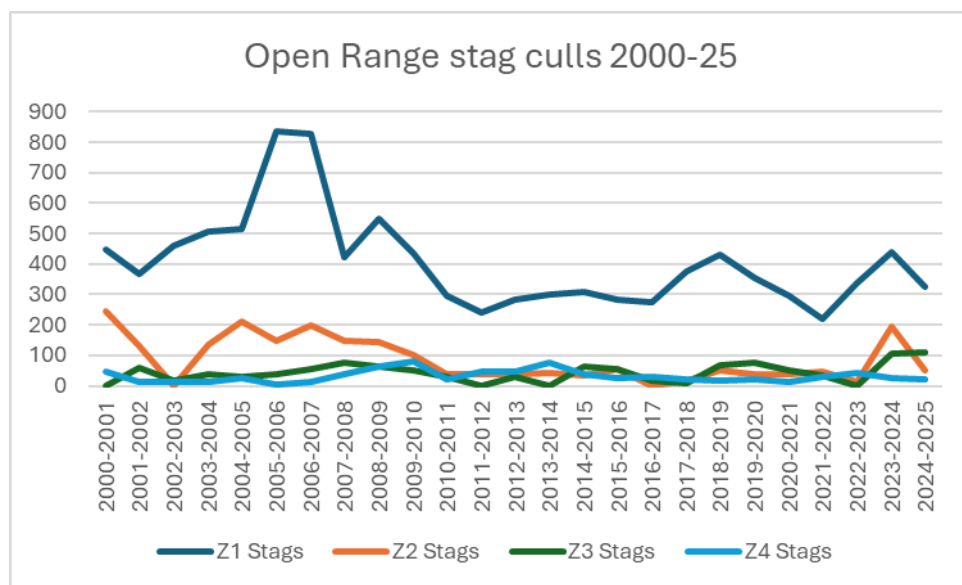


Culls overall have been declining over the period, but the context for this is a deer population that has halved over that time in the core control area at least, so that a sustainable cull in 2025 would be much lower than in 2000. There have been two large peaks in culling activity during the period, both designed to reduce populations to a much lower density.

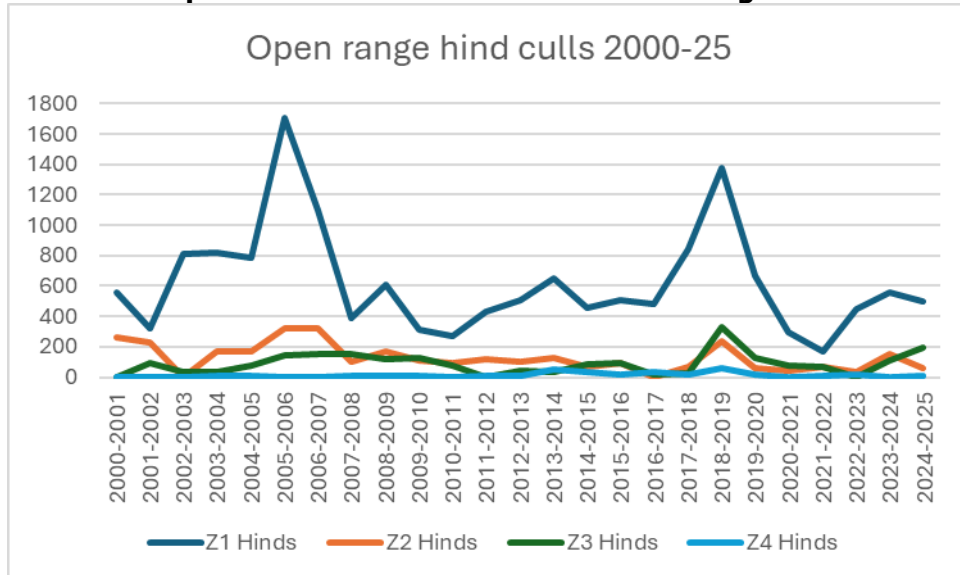
The graph below shows that it is chiefly the hind cull that created the two previous peaks, with the stag cull being more stable.



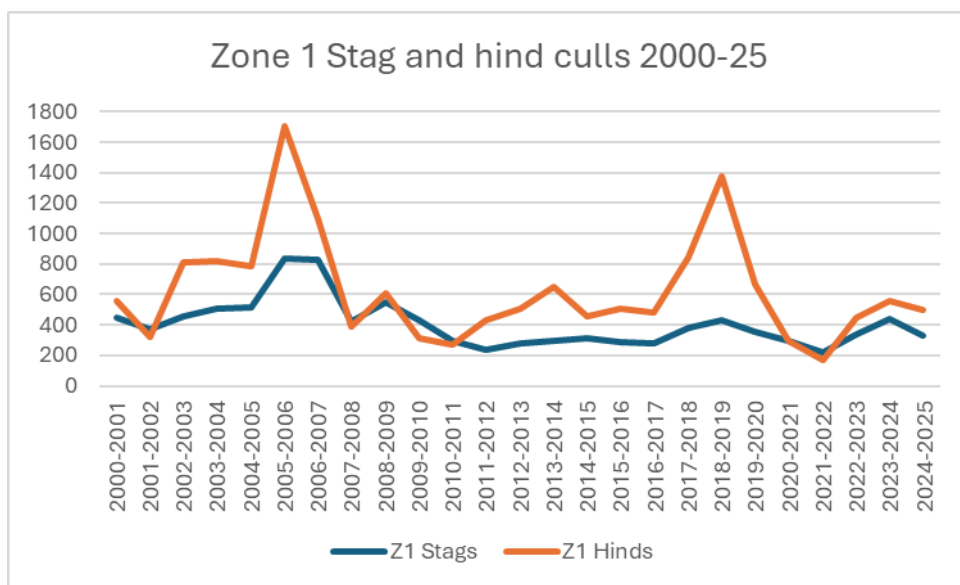
The graph below shows that it is Zone 1 contributing the vast majority of stag numbers, with only Zone 2 showing up to any significant extent among the others, and only then in some years. Zones 3 & 4 barely register in terms of overall numbers of deer culled.



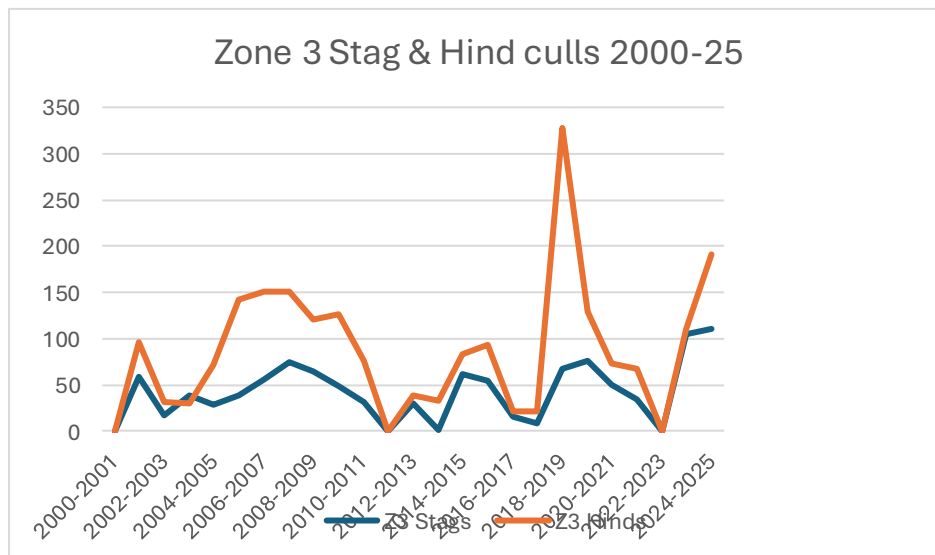
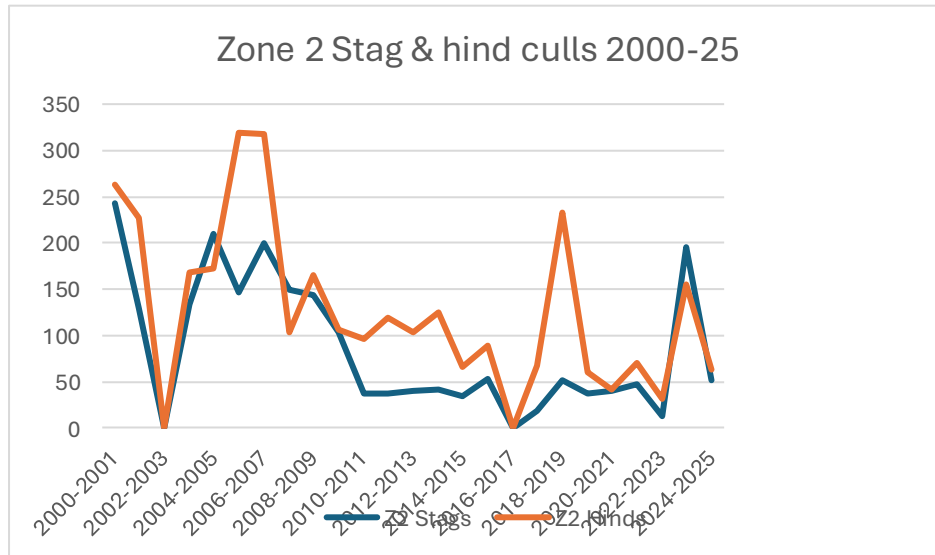
Below, Zone 1 is also contributing the vast majority of hinds, and chiefly responsible for the peaks in hind culls. Zone 3 is however a bit more prominent in recent years.



Zone 1 by itself (graph below) shows the pattern already seen above, with the other zones adding relatively little to the overall pattern or numbers over the period, at least in overall terms.

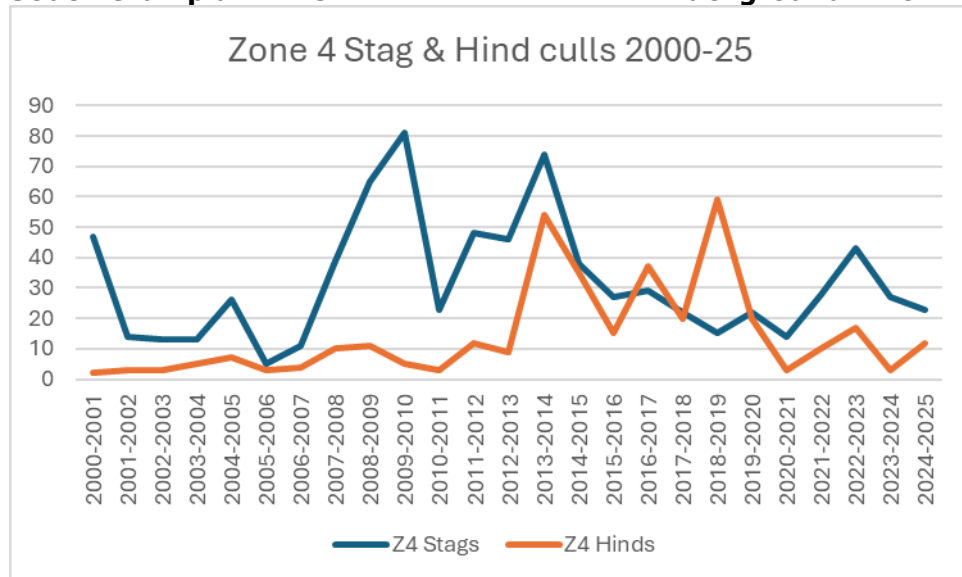


The two peaks in hind culls are discernable in the Zone 2 data, below, with hind culls being higher in most years than the stag cull. The pattern is fairly erratic between years, and the overall trend is definitely downwards.



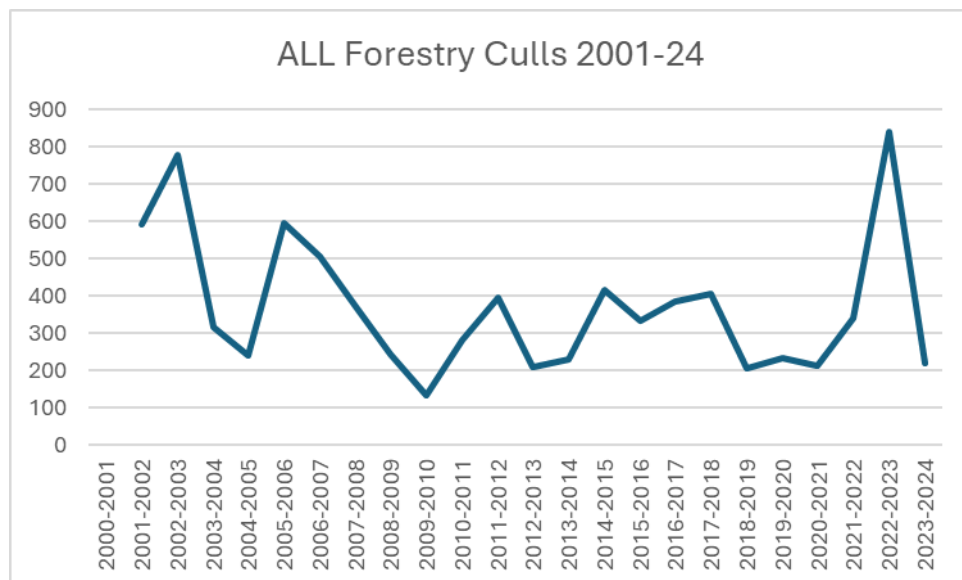
The Zone 3 culls are more significant in recent years, although it should be noted that Airlee has only been included in the data relatively recently, and the Clova data is only present for some years as well in the first half of the period. So, the graph above is likely to be somewhat misleading.

Finally, the Zone 4 figures are very erratic from year to year. Stag numbers were much more prominent in the early period, with only a minimal hind cull reported at that point. Hind culls increased to become more meaningful over the period, with stags declining. However, not all properties reported in all years, so as with above, this might not be an accurate representation of what was going on. However, the erratic cull reports suggest that there has been little focus on this area in the past.

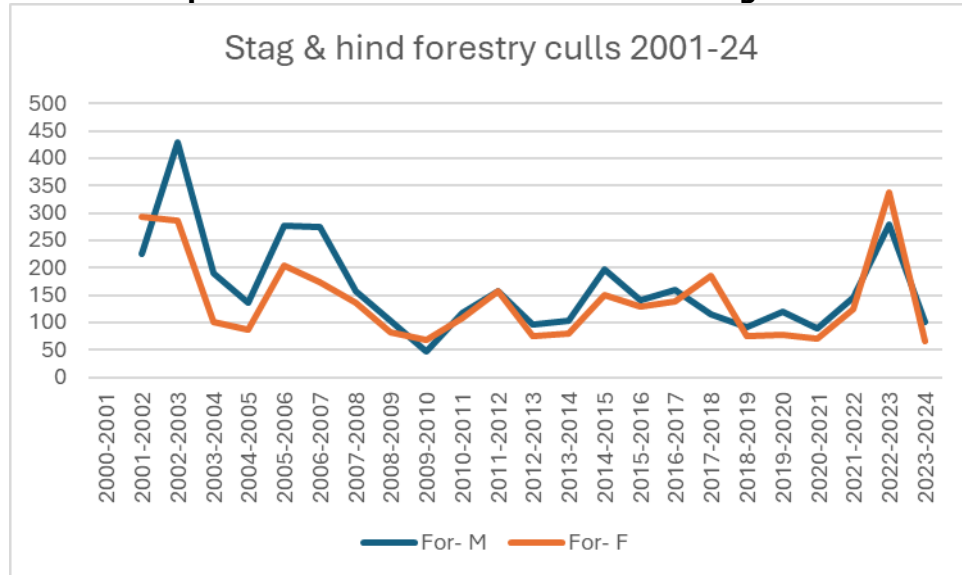


During the same period, 8,496 red deer were culled in forestry, which is quite a significant proportion of the whole. This included 3748 stags and 3207 hinds, with about 70% of these being culled on FLS land, and about 30% in woodland on the other properties, including Scottish Water.

In the first part of the period, numbers were high, falling and then remaining stable through to 2021 or so. The large peak in recent years comes mostly from increased culls on Scottish Water ground.

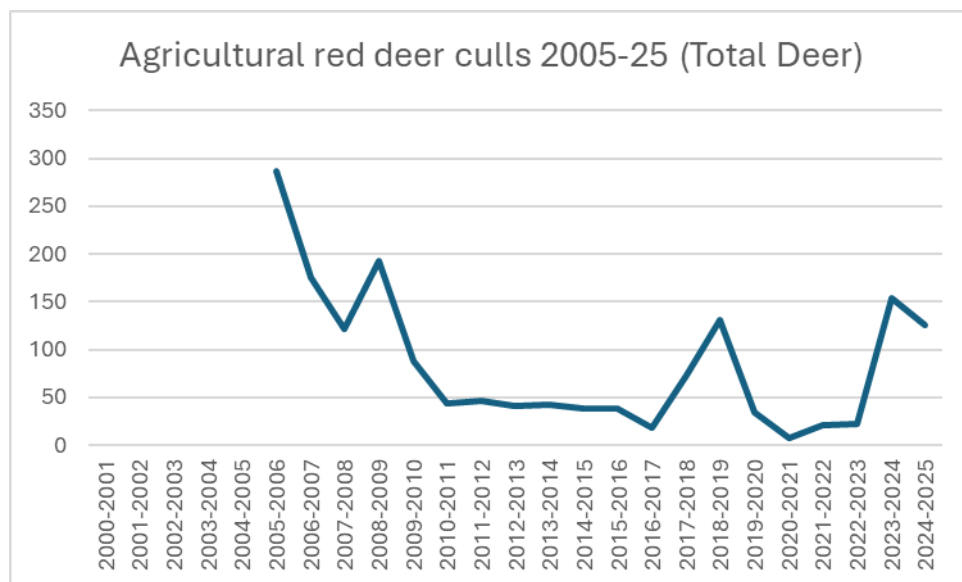


With the forestry culls, the stag and hind breakdown is almost identical in most years, especially more recently (graph below).



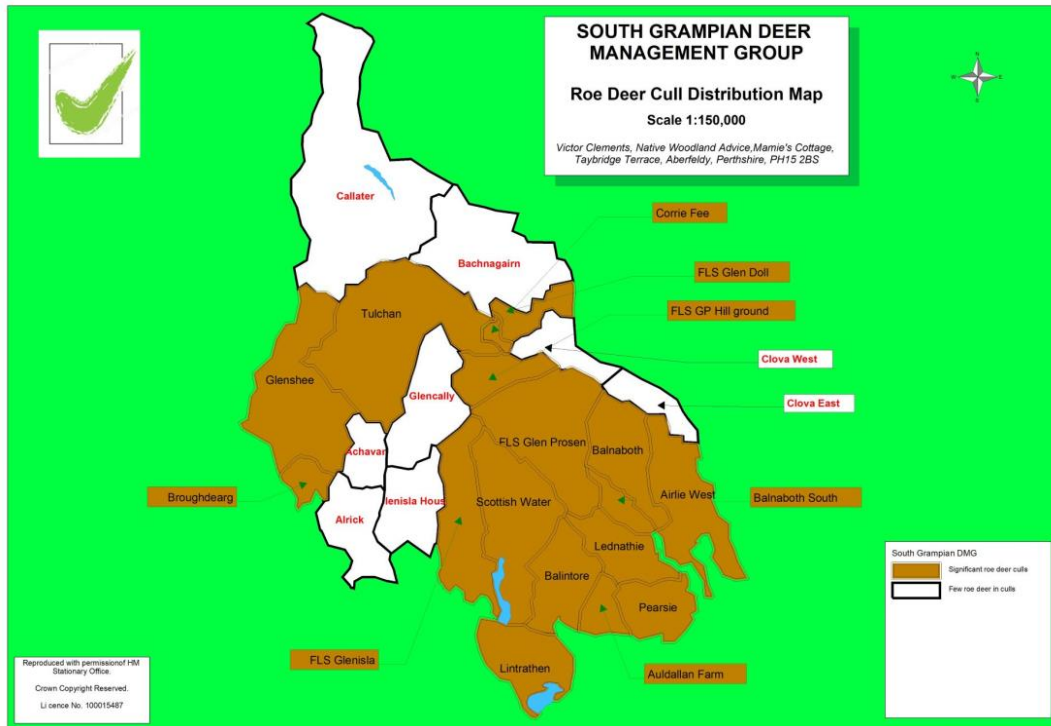
Over the period, 1735 red deer were culled for agricultural protection, which is arguably a relatively small proportion of the total. A high proportion of farmland within the area is farmed in- hand by estates and as such, it is likely that greater toleration is given to deer on farmland than might otherwise be the case. The data is available from 2005-6 only. The figures decline to very low levels by 2010-11, but with peaks again in 2018/19 and 2023/24, so it appears that deer culled for protecting agriculture may be increasing again.

The majority of deer culled are stags (1093) with approx. 70% of these culled out of season. There were a relatively small number of hinds (215- mostly culled in season), and interestingly, almost twice this number of calves (415). This implies people preferentially taking calves first to scare deer off, potentially when hinds are out of season.



Roe Deer

The data obtained confirms that roe deer have a very significant presence within the area, on open hill ground as well as in woodland. The **22.SG Roe Deer Cull distribution map** shows where significant numbers of roe deer have been regularly culled over the period. In the map below, those areas in brown have recent culls of 10+ roe annually, with many of these being well in excess of that. The other properties typically show much lower figures.



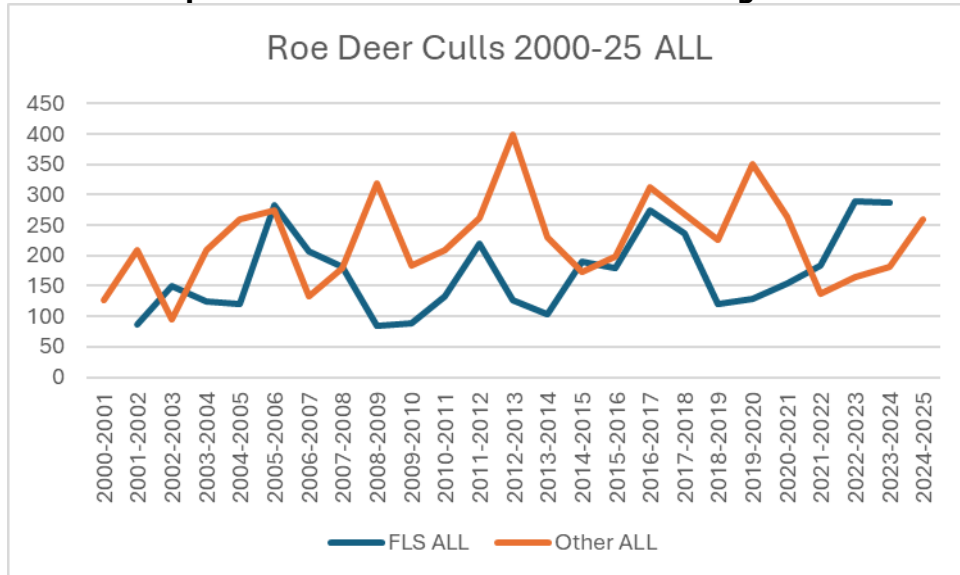
Cull levels do not equate with population, just activity. Nevertheless, the figures suggest that roe deer are a significant presence across most of the DMG area, and they may well increase in numbers, including on the open hill, as red deer numbers go down. This is a fundamentally different situation to many deer groups further west and north, where roe deer numbers are not really a consideration over most of the area

Over the 25 year period, there have been 3954 roe deer culled on FLS land, and 5634 culled on the other properties.

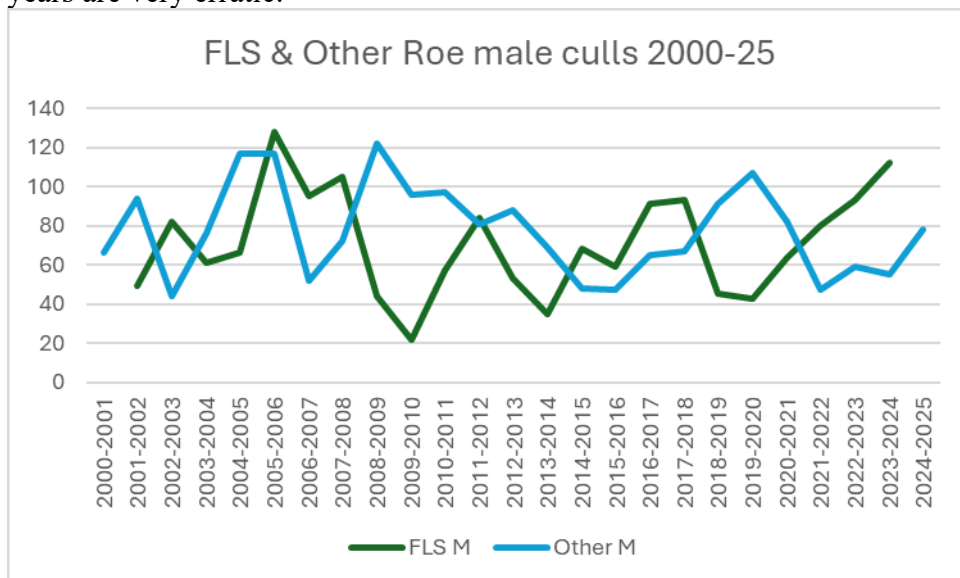
The FLS cull was split virtually 50:50 between bucks and does, with about 1/3 of bucks and 1/6 of hinds being culled out of season.

On other properties, there were more does culled (2734) than bucks (1943), with virtually all being culled in season.

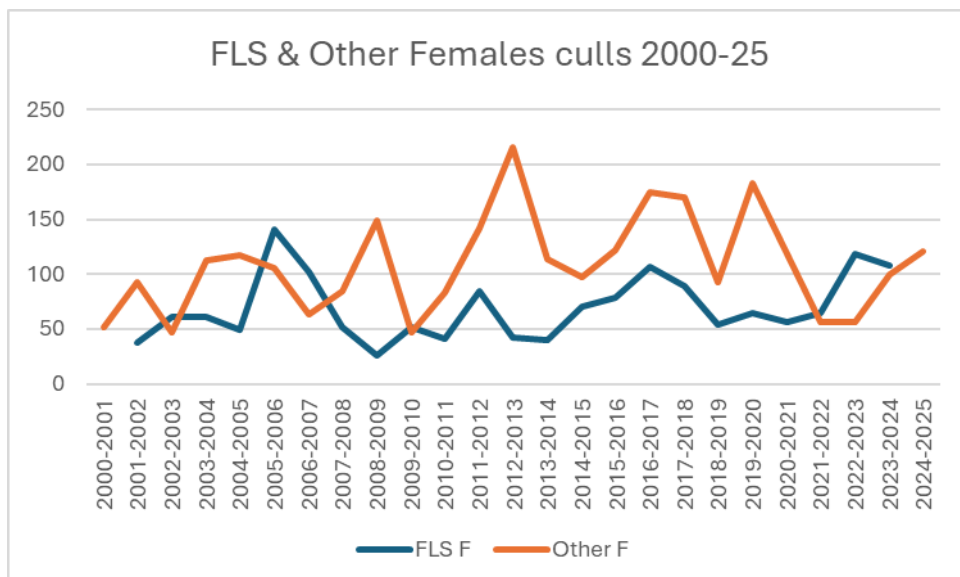
The following graph shows that roe deer culls appear to be rising over the 25 years. The cull figures appear to be very erratic, with high culls often followed by years with very few. This is very apparent in the individual estate data. For most of the period, the non- FLS cull has been above the FLS levels until the last few years.



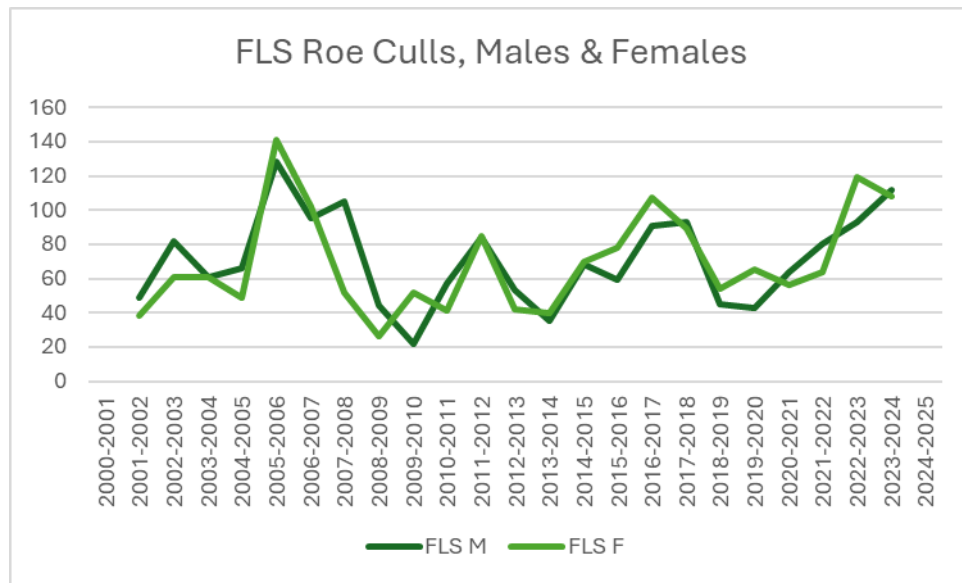
The roe buck cull appears to be very stable over the period, see below, but the culls between years are very erratic.



The roe doe cull appears to be increasing, with non- Other properties ahead of FLS. The cycle of peaks and troughs is very apparent.

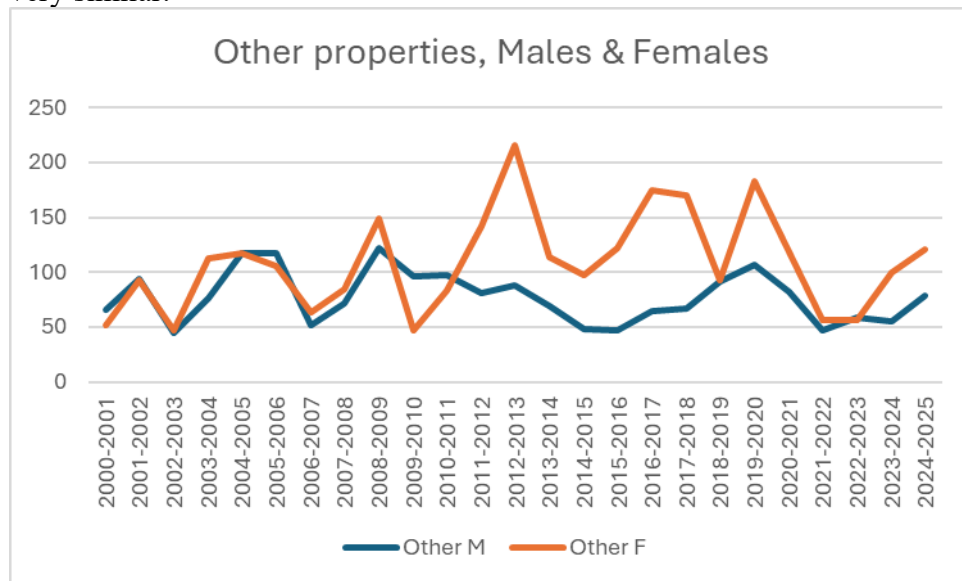


The graph below shows the 50:50 buck:doe split for FLS is apparent across the whole time period.



This graph also suggests that it is FLS that are contributing most to the increasing numbers.

The graph below shows roe buck culls on other properties to be very stable. Doe culls have often been very much higher, but cyclical, although the numbers in recent years have been very similar.



Sika Deer

There have only been 2 X sika deer culled over the 25 year period, one sika stag and one sika hind, both culled in FLS Glen Isla.

Fallow

There have been 58 animals culled over the period, with 29 stags, 21 hinds and 8 calves.

Most of these animals have been sourced from FLS Glen Isla, with a small number of animals recorded from FLS Glen Prosen, Alrick and Balintore. These records correlate very closely with accounts given by DMG members.

Red Deer Management Issues

The following issues have been identified by analysis of the questionnaires returned by SGDMG members as part of the process to update the current deer management plan, and subsequent interviews/ discussions. Commentary around these issues will form the major part of this document, with a view to trying to understand the various strands involved. Each issue is addressed in turn. Many of the issues relate directly or indirectly to Caenlochan, but a wider effort has been made to address issues within the DMG more generally so that all DMG members can be represented in this process.

- *A Group of two halves*
- *Porous boundaries*
- *Fractured membership*
- *A Group of small properties*
- *A very fertile landscape*
- *Over- grazing or not?*
- *Deer Mobility*
- *Difficulties with population modelling*
- *Difficulties with assessing recruitment*
- *The presence of other herbivores*
- *Caenlochan*
- *Perceptions and reality- What ChatGPT thinks about Caenlochan*
- *Over- analysis*
- *Failure to understand the problem*
- *Problems with planning- The Need for Stability*
- *No need for a parliamentary enquiry*
- *Cairngorms National Park Policy*
- *No plan to work to*
- *Opportunity Costs*
- *Concerns about jobs*
- *Density options going forwards*
- *What can be done about Caenlochan?*
- *Re-structuring the woodlands in Glen Doll*
- *Extensive new woodland creation schemes*
- *Agricultural damage*
- *Visitor pressure*
- *Confidence*
- *Future structure of the Deer Group*

A Group of two halves

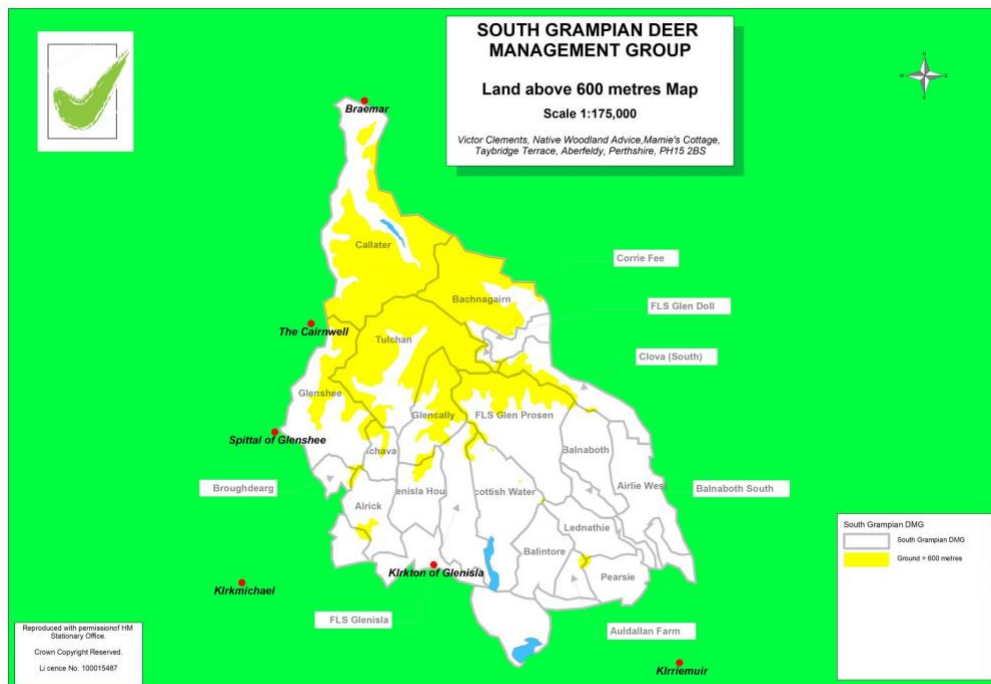
South Grampian DMG is very much a group of two halves.

To the north and west are larger properties, with much of their ground above 600 metres in the Grampian mountains. This part of the area is recognizable as an upland deer group, albeit with a range of other objectives as well. The difference with other DMG areas elsewhere in Scotland is the fertility of the underlying geology.



Bachnagairn

The map below shows the area above 600 metres in yellow.



Much of the east and south areas of the DMG are at a lower altitude, and are characterized by fertile upland farms with a high proportion of improved grassland and merging in to extensive areas of arable ground. Livestock are important, sheep and cattle. There are areas of productive forestry, low ground shooting is much more important, and most properties are involved with grouse moor management, albeit on a modest scale. Properties tend to be smaller towards the east and south of the group. The four glens of Glen Clova/ Doll, Glen Prosen, Glen Isla and Glen Shee mean that the main mountain areas are intimately connected to these fertile farming areas, and this is hugely important in understanding the dynamics within the area, the numbers of deer that are possible, and the effort required to effectively control them.



Balintore

In effect, SGDMG straddles the uplands and lowlands. In terms of deer dynamics, this is its defining feature.

Porous boundaries

Over the past 20 years or so, virtually all population modelling within the area has underestimated the numbers of deer present, confirmed by subsequent counts. While some of these deer are likely hidden within woodland in the area, it is almost certain that the boundaries of the DMG are very porous, and that deer from a wider area will be drawn in to the heart of South Grampian, especially in summer to head to the high tops. If some of these animals are then culled in the summer or autumn months, not previously having been counted in the area, then the population modelling will be wrong.

There is a story/ line recited by many DMG members that if there was only one deer left in Scotland, it would be found in Caenlochan glen. This is actually quite a useful way of articulating the pull of the high ground within the area.

Ultimately, South Grampian is a relatively small DMG area, with mobile deer herds around and beyond its periphery, many hidden in the landscape, and analysis of this situation is extremely complex and solutions difficult to implement.

While the upland DMG area is relatively easy to count and monitor, and deer management capacity there is good, it is very much more difficult understanding the surrounding area.

Fractured membership

Everyone associated with the group acknowledges that it has become very fragmented over the past 20 years. The Caenlochan issue has dominated the group to the exclusion of almost everything else.

There are two issues arising from this:

- 1 Group members towards the east and south of the DMG see little discussion or analysis of their own situation. By and large, they still participate in the group, but see little actual benefit in doing so. The Caenlochan issue which dominates meetings only has a marginal interest to them. Most will suggest that the deer group does not really work for them in any practical way.
- 2 Four properties at the heart of the Caenlochan Section 7 area are no longer DMG members. This weakens the group, and pushes the costs of administrating the DMG on to others. In fairness, with no obvious & agreed long term vision on Caenlochan, it is extremely difficult to plan future operations, and that has caused frustration and

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anger. It can be argued that the DMG has been unable to represent its membership effectively to date, and have not being able to facilitate agreement on the issues that affect them. Very extensive efforts have in fact been made to resolve the situation over the years, but without success. A lot of time and expense have went in to trying to achieve this. The DMG would say that their input has been ignored by the agencies, and this has made everything else much more difficult, effectively undermining their role in providing leadership to the group. The result of this is the current fragmentation of group membership, which makes resolution more difficult for everyone.

It is hugely important that South Grampian DMG can re-instate a robust forum for discussion of deer related and other land management issues, and that this management plan both recognizes the problems that currently exist, and makes a contribution to resolving them.

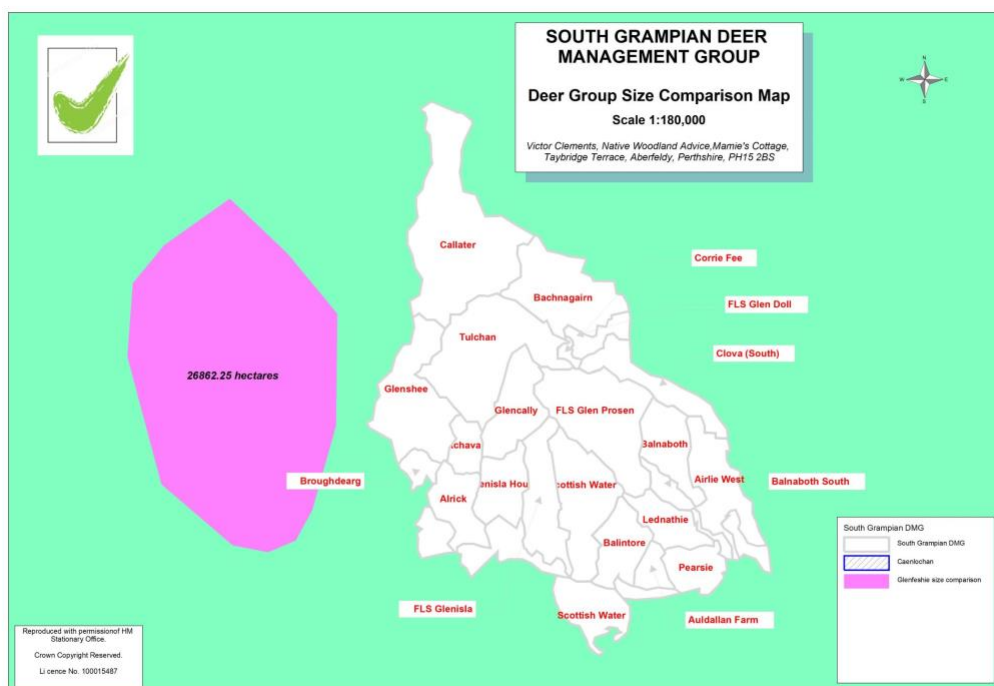
A Group of small properties

There is a strong perception that deer groups are made up of large estates, with an implication arising from this that they should be able to organize their business a lot more effectively. However, this is not an accurate characterization of South Grampian.

The 21 x properties within the DMG boundary can be summarized as follows:

Size of property	Tally
< 1000 ha	4
1-2000 ha	7
2-3000 ha	5
3000 ha +	5
Total:	21

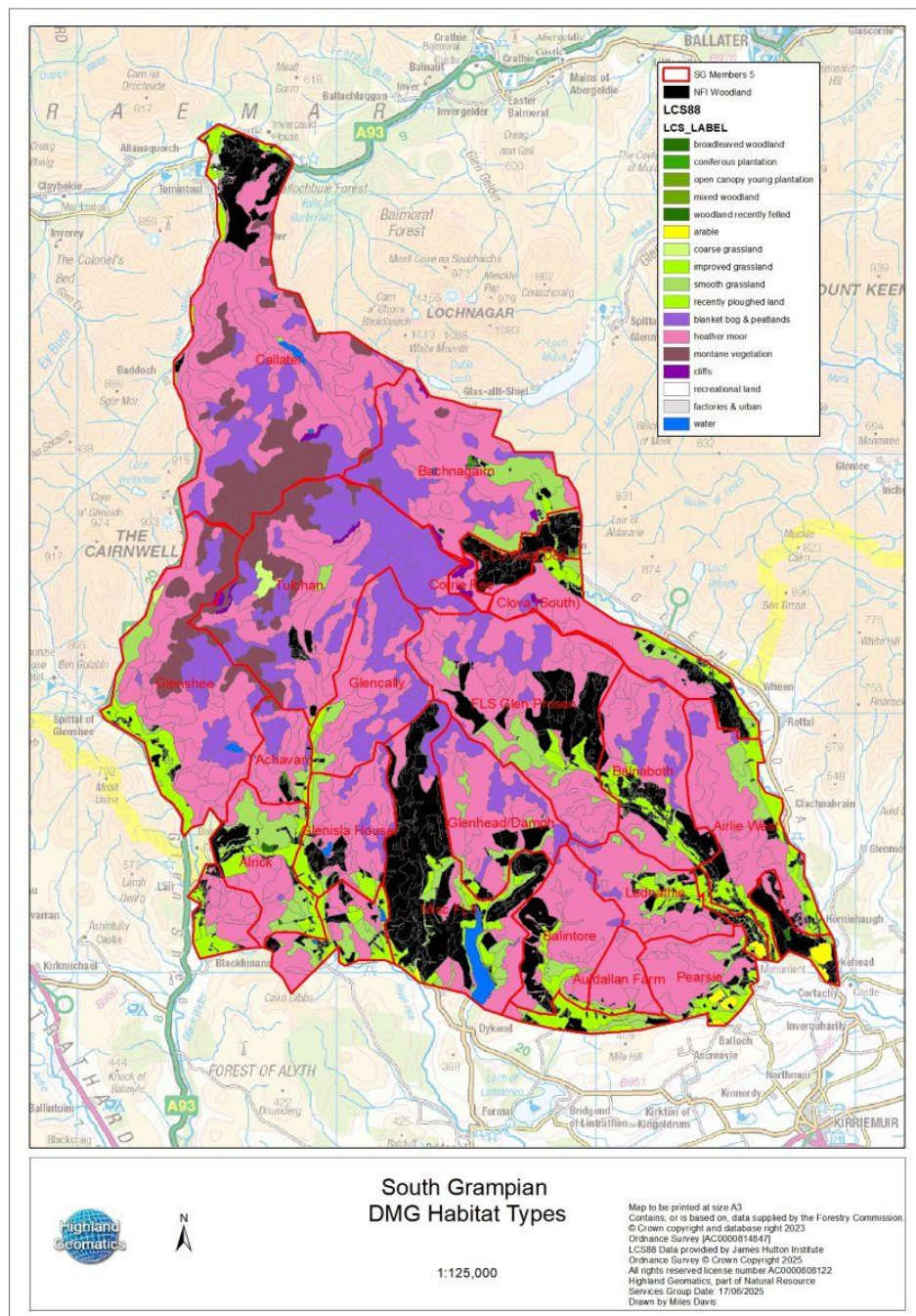
In terms of deer management, it is important to understand that this is actually a group of small properties, within which range a very mobile population of red deer. Virtually none of the DMG members are in a position to effectively manage the deer numbers within their own boundaries without reference to others, and robust collaboration is required. If group operation becomes fragmented, then this becomes much more difficult.



The pink area in the map above is the size of Glenfeshie, further north in the Cairngorms, and perhaps the estate in Scotland that is most associated with reducing deer numbers to low numbers to allow for woodland expansion. This one property, managed as a single unit, is 2/3 of the size of South Grampian DMG, with its multitude of ownership boundaries within the DMG boundary itself, not mentioning the very much more fragmented ownership pattern beyond the periphery of the group. This is an area made up largely of smaller landholdings, the majority of whom will have other management priorities, and this makes deer management all the more difficult to deliver.

A very fertile landscape

This map below shows the main habitat types within the SGDMG area. A combination of LUC88 habitat data and the latest NFI woodland dataset are used.



The black areas in the map are woodland, both native and conifer, taken from the latest NFI woodland database. The areas marked as green are improved in-bye grassland, and upland

grassland types, a proportion of which is species rich grassland. The area of upland grassland will be under-estimated on this map as it is known that a significant area of hill has been improved and sown out to grass over the last 30 years or so. However, the basic pattern is clear enough. Within the main glens of Glen Clova/Glen Doll, Glen Prosen, Glen Isla & Glen Shee, there are these improved grassland and sometimes arable areas interspersed with woodland, and these can sustain and hold both deer and sheep very close to the heather, blanket bog and montane habitats on the open hills, which are themselves very fertile, with much of the heather moorland (pink) being fairly robust against grazing. This pattern of multiple glens penetrating the main hills in an area of base rich geology is what maintains the numbers of animals present. In many respects, SGDMG is not a normal upland deer group, but one which straddles the uplands and lowlands, with the 4 X glens bringing fertile farmland accessible to deer right in to the very heart of the area.

It should also be noted that the DMG area shown is relatively porous to deer movements, and beyond the area shown above, there are extensive areas of not just improved grassland, but arable land too, and the potential food supply there is very large indeed.

The pink areas on the map are heather dominated habitats, although much of this will be a heather/ grassland mosaic, sometimes with grasses dominating over large areas. The purple areas are blanket bog, and the brown colour is the montane habitats, which are generally more sensitive to grazing.

Heavy grazing pressure over a protracted period will turn heather moorland to grass, and there is much debate and conflicting evidence over how the heather/upland grassland balance has changed over several decades. It might be expected that reduced grazing would increase the heather cover, providing more winter food supply, and making the grazing more robust overall. Anecdotal evidence from several DMG members would suggest that this is gradually happening already, and if this were true, it could be taken as a sign of environmental improvement. It is true that much of the habitat monitoring outwith designated sites shows Low/ Medium impacts on heather, but it is very difficult to judge whether there is a move from heather to grassland or vice versa across the DMG area, or whether the dynamics are different in different areas. Certainly, heather moorland in eastern Scotland is a fairly robust habitat, and will contribute significantly to the numbers of animals that can be sustained, particularly given its value as a winter food supply.

So, what is this landscape capable of grazing?

In 2017, the SRDP Farm Advisory Service (FAS) produced a very useful publication, *Technical Note TN 686: Conservation Grazing for Semi-natural Habitats*, which gives recommended grazing densities for different upland habitat types in terms of livestock units per hectare. This information note can be viewed on the DMG website as **Recommended Grazing Levels for Upland Habitat Types**. For each habitat type, the recommended grazing pressure is given as a range between upper and lower limits. The publication, quite rightly, sets out that there are a range of contexts and site conditions, and that any grazing regime should be tailored to the specific site, and monitored for impacts so that what is happening can be properly evidenced. Movement of animals across and through a landscape complicates things but nevertheless, the figures given are a very useful way of determining approximately what total level of grazing might be appropriate within a given landscape.

For SGDMG as a whole, the following table shows the area of different types of habitat, and the potential livestock units available from these. No Livestock units are allocated to the woodland area, although this will undoubtedly make a major contribution to the deer that a landscape can hold. The Misc Habitats/ No Grazing includes cliffs, built up areas, recreational ground and water.

For all habitats, the Allocated LU per ha figure is set as the middle of the recommended range. There is an argument to say that in a very fertile upland environment, these figures could be set slightly higher. The woodland area, excluded from these calculations, will undoubtedly have a grazing value as well as the shelter benefit they bring.

Habitat	Area (ha)	% of area	Allocated LU per ha	Total livestock units	% of LU
Misc Habitats/No grazing	469	1	-	-	-
Woodlands	6804	14	-	-	-
Montane habitats	3084	6	0.02	62	1
Blanket Bog	7360	15	0.02	147	2
Heather moorland	23,903	50	0.12	2868	32
Upland grassland habitats	3102	7	0.5	1508	17
Improved grassland	2908	6	1.5*	4264	48
TOTAL:	47,630	100		8,871	100

**The allocated LU for improved grassland was taken from the SAC Farm Management Handbook, and like the other figures, represents a conservative estimation.*

For the DMG as a whole, heather moorland comprises exactly 50% of the area, and supplies about one third of the potential recommended livestock units of grazing available.

The montane and blanket bog habitats comprise 21% of the area of the DMG, but represent only 3% of the potential recommended grazing.

Conversely, the upland grassland habitats and improved grassland comprise only 13% of the area, but can potentially supply 65% or nearly two thirds of the recommended livestock units of grazing. The improved grassland areas in particular supply almost half of the available grazing within the DMG, from only 6 % of the area.

The problem for managing the overall hill environment within South Grampian is that habitats which can arguably withstand current herbivore pressure supply 97% of the potential livestock units of grazing, but these animals can drift to the tops of the mountains in summer, where only 3% of the available grazing is located, on 21% of the area. This area then becomes over grazed, with the other habitats potentially becoming undergrazed during the summer months, and this too can reduce biodiversity within the ground vegetation there. The habitat monitoring information that is available shows the montane areas being very heavily over grazed with little ambiguity about that, but low or medium impacts on the heather moorland and upland grassland habitats, and only relatively modest numbers of deer being culled out of season for agricultural protection.

This is the essential issue that needs to be understood at the heart of this area, and it is a circle that is physically not possible to square. Additional commentary is provided below looking at the total grazing pressure (deer, sheep, cattle, hares) on a property by property

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and then zonal basis, and comparing this to the grazing potentially available. The analysis shows only 49% of the available livestock units being taken up. South Grampian as a whole is not being overgrazed. The issue is that the grazing levels sustained by 79% of the area which is relatively robust are damaging to the 21% of the area that is much less robust, and these areas are located in very close proximity to one another.

If the 8871 livestock units of grazing was to be taken up by deer alone, one deer being 0.3 LU, this would amount to 29,570 animals, or 73 deer per sq km. Clearly, sheep and cattle are grazed as well, and these will be added in to calculations in due course, but these figures show the fertility of this landscape, and this is the reality that needs to be addressed or taken account of when trying to put together a realistic plan going forwards. It is the close proximity of the improved grassland areas that have the biggest impact on the overall dynamics.

It is only one part of the South Grampian landscape that is being over grazed, and this driven by the fertility and productive capacity of the rest. It is however that productive capacity that provides income and jobs, and there is therefore an opportunity cost to be considered if overall grazing levels were to be reduced well below their current levels.

The potential grazing areas are now considered within the 4 X zones separately:

Zone 1

Habitat type	Area (ha)	% of area	Livestock Units available	% of livestock units
Montane	3084	12	62	1
Blanket bog	5778	23	115	3
Heather Moorland	13,665	53	1577	38
Upland grassland	2697	6	798	19
Improved grassland	1337	5	1619	39
Total:	25,561		4170	
% of DMG grazing area/ LUs available	54%		47%	

In addition to the habitats above, there are 1952 ha of woodland within Zone 1, but it is likely that deer are excluded from most of this.

Zone 1 is the only area with any significant amount of montane habitat, and this includes the important designated habitats that have defined the DMG over many years. These represent only 1% of the potential grazing within the area and yet in summer, a significant proportion of the deer population in Zone 1 will be residing in that area. Improved grassland and heather moorland provide 77% of the available grazing, split almost 50:50, with upland grasslands also providing a significant contribution. Zone 1 shows a very similar pattern to the DMG as a whole.

Zone 1 provides just over half of the total grazing area within the group, and just under half of the potential recommended livestock units.

Blanket bog comprises almost a quarter of the total open ground area, which is very significant in terms of overall biodiversity/ conservation interest.

Zone 2

Zone 2 is the most heavily wooded part of the DMG, with 3231 ha present. It is likely that deer will have access to a significant proportion of this, and this woodland area may well be a key factor in both hiding deer numbers, and holding them at the heart of the DMG area.

There is no montane habitat recorded within Zone 2.

Habitat type	Area (ha)	% of area	Livestock Units available	% of livestock units
Montane	0	0	0	0
Blanket bog	1079	17	22	1
Heather Moorland	4229	65	507	33
Upland grassland	772	12	386	25
Improved grassland	427	6	624	40
Total:	6505		1538	
% of DMG area/ LUs available	14%		17%	

In terms of the grazing provided by other habitats, 40 percent is supported by improved grassland, with the other proportions being similar to Zone 1.

Overall. Zone 2 provides 14% of the open range grazing area, and 17% of the potential available livestock units of grazing. However, the woodland area is very significant, and will undoubtedly both support and retain deer at the heart of the overall DMG area. It is possible that a proportion of these animals will find their way up on to the high ground in Zone 1.

Zone 3

There are 1062 ha of woodland in Zone 3, with potentially the majority of this being open to deer, and providing feeding as well as shelter.

There is no montane vegetation recorded, and the % of blanket bog is much less than the previous two zones.

Habitat type	Area (ha)	% of area	Livestock Units available	% of livestock units
Montane	0	0	0	0
Blanket bog	434	8	9	0
Heather Moorland	3679	68	379	20
Upland grassland	402	7	171	9
Improved grassland	910	17	1365	71
Total:	5425		1923	
% of DMG area/ LUs available	11%		22%	

Within Zone 3, the vast majority of the available grazing (71%) is provided by the improved grassland areas. It is unlikely that deer from Zone 3 could find their way through to the montane areas in Zone 1.

Zone 3 provides just 11% of the available grazing area, but 22% of the potential grazing units.

Zone 4

There are 525 ha of woodland in Zone 4, with this area split between woods open to deer and woods enclosed to deer.

There is no montane vegetation within the area, and the proportion of blanket bog is very small.

Just over half of the potential available grazing units are provided by improved grassland, with lesser proportions being supported by heather moorland and upland grasslands.

Habitat type	Area (ha)	% of area	Livestock Units available	% of livestock units
Montane	0	0	0	0
Blanket bog	116	3	2	0
Heather Moorland	3351	78	402	33
Upland grassland	352	8	176	14
Improved grassland	491	11	656	53
Total:	4311		1237	
% of DMG area/ LUs available	9%		14%	

Zone 4 contains 9% of the available grazing area, and 14% of the available grazing units. It is very unlikely that deer from this area will find their way through to the montane areas of Zone 1.

Over- grazing or not?

This next section details what grazing pressure currently exists, and how that relates to what is potentially available. Analysis is provided at an individual property level, the zonal level, and the DMG as a whole. For reasons of confidentiality, information is provided in such a way that sheep or cattle numbers cannot be determined for individual properties.

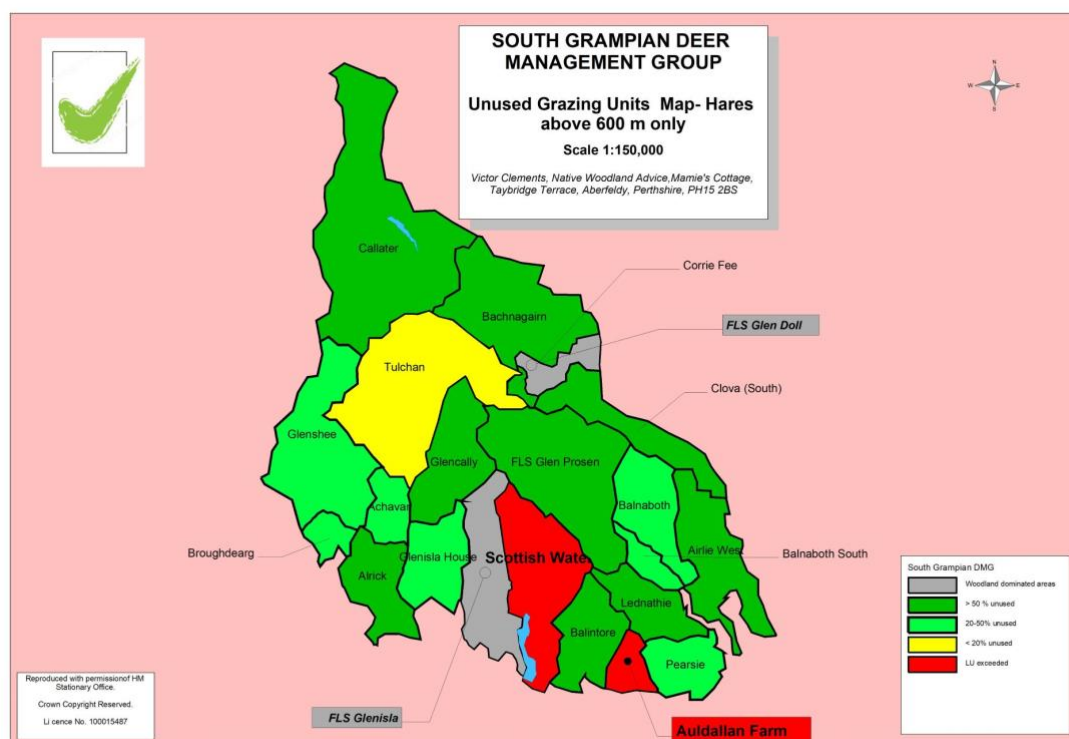
Potential herbivores are quantified in terms of livestock units, as set out in this table below. The figures shown are consistent with those used by the agricultural colleges and others, and consistent with the technical paper referenced above. Although roe deer are likely to be present in significant numbers within the DMG, there is no information on actual numbers or densities, and they are therefore omitted from calculations.

Herbivore	Allocated livestock units (LU)
Cattle	1.0
Sheep	0.15
Deer	0.3
Hares	0.02

The table below shows the Livestock Units of grazing potentially available within the DMG, and split up between each of the 4 X zones. There then follows an account of the actual LUs present in 2025, with the difference then noted, and any under utilization noted as a proportion of what is available.

	Total DMG	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4
Total LU available	8871	4270	1538	1755	1237
Actual LU in 2025					
Deer	2028	1476	64	396	171
Sheep		645	375	390	503
Cattle		100	0	30	0
Hares	343	225	53	41	35
TOTAL:		2401	492	857	709
Available- Actual		1869	1046	898	528
% of LU Unused		44	68	51	43

The maps below show the balance of recommended vs actual grazing pressure on individual properties. Each property is placed in a band, so that sheep numbers cannot be determined, although the third map shows where hill sheep are present.



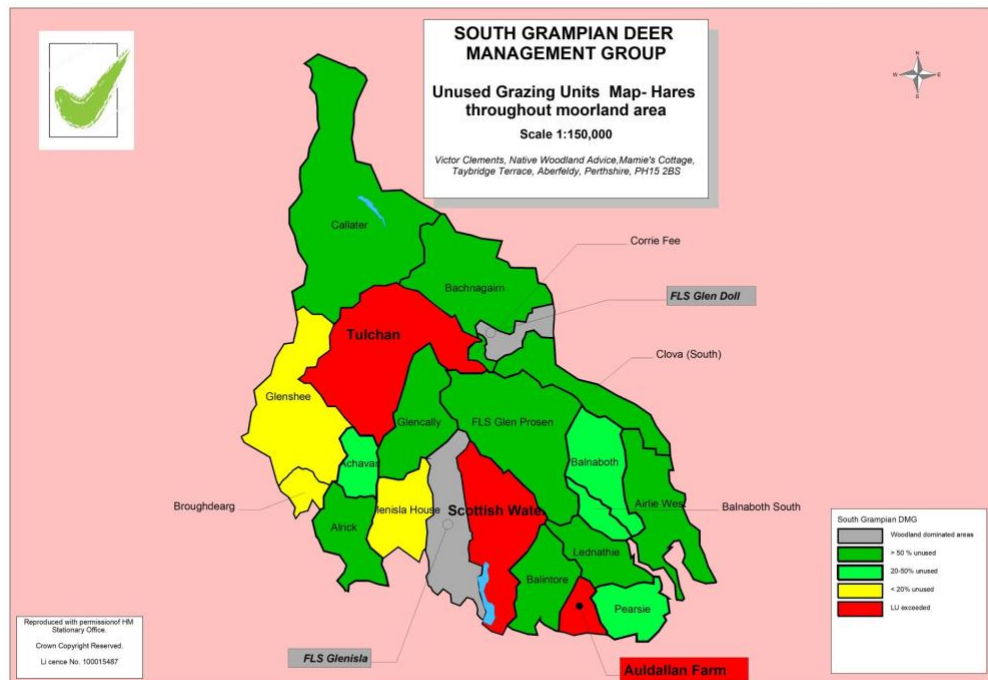
The dark green colour in the above map shows properties where > 50% of available grazing is not taken up, the lighter green colour shows 20-50% of available not taken up, and the yellow colour < 20%. The two red areas indicate where grazing appears to be higher than recommended for the range of habitats present. In the case of Auldallan, that appears to be

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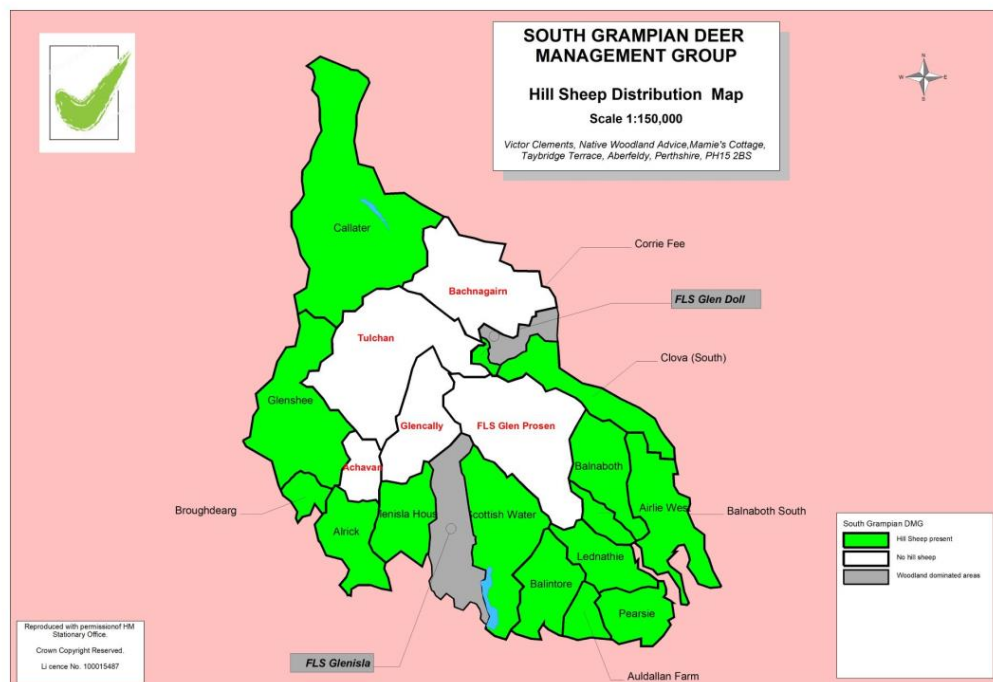
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because a large number of deer just happened to be on them on count day. The Scottish Water property is because of the number of sheep present.

The above map attributes 50 hares per sq km to the montane zone only. The map below shows the impact of attributing hares to the whole of the moorland and montane areas,



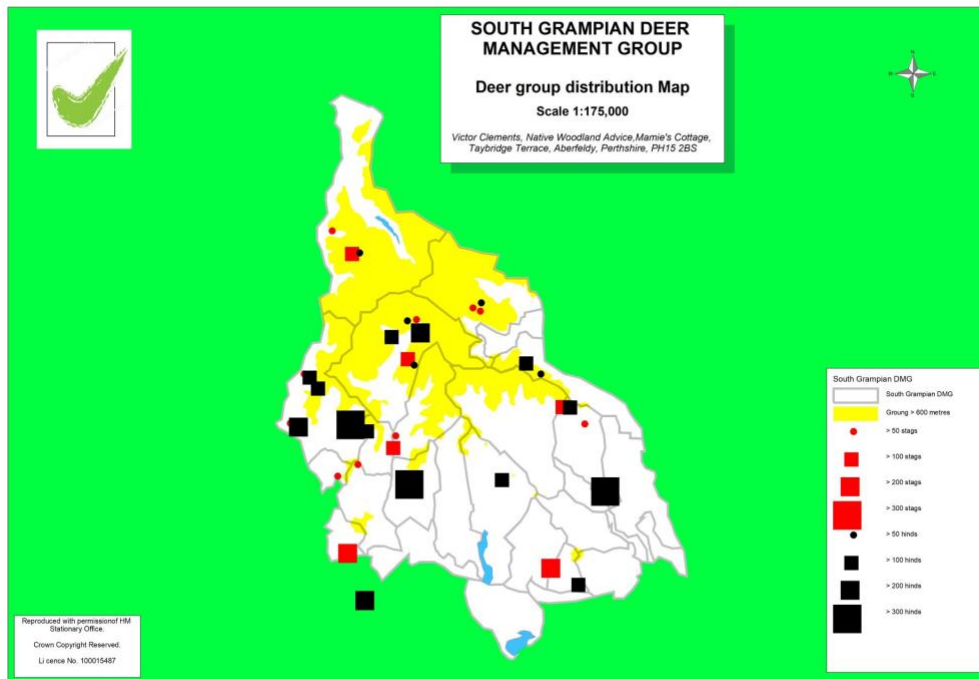
This analysis makes a significant difference to Tulchan and Glenshee, with Tulchan now appearing to be overgrazed in terms of the range of habitats available. It demonstrates how hares are significant enough to make a difference to any analysis, and that the assumptions made when looking at data can have a significant impact on the outcome.



Finally, the map above shows that hill sheep are well distributed throughout much of the DMG area, except for the area at the top of Glenisla, and Glen Prosen which has been largely cleared of sheep in the last few years.

Deer Mobility

Deer managers and others familiar with the area consistently listed deer mobility as the single most important issue within the area, something that many estates struggled to cope with in that deer could cross ownership boundaries quickly and frustrate their efforts to try and control numbers. The map below was taken from the 2025 helicopter count map for the area. Red denotes stag numbers, and black denotes hinds. The small circles denote more than 50 deer in a 1 km square. The small squares denote more than 100 deer, the medium squares more than 200 and the largest squares denote more than 300 animals. There are 3 x black squares around the south of the area denoting more than 300 hinds. These animals are moving around in a very fertile landscape, characterized by relatively small, mixed landholdings.



There is even a group of 200 hinds identified to the south of the DMG in an area of fertile farmland. It is likely that many other such groups exist outwith the DMG boundaries as well.

The 2025 helicopter deer count map was very striking for the small proportion of 1 km squares that had any deer in them.

To emphasize this point, South Grampian DMG was compared with the Mid West DMG, also counted in 2025. The eastern part of that group was a similar size to South Grampian, had a similar count of deer, and both had an average density of c 15 deer per sq km overall. The topography of both areas was also broadly similar, although South Grampian is inherently more fertile. The Mid West DMG count map was much more typical of what other count maps throughout the Highlands might look like.

The following table sets out a broad comparison between the two areas:

Deer number per sq km	South Grampian	South Grampian	Mid West	Mid West
% empty 1 km squares	82%		58%	
	% squares	% deer	% squares	% deer
1-6 deer	16	1	19	2
7- 19 deer	20	4	32	11
20-99 deer	40	23	42	51
100+ deer	24	72	9	36
	100	100	100	100

Although in both areas a minority of 1 km squares are occupied by deer, for South Grampian, it was only 18%.

The figures show that for South Grampian, 72% of deer were counted in squares with over 100 deer present, twice the proportion of the Mid West DMG which is more typical of the deer distribution in other DMG areas. This relatively high deer density, made up of large groups but occupying only a very small part of the range at any one time puts South Grampian at the extreme end of the spectrum. It is a genuine problem, which makes deer management very difficult.

The following table gives some further details on the proportion of deer in squares of varying deer density:

No of deer in 1 km square	% of total deer
➤ 100 deer	72
➤ 200 deer	52
➤ 300 deer	34
➤ 400 deer	25

Just over half of all deer are in groups of over 200, just over a third in groups over 300, and a quarter in groups over 400. The largest group was 459 animals, comprised mostly of hinds, and located at the eastern edge of the DMG.

By comparison, for the Mid West DMG, only 6% of deer were located in squares with > 200 deer (just one square), and there were no deer > 400 animals.

In addition to large groups of deer being difficult to control, they can potentially cause a great deal of trampling damage, both in grassland and agricultural crops, as well as to upland habitats, particularly blanket bog and montane habitats, and of course, to fences, stone walls and the sides of watercourses as well.

Red deer congregate in to large herds for protection/ defence as a result of sustained disturbance over a long period of time. In South Grampian, that disturbance will have arisen from both public access pressure and large scale culling pressure, and the deer have simply reacted to this by changing their behaviour. Visitors to the area often see big herds of

animals, and pass comment on these. What they do not pass comment on is the large areas with no deer present at all, their numbers having been concentrated in to these large herds, occupying a small proportion of the range at any one time.

Difficulties with population modelling

Over the past twenty years or so, publicly funded helicopter deer counts have often revealed numbers of animals above what was projected, and this has often led to confusion and frustration by all involved.

In principle, population modelling of deer is a very useful discipline, and even if numbers subsequently counted are different to those modelled, the difference often throws some light on the dynamics involved in causing that.

In theory, in a relatively closed or discreet deer population bounded by topography, roads, rivers or whatever, the only way animals can enter the population is by being born in to it, and this can be quantified in terms of a recruitment count. In theory, the only way an animal can leave a population is either through being culled, or through natural mortality. These variables can also be quantified, and guide cull levels can be set to try and give a target density at some point in the future, typically within five years or so.

Immigration or emigration, which can be temporary, seasonal or permanent, complicate the picture, and it is also the case that animals hidden or not counted in an area will skew any modelling. However, even if your modelling proves to be well out, a better understanding of what is going on can be taken from this, and your model then adjusted for the next period ahead.

The ideal situation to study as an example is the current population situation within South Grampian. Nature Scot organized helicopter counts of the Caenlochan Section 7 area in 2022 and again in 2025, just three years apart. This provides an excellent opportunity to model from one year to the next, and then compare the difference between the newly counted and projected populations.

Both these counts were considered to have been conducted well, and Nature Scot advised on the necessary deer culls for each of the 3 X years involved under the current Section 7 agreement. The required culls were delivered by DMG stalkers in each of the three years, with the intention of reducing the population to 10 per sq km. However, the outcome was not as expected.

Model 1 Nature Scot Model

	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Overall Density (at ~335km²)
2022 Count (March)	2375	2875	599	5849	17.5
Estimated Post-count Cull	10	0	0	10	
2022 Population Post Cull	2365	2875	599	5839	
2022 Mortality	47	29	30	106	

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2022 Population Pre Calving	2318	2846	569	5733	17.1
2022 Population Post Calving	2602	3131	1252	6985	20.9
2022/2023 Cull Scenario	535	768	228	1531	
2023 Population Post Cull	2067	2363	1024	5454	
2023 Mortality	41	24	51	116	
2023 Population Pre Calving	2026	2339	973	5338	15.9
2023 Population Post Calving	2512	2826	1017	6355	19.0
2023/2024 Cull Scenario	791	860	322	1973	
2024 Population Post Cull	1721	1966	695	4382	
2024 Mortality Post Cull	34	20	35	89	
2024 Population Pre Calving	1687	1946	660	4294	12.8
2024 Population Post Calving	2017	2276	911	5204	15.5
2024/2025 Cull Scenario	670	785	295	1750	
2025 Population Post Cull	1347	1491	616	3454	
2025 Mortality Post Cull	27	15	31	73	
2025 Population Pre Calving	1320	1476	585	3381	10.1
2025 COUNT	2032	2405	690	5127	15.3
DIFFERENCE	712	929	105	1746	5

The above model should have delivered a deer density of 10.1 deer per sq km within the Section 7 area by spring 2025. The model and associated culls were guided by Nature Scot with no other input or involvement by other parties, and the culls delivered as requested. The difference between projected and counted after just three years was 1745 animals, or the equivalent of 5 deer per sq km over the whole area. The difference for hinds was particularly significant at 929 animals.

Given that the two counts were conducted and verified well with the best technology available at the time, and with culls overseen by Nature Scot, the obvious explanation would be that deer have either moved in to the area, or were hidden at the time of the 2022 count. It may also be the case that some deer normally resident in 2022 were temporarily outwith the DMG boundaries on that count. Given that parts of the DMG area are well wooded, and the deer population within the area is regarded as being exceptionally mobile, then any one of these explanations or a combination of them is entirely credible, particularly if recruitment has been underestimated as well. However, recruitment in itself cannot explain the difference observed. Movement or undercounting is required to explain the difference.

In the following model, the 2022 count has been adjusted retrospectively to try and remove the difference from the counted population in 2025. It is not possible to reconcile the calf numbers as the recruitment rate was lower in 2025 than 2022. So, this model just reconciles the stag and hind numbers.

Model 2 ATEMPTED RECONCILIATION					
	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Overall Density (at ~335km ²)
2022 Count (Reconciled)	2528	3233	1293	7054	21.1
Estimated Post-count Cull	10	0	0	10	
2022 Population Post Cull	2518	3233	1293	7044	
2022 Mortality	50	32	65	147	
2022 Population Pre Calving	2468	3201	1229	6897	20.6
2022 Population Post Calving	3082	3815	1526	8423	25.1
2022/2023 Cull Scenario	535	768	228	1531	
2023 Population Post Cull	2547	3047	1298	6892	
2023 Mortality	51	30	65	146	
2023 Population Pre Calving	2496	3016	1233	6746	20.1
2023 Population Post Calving	3113	3633	1308	8053	24.0
2023/2024 Cull Scenario	791	860	322	1973	
2024 Population Post Cull	2322	2773	986	6080	
2024 Mortality Post Cull	46	28	49	123	
2024 Population Pre Calving	2275	2745	937	5957	17.8
2024 Population Post Calving	2743	3214	1285	7242	21.6
2024/2025 Cull Scenario	670	785	295	1750	
2025 Population Post Cull	2073	2429	990	5492	
2025 Mortality Post Cull	41	24	50	115	
2025 Population Pre Calving	2032	2404	941	5377	16.1
2025 COUNT	2032	2405	690	5127	15.3
DIFFERENCE	0	1	-251	-250	-1

The table below illustrates the additional animals that would have needed to have been counted in 2022 to align with the count achieved in 2025.

RECONCILIATION	Stags	Hinds
2022 Count (Reconciled)	2528	3233
2022 Count (March)	2375	2875
DIFFERENCE	153	358

The 153 difference in stags is a 6% increase, and the 358 hinds represents an 12% increase. These are very modest figures, within the range of error that might be expected in a count.

The retrospective modelling suggests that a relatively small difference in animals in 2022 can deliver the additional 1745 animals counted by 2025, with three years of compounded recruitment. There is no great mystery in why deer counts consistently show greater numbers than projected. It is simply that for one reason or another, some deer miss being counted. The order of magnitude is no greater than most other DMG areas. The only caveat to this would be if a similar % of deer were missed in 2025, on top of the population counted, in which case the 6 & 12% figures would need to be higher.

For models going forwards, it is therefore necessary to add in an additional % to that actually counted. That % can be based on experience of the area, but a certain amount of guess work is required. However, having a count every third year or so should help determine if culls have went too far, and corrections can then be made.

Whatever the target density going forwards, an additional % of animals needs to be added in to the most recent count figures. In this case, possibly 12% more stags and 20% more hinds, to allow that some were not counted in 2025. That may well be too high a figure, but it should at least allow the DMG to get ahead with planning, and not to be continually having to catch up.

Difficulties with assessing recruitment

Perhaps the most important metric in any population model is the recruitment rate, the number of calves which survive through to one year old as a proportion of the hinds counted. In a very fertile hill environment, where deer also have easy access to improved grazing, crops and woodland shelter, it is reasonable to judge that recruitment is likely to be fairly high, and Nature Scot use 40% as a default in their models.

In theory, it is relatively straightforward to carry out sample counts in late April/ early May each year, count up the surviving calves and hinds, and work out a recruitment rate.

There are however, two main problems with this:

- 1 Open hill deer are much easier to count than those in woodland or lowland areas, not just because they are easier to find and observe, but because the open hill areas are more likely to have personnel on the ground who can do this. This leads to open

hill deer where the recruitment is likely to be lower being overly represented in any counts.

- 2 In good years, well grown calves can be mistaken for hinds, even by experienced personnel, and this then means that the recruitment rate is under-estimated.

It is very important not to be too critical of efforts to do recruitment counts. The Nature Scot helicopter count of 2025, where experienced personnel have time to carefully analyse and classify animals in photographs, returned a very low recruitment of just 31%, well below the default 40%.

The problem therefore when judging recruitment is this very stark difference between open ground and woodland deer. For the former, recruitment is likely to be 38-40% in most years, although most counts show much less than this. In mixed lowland/ woodland areas, a recruitment approaching 60% is much more likely, although verifying this is very difficult.

The presence of other herbivores

Within SGDMG, it is important to note the relative importance of all grazing animals, and this applies especially to the designated montane areas, where the 2018 habitat survey suggested that 20% of dung counted in occupancy surveys was from non- deer species (sheep, hares, grouse).

In terms of actual numbers, there are many more sheep than deer within the DMG area (14,450 vs 7019), although when expressed in terms of livestock units, the grazing pressure is almost identical (2167 vs 2106 LU). While deer are present throughout the open grazing area, and in areas of woodland as well, sheep are only present on a proportion of the hill area (61%). A fuller description of the sheep population and distribution is given in a subsequent section of this document, looking at changes over time, and comparing data given by properties to that obtained through agricultural census returns at a parish level.

The 14,450 sheep present within the SGDMG area are the equivalent of 14.7 deer per sq km across the whole area, or 25 deer per sq km across the 29,000 ha of range on which they are present.

There are a significant number of cattle grazed within the area, including on the hill area. Seasonal grazing for cattle is also provided on some properties, where it is recognized that there is an abundance of grass in the summer months, and this is best utilized at this time. Overall, the cattle grazing pressure is very significantly less than deer or sheep, with their presence amounting to only a few hundred LU.

Roe deer are certainly present within the area, including on the hill ground, and they may well increase in numbers if red deer in particular were to reduce, or significantly more woodland was to be planted. At this point, the information to quantify their presence is not available. However, it can be said that they are certainly not an insignificant presence.

Rabbits are locally numerous within the area, particularly to the south and east, to the point of making planting schemes difficult in some places. However, again, it is difficult to quantify this.

Mountain hares are proportionately more important at higher elevations, and the 2018 HIA study suggested that more than half of the non- deer dung pellets counted came from hares, with the remainder from sheep and red grouse.

Mountain hares are therefore important to understand, particularly as much of the moorland

area in South Grampian would be considered as amongst the best habitat in the country for them, with the particular combination of good heather habitat and predator controls to be found there.

Mountain hare populations oscillate in cycles over 8-10 years, but depending on what efforts are made to reduce the very high peaks in numbers, which are invariably followed by crashes in numbers. In the South Grampian area, it is considered that mountain hare numbers are increasing again at the moment.

A number of commentators have made estimates for mountain hare guide densities in good habitat, such as that found within South Grampian.

Nature Scot suggest that densities of 30-70 hares per sq km are fairly typical, rising to up to 200 per sq km where heather habitat is good, and burning and predator control takes place. The 200 figure is backed up in an article in the Reforesting Scotland magazine (G Eason, James Hutton Inst), and experienced keepers who have been counting hares using agreed methodologies in recent years suggest densities > 100 hares per sq km are likely in good habitat.

For context, a mountain hare is counted as 0.02 Livestock Units, or 15 hares have the same impact as one deer. In reality, hares are also more likely to stay at higher altitudes in to the winter months, so their impacts are likely to be higher than this on sensitive montane habitats in winter, when sheep and deer typically withdraw to below the 600 metre contour.

30-70 hares per sq km would equate to 2-5 deer per sq km.

100 hares per sq km would equate to 6-7 deer per sq km.

200 hares per sq km would equate to 13-14 deer per sq km.

These are potentially significant densities, and certainly cannot be discounted when considering overall pressure. They are not simply an academic consideration.

If an average of 50 hares per sq km were present across the heather moorland, peatland and montane areas, that would suggest a population of 17,173 hares within the DMG area or the equivalent of 1145 deer. This in turn would be the equivalent just over 3 deer per sq km within the hill area, or 2.4 red deer across the area of the DMG as a whole.

It is noted that red grouse also browse montane heather habitats. There is no way to quantify their impacts, and they are almost certainly less than the mammal species, but the 2018 HIA acknowledges their contribution as well.

Caenlochan

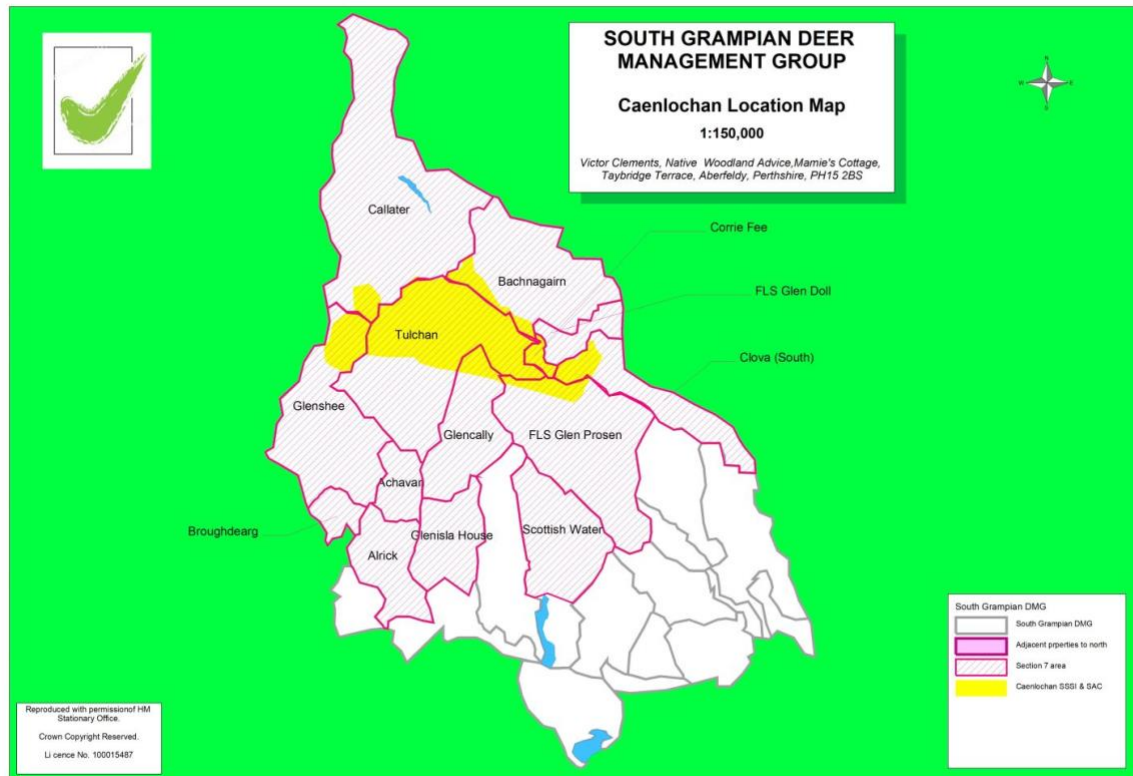
Caenlochan is a name that will be very recognizable to many people involved in land management in Scotland. The area has been subject to efforts to reduce deer numbers since 2003, and has had a national profile from the outset. Many people, especially those in environmental organizations and government, consider that those efforts have failed, and the 2020 Deer Working Group had a recommendation that there should be a parliamentary enquiry in to what has been happening there, considering the accumulated cost and apparent lack of progress.

However, as previously noted, it is important to distinguish between efforts made, and the

South Grampian DMG

Background Information & Policies

results of those efforts. Caenlochan is marked in yellow on the map below, with properties subject to the current Section 7 agreement denoted by the hatching.



The very high deer densities prior to 2003 (potentially 40 deer per sq km +) were reduced to 19 per sq km in just a few years with agency oversight and interventions, and that density was more or less maintained through to 2018, when additional culling was required to bring the population back in line again. The public and private effort required to do this was very considerable indeed. The **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** estimates the public cost at £850,000 +/- £100,000. The private cost both in terms of effort and in opportunity cost is likely to be several times this amount. These costs are discussed later in this analysis.

The problem is that the **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** is very clear that despite halving the deer population, there has been no significant improvement in habitat impacts over that time. It is for this reason that Caenlochan interventions to date are judged to have failed. Habitat monitoring has been used to inform the situation in 2008, 2012, 2015 & 2018. Occupancy surveys in 2018 suggested 55 deer and sheep per 100 ha on the montane area around Caenlochan, and almost twice this density on grassy areas. These figures give some indication of the movement from low to high ground in the summer months. HIA results suggest that the required change is not modest in extent, but fundamental, moving to an entirely new situation completely. Reductions in grazing pressure of 75% have been advised.

We can question whether the estimated occupancy levels are in any way accurate, or are they misleading?

The 2018 dung count results suggest 8,233 deer using the main study area, when there were just over 7000 deer counted in the whole DMG in 2025. The same study suggests there may have been 11,370 deer in the overall control area. (Points 158 & 159 in **2020 Caenlochan Review Report**.)

There are two possible explanations that could be taken from this, both of which should initiate a pause for thought and reflection, as the 2020 report suggests is necessary:

- 1 The count methodologies used are grossly over- estimating the animals present, or
- 2 Caenlochan is pulling in animals from well beyond the DMG area in the summer months. This raises the question of what actually needs to be done to resolve this issue, and over what area? This is the “Last deer in Scotland” explanation.

The **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** mentions some of the contradictions and limitations of the HIA data gathered to date. Some of the differences between years may be down to methodology or surveyor bias/ interpretation. There is no detailed protocol. It is also the case that HIA has progressively been undertaken later in the season over the period, and that too may be reflected in the results. There are many limitations to the HIA methods used, with lots of small changes to process along the way. All this means that while there is undoubtedly grazing pressure on the high tops, and everyone understands why that is, the evidence base is weaker than it might otherwise be, and possibly open to challenge should the balance between incentives and intervention not be gauged correctly in future.

In practice, there are a lot of red flags associated with this situation, which add risk to interventions of the wrong kind.

The Caenlochan issue has defined the deer group over 20 years, to the point that many other issues have been ignored, and as previously noted, the group has become extremely fractured and demoralized because of this. It is also the case that the profile given to Caenlochan has created great pressure within Nature Scot (previously Scottish Natural Heritage), and they have struggled to deal with the problem.

This report makes the case that Caenlochan is not difficult to understand, but it will require great flexibility in thinking to resolve it. Almost certainly, outcomes are being sought which are simply not possible to deliver, and there is a reluctance to admit to this, although just about everyone associated with Caenlochan across both public and private sectors intuitively understands this point. The reasons why will be articulated in a subsequent section.

The **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** is the best analysis we have of previous efforts, but read with a sceptical mind, it raises so many red flags about our understanding of what is going on and what might be possible, that the “pause and period of reflection” it advocates is almost certainly what everyone should be doing at present.

Perceptions and Reality- What ChatGPT thinks about Caenlochan

As part of this analysis of Caenlochan, it was decided to ask three questions of ChatGPT, to see what publicly available documents were saying about the issue.

The questions asked were:

- 1 What is the problem?
- 2 Who is to blame?
- 3 What is to be done?

The analysis is interesting, and much of it may well be correct, including some of the suggested solutions, but it is important to recognize at the outset what documents have been

referenced and analysed for information relating to Caenlochan, and which have not. The obvious point to note is that there is no reference to any material produced by the DMG, by individual owners, or by any representative bodies. There are no deer plans to be found online, and the **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** was never published. This latter document is perhaps the single most important piece of work yet undertaken in to this issue, but it is not available for analysis and discussion. Its worth is all the stronger for being conducted independently, and reviewed by Nature Scot. As such, it must be recognized as a credible if not definitive account.

It is this background information and analysis that is not in the public domain that allows people to ascertain better what is going on at Caenlochan, and a more balanced narrative and understanding could be achieved if this was available too. The ChatGPT analysis has highlighted that in terms of what is in the public domain, that this has been an extremely one sided conversation to date. A resolution would be much more likely if the full picture was available.

This document and planning process aims to provide that more comprehensive analysis, with a view to providing some sort of resolution to Caenlochan.

The sources used by ChatGPT are set out below.

Sources Used

Primary Reports and Government Documents

1. **Deer Working Group Report (2020)**
"The Management of Wild Deer in Scotland" – Government-commissioned report outlining systemic failings and reform proposals.
Source: gov.scot
2. **NatureScot Press Releases and Management Plans**
Updates on Section 7 agreements and deer management progress in Caenlochan.
Source: presscentre.nature.scot

News & Investigative Journalism

3. **Parkswatch Scotland**
Multiple detailed blog articles analyzing NatureScot's handling of Caenlochan and red deer control schemes.
[Source: parkswatchscotland.co.uk](https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk)
4. **The Sunday Post**
Article: *"Highland lairds warned: Official 'hired guns' will cull deer herds if they refuse"*
[Source: sundaypost.com](https://www.sundaypost.com)

Other Informative Sources

5. **Wikipedia – Corrie Fee**
Background on historical deer fencing and conservation efforts at Corrie Fee (within the Caenlochan area).
[Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_Fee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_Fee)

6. Reddit Thread – UK Wild Camping

Public discussion on red deer impact around Corrie Fee and Caenlochan. Useful for gauging public sentiment.

[Source: reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)

The following summary report, set out in dark blue, has been produced by ChatGPT, with a more lengthy account given afterwards.

In the accounts, a limited number of points have been made by this author **in red**. This is how other people perceive Caenlochan, and by extension, South Grampian DMG. It is important to be aware of this.

Caenlochan Glen Red Deer Problem – Summary and Analysis

This document summarizes a detailed conversation on the long-standing issue of red deer overpopulation in Caenlochan Glen, Scotland, its causes, impacts, and proposed solutions.

1. What is the problem?

Caenlochan Glen has faced persistent overpopulation of red deer for over 20 years. This has led to severe damage to sensitive upland habitats, including overgrazing of rare alpine plants, peatland erosion, and failure of woodland regeneration.

Despite Section 7 voluntary deer-control schemes starting in 2003, deer densities remained above ecological limits. Recent efforts aim to reduce densities to 10 deer/km² by 2026, though experts argue 5/km² is required for recovery.

2. Who is to blame?

Blame is shared among several actors:

- Landowners/Estates: Maintained high deer densities for stalking; often resisted cull targets. **Landowners have in fact delivered all targets to date, although they have always been sceptical about what this might achieve,**
- NatureScot (formerly SNH): Delayed enforcement; relied too long on ineffective voluntary schemes.
- Scottish Government: Under-prioritized biodiversity; did not enforce or monitor schemes effectively.
- Voluntary Management Model: Relies on unenforceable cooperation; lacks transparency and accountability.

3. What should be done?

A robust, legally enforceable action plan is needed. Key steps include:

1. Enforce deer densities below 5/km² using Section 8 powers if necessary. **Very interesting that although the current target is actually 10 deer per sq km, a much lower target is suggested here. Discussion of target densities later in this document.**
2. Replace voluntary schemes with mandatory, enforceable deer control plans.
3. Monitor ecological recovery with science-based metrics, not just deer counts.
4. Only fund deer management efforts that result in measurable ecological gains.
5. Tie rural subsidies to biodiversity outcomes; end support for overstocking estates. **Case has been made that properties are not overstocked over the vast majority of the area. It is only a proportion of some properties that is overstocked. The evidence base suggests that all those properties within the Caenlochan area are within recommended grazing levels, but depending on what assumptions you build in about hares.**
6. Engage the public through education and local venison markets to build long-term support.

4. Visual Summary: Policy Briefing

A summarized briefing version of the recommendations:



THE CORE PROBLEM:

Overpopulation of red deer (10–21/km² vs target <5/km²) has severely degraded protected habitats. **The target has never been 5 deer per sq km.**



RECOMMENDED ACTION PLAN:

-  Enforce lower deer densities legally.
-  End voluntary-only management and require statutory compliance. **The recommendation of statutory compliance is the opinion of those referenced by ChatGPT.**
-  Restore damaged ecosystems including native woodlands and peatlands.
-  Fund what works — not what fails.
-  Reform rural subsidies to reward biodiversity outcomes. **This is an insightful and constructive comment which most people would agree with.**
-  Educate and engage the public about the need for deer control.



OUTCOME GOAL:

A healthy, resilient Caenlochan Glen where native plants thrive, carbon is stored, and deer are managed sustainably.

The full ChatGPT answers are given here below:

Hi

ChatGPT said:

Hi there! How can I help you today? 😊

You said:

There has been a problem with deer numbers around Caenlochan Glen for over twenty years now. What is it all about?

ChatGPT said:

The issue in Caenlochan Glen revolves around **persistent over-abundance of red deer**, which has severely damaged its high-value mountain habitats for over 20 years.



What's happening?

- **Habitat degradation:** High deer densities have prevented tree regeneration, over-grazed sensitive plant communities (especially rare alpine species), and caused peatland erosion [reddit.com+15parkswatchscotland.co.uk+15parkswatchscotland.co.uk+15](#). Corrie Fee – once part of the larger nature reserve – had to be fenced off from 1991 to protect vegetation from grazing [en.wikipedia.org+1en.wikipedia.org+1](#).
- **Failed deer-control agreements:** A Section 7 deer-control scheme was first set up in 2003, but successive attempts failed to reduce deer to sustainable levels (that is, closer to 5 per km²), often hovering at 10–21 deer/km² through 2020 [sundaypost.com+2parkswatchscotland.co.uk+2presscentre.nature.scot+2](#).

5 deer per sq km was never a target, although this may be what is required.
- **Public accountability concerns:** A 2020 Deer Working Group report criticized the high public expenditure on these schemes with little habitat improvement, and specifically called for a short parliamentary inquiry into Caenlochan’s situation [reddit.com+15gov.scot+15parkswatchscotland.co.uk+15](#).



Recent developments

- **New Section 7 targets:** In 2023–24, NatureScot signed an updated Section 7 agreement covering ~33,500 ha, with a goal to reduce deer densities to 10/km² by spring 2026 [gov.scot+7presscentre.nature.scot+7parkswatchscotland.co.uk+7](#). Estates have exceeded year-one cull targets despite poor weather [reddit.com+8presscentre.nature.scot+8cairnngorms.co.uk+8](#). Estates delivered 3 X years of agreed culls, but latest count records more deer still than expected.
- **Ongoing tension with landowners:** Some estates resisted, risking NatureScot invoking Section 8 — which allows government-appointed culling teams. NatureScot stated deer impacts remain “significant” and they would enforce if necessary [theguardian.com+11sundaypost.com+11presscentre.nature.scot+11](#).



Why it matters

Concern	Impact
Biodiversity loss	Rare montane plants cannot regenerate due to grazing pressure the-guardian.com+2reddit.com+2parkswatchscotland.co.uk+2
Climate resilience	Healthy woodlands and peatlands store carbon — but deer prevent their recovery
Public expenditure scrutiny	Sheep-like deer densities demand continuing costly management, yet improvements have lagged



In summary

For over two decades, **Caenlochan Glen has suffered from excessively high red deer numbers**, driven by voluntary deer-management that fell far short of ecological needs. Recent efforts under a renewed Section 7 agreement aim to reduce deer to about 10/km² by 2026. Whether this will truly allow habitat recovery remains to be seen — especially since scientific studies suggest densities closer to 5/km² may be needed for woodland and peatland regeneration[nature.scot+11parkswatchscotland.co.uk+11parkswatchscotland.co.uk+11](#).



Let me know if you'd like to dive deeper into local survey numbers, the specifics of the Section 7 scheme, or the parliamentary response to the 2020 Deer Working Group!



Sources

You said:

Who is to blame?

ChatGPT said:

The situation at **Caenlochan Glen** has multiple layers of responsibility. Here's a breakdown of the main parties often held accountable, and why:



1. Landowners and Deer Management Groups

- **Why they are blamed:** Many estates in the area **manage land for red deer stalking** (trophy hunting), which benefits from **high deer numbers**. Voluntary agreements to reduce deer populations were often **not followed through**.
- **Example:** Even under Section 7 agreements (voluntary cull targets), many estates **failed to meet agreed reductions** for years. **This is not actually true.**
- **Consequence:** This resistance helped maintain deer densities far above ecological limits (~10–21 deer/km² vs the recommended 5/km²). **Target densities have been 19 per sq km, then 10 per sq km. The “recommendation” of 5 per sq km has been by external activists to date. The 2020 Caenlochan Review Report did suggest 5 per sq km, but that has never been published.**



2. NatureScot (formerly SNH)

- **Why they are blamed:** As the government agency responsible for deer and nature conservation, they're accused of being **too lenient** for too long.
- **Criticism:**
 - Reluctance to use **Section 8 powers** (legal compulsion and direct culling).
 - Continued funding of voluntary schemes despite **lack of measurable results**.
- **Example:** Despite obvious failures for nearly two decades, NatureScot renewed Section 7 agreements and only recently threatened enforcement.



3. Scottish Government

- **Why they are blamed:** Critics argue that government policy has historically favoured **landowner interests** and **underprioritized ecological restoration**.
- **Oversight failure:** The Deer Working Group (2020) found that **legislation wasn't being enforced** and called Caenlochan a case needing parliamentary scrutiny.
- **Funding concern:** Public money was used to support deer management schemes **with little accountability or habitat improvement**.



4. Voluntary Deer Management System (as a concept)

- **Why it's blamed:** The Scottish model relies heavily on **voluntary cooperation** by private landowners to manage a public resource (wild deer). This approach:
 - Lacks **enforcement teeth**
 - Has limited transparency

- **Delays action** even in protected areas



 Summary of Blame

Group	Responsibility
Landowners/Estates	Maintained high deer densities for sporting and economic reasons.
NatureScot	Failed to enforce legally binding measures early enough.
Scottish Government	Did not prioritize biodiversity and let failed schemes persist.
Deer Management System	Structural flaws allowed ecological degradation for decades.



In short, **all parties share responsibility**, but many ecologists and conservationists argue that **the Scottish Government and NatureScot** should have acted more decisively — particularly in designated protected areas like Caenlochan.

Would you like to see what’s being done now to fix this?

You said:

What should be done about it?

ChatGPT said:

Fixing the long-standing deer overpopulation problem in **Caenlochan Glen** requires decisive and coordinated action. Here's what **should** be done — drawing on ecological research, the 2020 Deer Working Group report, and conservation practice:



✓ What Should Be Done

1. Enforce Lower Deer Densities — Not Just Target Them

- **Goal:** Bring red deer densities down to **below 5 deer/km²**, especially in sensitive upland habitats.
- **How:**
 - Use **Section 8 powers** if estates continue to resist.
 - Require **measurable deer density and habitat impact indicators**.
- **Why:** Ecological recovery — especially native woodland and montane plant regeneration — typically needs densities **below 5/km²**. Many areas in Caenlochan are still over 10/km².



2. End the Reliance on Voluntary Agreements

- Voluntary Section 7 schemes have **failed for two decades**.

- Instead:
 - Introduce **mandatory deer management plans** with statutory enforcement.
 - Penalize non-compliance through **withholding subsidies or fines**.
 - Ensure transparency — publish cull targets, densities, and habitat surveys.



3. Restore and Monitor Habitats

- Conduct **scientific habitat monitoring** — not just deer counts — to track recovery (e.g. tree seedling surveys, plant diversity, peat erosion).
- Restore **natural woodlands and peatlands** via:
 - **Fencing** (temporary, where needed)
 - **Tree planting and rewilding**
 - **Blocking drainage** to restore bogs



4. Support Deer Control with Public Investment — But Only Where

- Fund professional deer stalkers, helicopters, and carcass removal **only** if estates meet biodiversity goals.
- Expand **community deer management initiatives** — training locals to manage deer for meat and ecosystem balance.



5. Reform Scotland's Land Use Incentives

- Tie all rural subsidies to **active environmental stewardship** — not just deer numbers.
- Make biodiversity recovery a **condition of public money**.
- Shift incentives away from managing land for red deer sport and toward **public benefit** (climate, biodiversity, access).



6. Educate and Engage the Public

- Raise awareness about:
 - Why overgrazing harms biodiversity

- The need for culling (not everyone supports it)
- The benefits of a healthy, balanced ecosystem
- Promote **local venison** as a sustainable, low-carbon meat to help make deer control economically viable.



 In Summary

Action	Purpose
Enforce low deer densities	Enable habitat recovery
Replace voluntary plans with legal ones	Ensure compliance
Fund only effective management	Stop wasting public money
Restore ecosystems	Rebuild biodiversity and carbon sinks
Reform land incentives	Align private action with public benefit
Educate and involve communities	Build long-term support



Would you like a visual summary or a policy briefing-style version of this?

You said:

yes please

ChatGPT said:

Here's a **visual summary** in the form of a clear, policy-style briefing: (Below is a variation of the summary document above).



Caenlochan Glen Red Deer Problem: What Should Be Done?

Policy Briefing – July 2025



THE CORE PROBLEM

Overpopulation of red deer (10–21/km² vs target <5/km²) has severely degraded protected habitats at Caenlochan Glen for 20+ years. Voluntary control schemes have repeatedly failed.



RECOMMENDED ACTION PLAN



1. Enforce Lower Deer Densities

- Legally require densities <5 deer/km² in sensitive habitats.
- Use **Section 8 powers** to compel compliance if needed.
- Base progress on **ecological outcomes**, not just deer counts.



2. End Voluntary-Only Management

- Replace failed **Section 7 schemes** with **mandatory deer control plans**.
- Impose financial penalties for non-compliance.
- Publicly report data on culls, densities, and habitat condition.



3. Restore Damaged Ecosystems

- Rewild native woodlands and restore peatlands.
- Use temporary fencing only if essential.
- Monitor progress via vegetation surveys and peat integrity indicators.



4. Fund What Works — Not What Fails

- Support estates that meet cull targets and deliver recovery.
- Expand **professional and community-led deer control**.
- Cease funding for plans that yield no measurable habitat benefit.



5. Reform Rural Subsidies

- Tie **all public land payments** to biodiversity and climate delivery.
- End subsidies for sporting estates that overstock deer.
- Reward active deer reduction and rewilding.



6. 📣 Educate & Build Public Support

- Explain the **need for deer control** to restore nature.
- Promote **venison markets** to give economic value to control efforts.
- Engage local communities as stewards of upland recovery.



🌐 OUTCOME GOAL

A healthy, resilient Caenlochan Glen where native plants thrive, carbon is stored in peat, and deer are part of a balanced ecosystem — not a barrier to it.

The above ChatGPT accounts are hugely important because this is how people (largely activists) outwith land management circles and Nature Scot see the issue.

Some of the above is undoubtedly true, but the account is one sided, with key documents and analysis not considered.

Part of the rationale for this document however is to provide a balancing narrative, and explain WHY the situation has proved so difficult to resolve. To do that, it will be published in full, and brought to ChatGPT's attention for re- evaluation.

Over- analysis

Much of the information that has been written about Caenlochan is very lengthy, often contradictory, overly complex and difficult to penetrate and understand. The level of deer count information available is almost bewildering in its extent, and overall, it is very easy to come to believe that this is a hugely complex issue that requires very high levels of scientific support and understanding.

The issue is not complicated, and it is important not to make it so. The fundamental problem is easy enough to understand.

Failure to understand the problem

The fundamental problem at Caenlochan is that we have an extremely fertile and productive environment that can sustain a lot of grazing, immediately next to very sensitive habitats that can withstand very little grazing at all, and in the summer months, animals drift from one area to the other. That is the problem, and everyone understands that.

To reduce grazing on the sensitive habitats, deer and sheep reductions in the surrounding landscape need to be reduced to levels where very significant opportunity costs arise, and landowners are reluctant to do this for fear of losing significant income and employment. No mechanism that would cover this cost to help promote the envisaged outcomes exists.

There is the additional problem that even without deer or sheep on the high tops, hare densities in themselves would be enough to remove montane willows and have other significant impacts on a wider suite of montane vegetation. They would still be the equivalent of a significant deer population.

It is possible to put in place a “direction-of travel” arrangement, but the anticipated outcome as envisaged by many is not a practical consideration. Ultimately, something less than this will have to suffice. Almost everyone across public and private sectors understands this,

It is simply not possible to resolve the problem at Caenlochan without very considerable public investment, and very significant costs elsewhere in South Grampian, financial and environmental. The risk of failure is very high indeed. Such investment may or may not be warranted. It is important to understand and acknowledge why virtually no one thinks that this is a problem that can be resolved, unless the desired outcome is re-framed or evaluated in some other way. It is not a simple “over grazing “ problem.

Some discussion on density options will follow shortly.

Problems with planning- The Need for Stability

At present, the target deer density within much of South Grampian is 10 deer per sq km, but almost all owners expect this to go to 5 deer per sq km, and even then, there is no confidence that this would deliver the outcomes being sought. Many feel the Caenlochan problem will never end. There is good evidence elsewhere in Scotland, notably across Cairngorms Connect and Mar Lodge that very low densities of deer in particular are required, potentially 1-2 per sq km or less, if regeneration of habitats at high altitude is desired.

The current deer density is 15-16 per sq km, and most properties say they need this to justify current employment, bearing in mind that most properties are relatively small, and do not have the benefits of scale that other conservation focused properties might have. It is very difficult to plan if people do not know what to plan for. South Grampian needs

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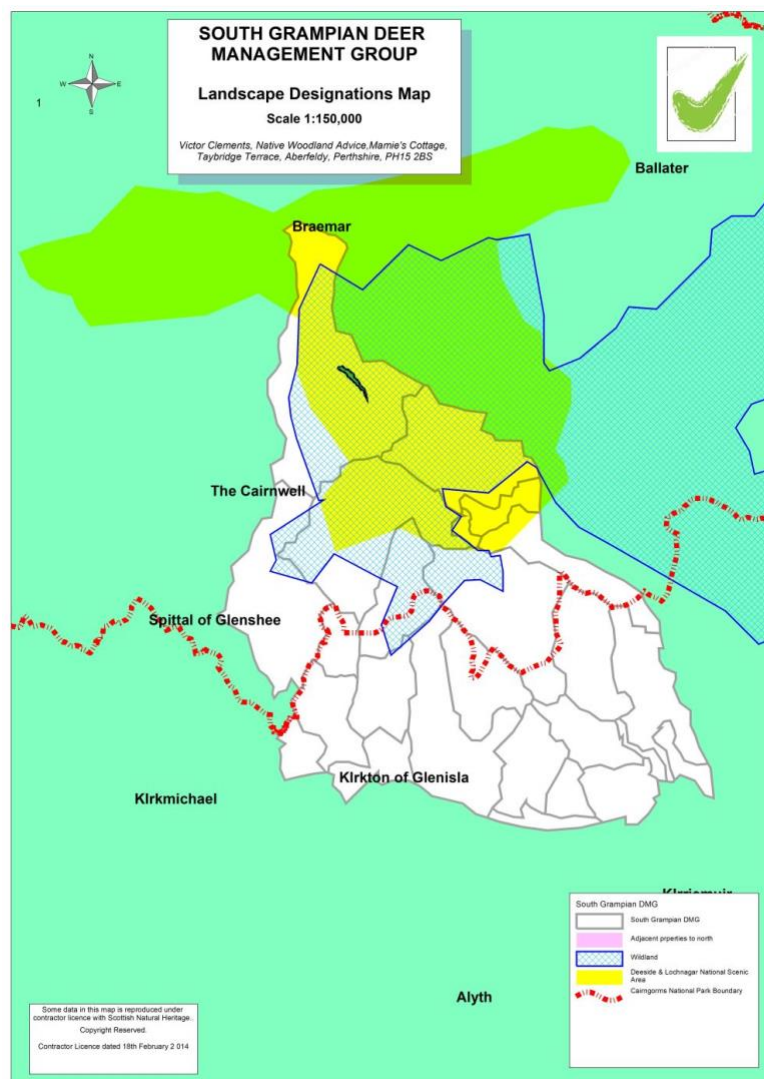
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agreed target densities, and then for these densities to be maintained at this level for ten years or more to monitor the impacts of that.

It is possible to point to the large deer fenced enclosure at Corrie Fee where progress has been very modest over 30 years or more, and wonder what would be required to make any significant difference to montane habitats in the wider area at all. The risk/ probability of failure is very high for everyone, agency staff included, even if deer were removed entirely. This has to be part of the evaluation.

Cairngorms National Park Policy

The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) have a policy position of having deer densities of 5-8 deer per sq km across the park area. The northern part of the DMG area lies within the park area, see map below, but in terms of deer management, any park policy would effectively apply to the whole of SGDMG, especially if CNPA were part of some sort of incentivization scheme that properties were taking up.



The CNPA target density has no legal standing at present, but initial discussions around the upcoming Natural Environment Bill suggest that a park policy like this would need to be fully considered by Nature Scot when they are contemplating sites for potential intervention. As such, the CNPA policy, and how it might be implemented, are a key consideration for this plan.

In practical terms, the 5-8 deer per sq km is unlikely to be sufficient to allow some of the

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much more sensitive habitats to come in to favourable condition, but will be low enough to see under-grazing of moorland and grassland habitats at middle and lower altitudes, and to almost certainly see socio- economic implications as well.

The problem thrown up by this policy is that while 5-8 deer per sq km will undoubtedly allow for Scots Pine regeneration on more nutrient poor substrates, as found further north within the park, it would be much more difficult to implement in a more fertile environment, and would lead to a range of other problems if it was implemented, without addressing the core Caenlochan issue within South Grampian.

No plan to work to

DMG members perceive a series of moving targets in the current process and what is expected of them, and do not recognize any coherent plan that will result in environmental improvements of the type envisaged, or reward them for playing a part in that.

During the production of this document, no-one in any of the public agencies has been able to articulate what a “solution” to Caenlochan would look like. This implies lack of strategic direction and confidence from above. It is not clear who makes the decision regarding what might be acceptable, or by what mechanism. Approaches to government ministers by South Grampian DMG to try and initiate a different approach have received no reply or apparent interest, so there is a political dimension to this paralysis as well, and that makes it much more difficult for the public agencies to be decisive or to work effectively. It appears that little consideration has been given to this by anyone in recent years. This is an astonishing thing to have to say. It is possible that everyone is simply avoiding the issue and awaiting a parliamentary enquiry, as suggested by the Deer Working Group report, but addressing the issue has a greater urgency than that, and people need direction now.

Both public and private sector interests need a plan to work to. The lack of any such plan is very damaging to both.

Opportunity Costs

The **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** lists the public costs of Caenlochan to date as £850,000, +/- £100,000. The opportunity cost to DMG members is conspicuous by its absence, and yet, this is likely to be a much higher amount.

The 2020 report includes this very useful summary, which will also be discussed in the *Density options going forwards* section below.

Table 20 Four possible future ‘deer density scenarios’ across the current Caenlochan Section 7 control area (with supporting notes)

Scenario	Winter population size	Deer density per km ²	Summer deer density (per km ²) in core summer range	% Decline in deer density from 2018 (approx)	% Decline in herbivore off-take from 2018 (approx)	Change in annual level of impacts	Habitat recovery	Mature stags available annually for sport (@ 6 yrs old) - approx	Socio-economic impacts
Notes ->	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	7,086	20	40	0%	0%	Little or none	Negligible	380	None
2	5,315	15	30	-25%	-20%	Minor	Limited or local	285	Fairly limited
3	3,543	10	20	-50%	-40%	Considerable	Widespread but gradual	190	Considerable
4	1,772	5	10	-75%	-60%	Major	Widespread and rapid	95	Widespread & major

This very simple table provides a succinct and credible summary of what the choices going forwards might be, or is at least a good starting point for discussion. The unpublished report from which it comes suggests very strongly, backed by evidence as the author sees it, that the target deer density across the area affecting Caenlochan should be 5 deer per sq km.

Basically, it makes the case that grazing pressure within the core control area needs to be reduced by 75 percent to make any significant difference to impacts there. Taking this at face value, that would allow DMG members to take less than 100 stags, and is almost 300 less than what they can achieve today.

A number of properties have suggested that the value of such an animal is now well in excess of £1000 by the time the various components of value are taken in to account, but before any local economic multipliers are applied.

It is possible to argue that the economic impact on the value of stags alone would be conservatively estimated at £300,000 annually, or £1.5 million over 5 years. Any sporting value placed on hinds would also have to be reduced. A local economic multiplier would double this given the range of businesses that supply the deer sector locally, and the administration time and support required to organize things.

It is also the case that as deer numbers reduce, the time/ animal increases, and the likelihood is that properties earning some sort of income now will then be operating at significant cost. Evidence from other areas with low deer densities suggests that this would be the case, as the time required per deer is then very high.

It is highly likely therefore that over a five year period, the private economic cost could well be 3-4 times the £850,000 cost attributed to the public purse up to 2019, and this would be recurring every five years for many decades going forwards.

For the avoidance of any doubt, most properties in South Grampian have their deer stalking well integrated with accommodation and ancillary services, the area is a very popular destination for visiting stalkers, high rates can be charged, and the fact that 2-3 operators can lease land within the area to conduct stalking as part of a overall business shows that the economic activity generated is genuine, and significant within the area. It is important not to understate or dismiss the value of this, but to acknowledge it as part of the overall equation.

Several DMG members have made the point that in no other sector or business would people be expected to amend or reduce their legitimate business activities without due consideration to the effects that this might have on them. There has been no such consideration in evidence to date.

Concerns about jobs

The above table highlights socio economic impacts which would be “widespread and major”, and this is what many people within the group fear.

The concern that people have is that with the cost of employment now being so high, that if income falls below a certain level, then it becomes difficult to justify, and if that employment partly relies on other activities that might be under pressure as well, then the point where a decision has to be made could arrive quite suddenly and abruptly. There is a threshold of economic viability, below which employment is unsustainable. Generally, the employees who may be most vulnerable would be those where multiple keepers are employed. Losses could arise through redundancy, or an employee leaving simply not being replaced. Annual losses of £300,000 and possibly double that from a relatively small rural area must have a significant impact within it. That would not be a change without consequence.

During the interviews for this document, the case has been made that the prospect of future job losses in South Grampian has been over-stated, and that the majority of potential losses

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have already quietly occurred. Many properties within the area already only employ a single handed keeper, do the stalking themselves, or have their ground leased out to some-one who does this as part of a wider package of work within the wider area. Expectations on the deer front have already been downgraded. As such, many properties do not have positions to cut easily. Several will have already disappeared over 20 years or so, brought about partly through uncertainty about what the future might hold.

The suggestion that there might be regional impacts to large scale deer reductions is easier to dismiss. The wider area is economically strong, and keepers leaving the profession are likely to find other work in the wider area. However, reductions in land based work and capacity within the area would be real enough, with support industries and hotels being very vulnerable to any reduction in off-season visitors or demand for their services. Loss of personnel would also put pressure on whatever other activities that people are currently engaged with.

Looking forwards, it might be better not to think in terms of what might be lost, but what might be gained if DMG properties were able to plan with more certainty. If that was possible, at whatever density was deemed suitable, that might secure the employment that is currently there, and possibly add some more if environmental management was properly incentivized.

Whatever the impacts on employment, the choices there are in South Grampian will have real life consequences, and that needs to be understood and respected.

Density options going forwards

The table below illustrates 4 X density scenarios, but there are arguably six density options within the area that should be considered.

Table 20 Four possible future 'deer density scenarios' across the current Caenlochan Section 7 control area (with supporting notes)

Scenario	Winter population size	Deer density per km ²	Summer deer density (per km ²) in core summer range	% Decline in deer density from 2018 (approx)	% Decline in herbivore off-take from 2018 (approx)	Change in annual level of impacts	Habitat recovery	Mature stags available annually for sport (@ 6 yrs old) - approx	Socio-economic impacts
Notes ->	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	7,086	20	40	0%	0%	Little or none	Negligible	380	None
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4	1,772	5	10	-75%	-60%	Major	Widespread and rapid	95	Widespread & major

- 1 The first would be to have no ongoing oversight of the situation and to allow deer numbers to find their own level. In such a fertile area, this could be 30-40 deer per sq km again. However, there is no demand from DMG members for this to happen, and with almost all properties now having environmental and agricultural objectives as well, self regulation would probably now deliver a deer density somewhat less than that and closer to what currently exists.
- 2 The second would be something within the 15-18 deer per sq km range, which has been more or less where densities have been since 2007. This is the density which most properties would like to see, which would deliver their income objectives, and which they could plan around and sustain over a period of time. Arguably, it is a density that such a fertile environment can sustain, and is well within the recommended grazing levels for the majority of habitats in the area, although obviously not the higher ground.
- 3 The third option is 10 deer per sq km, which is essentially a Scottish Government

driven policy figure. This is much less than most properties would like to see, and is almost certainly too high to deliver the environmental outcomes required. It therefore serves neither purpose, with both economic activity and montane management being heavily compromised.

- 4 The fourth option is the CNPA policy density of 5-8 deer per sq km which is lower still, but above the level of 5 deer per sq km that the 2020 report advocates, and which most people intuitively believe would have to happen to make any difference to impact levels on the more sensitive habitats at all.
- 5 The fifth option would be 5 deer per sq km, as advocated by the 2020 report, Options 3, 4 & 5 would have very significant consequences, and would require the opportunity costs to be fully analysed and mitigated for on a longer term basis. The cost of that is likely to be very significant indeed.
- 6 Finally, the sixth option is to say that experience elsewhere suggests that even 5 deer per sq km would not be enough, and that a density of 1-2 deer per sq km would be required to deliver some of the envisaged outcomes. Such a density would require not only a mitigation of opportunity costs, but ongoing and persistent deer management costs at a fairly significant level so that densities could be kept to these very low levels. It is highly likely that the public purse would not want to contemplate this, and this is likely to be the case with Options 4 & 5 as well.

Any of these options beyond Option 1 will require a sustained and deliberate effort to keep deer densities at a level below what the South Grampian hills would naturally support in terms of recommended or potential grazing levels.

No need for a parliamentary enquiry

The Deer Working Group Report of 2020 suggested that there needed to be an enquiry in to Caenlochan. However, the basic problem is very easy to understand, and virtually everyone agrees with this.

South Grampian is a small deer management group, and most members are small in deer management terms. It is a very fertile environment, and the carrying capacity of grazing animals is very many times higher than what the most sensitive habitats in that landscape can endure.

As a statutory deer intervention, it is important not to pass off Caenlochan efforts to date as a failure. Initial efforts in 2003-6 halved the deer population, and densities were held at this level, more or less, for 10 years. That was long enough to demonstrate for certain that little habitat improvement on the high tops had arisen from this, but there was an expectation at the time that improvement may well occur. Being critical now is judging the situation in retrospect.

From 2022 until present, all properties in the area, albeit under protest, agreed and delivered a cull programme with Nature Scot to bring the deer density down to 10 deer per sq km. We know that this has not happened, probably because hidden animals, deer movement in to the area and possibly higher recruitment than had been estimated.

Any criticism of Nature Scot and the Scottish Government should focus on two main points:

- 1 Failure to realize that what is envisaged for Caenlochan is not actually possible in any realistic sense, but no-one has wanted to admit to this, despite everyone

understanding the problem. No-one appears to have sufficient control of the situation to force a change in direction.

- 2 While they have often been criticized for the amount of public money spent on Caenlochan, there has never been any analysis of the opportunity costs to owners within the area, which is likely to amount to £300,000 or more annually, perhaps £1.5 million in a five year window. The figure would unquestionably be much higher if a proper economic review was undertaken, and economic multipliers used as well. If estate owners sometimes appear less than enthusiastic about what is going on, this is the reason why. This point needs to be addressed. If the cost is judged to be too high, then habitat impact targets need to be adjusted so that realistic outcomes can be achieved across the area. It is likely that the majority of potential job losses have already taken place, and this has created a level of ill- feeling and resentment that will be difficult to rectify going forwards.

What can be done about Caenlochan?

The **2020 Caenlochan Review Report** suggested that a pause and a period of reflection was required on this issue, and it is difficult to argue with that. That did not happen at the time, with another Section 7 agreement entered in to, arguably a very rash decision given the number of red flags highlighted by the 2020 report. Despite a cull programme overseen by Nature Scot themselves, the 2025 count gave a population some 5 deer per sq km higher than expected.

This alone would suggest that despite 20 years of experience with the site, and with all the scientific and statistical expertise available to them, that Nature Scot's own understanding of Caenlochan is still very poor.

It is important that this report does not provide a list of six options on deer densities, without recommending which is likely to be the most suitable going forwards.

With that in mind:

- 1 There is no evidence that the laissez faire Option 1 is supported or required by DMG members, all of whom now have environmental or agricultural interests that uncontrolled deer numbers would undoubtedly damage.
- 2 Many DMG members towards the west of the DMG say they would like to see 15-16 deer per sq km, and this would fulfill their requirements to have some income and employment from their properties. There is no need for any more than this. Several members towards the east of the DMG will accept significantly less than this, notably in Zone 4 where there is virtually no sporting demand at all, and in Zone 2 as well where management objectives are centred around forestry, water catchment management and agriculture.
- 3 We should respect the analysis carried out in the **2020 Caenlochan Review Report**, which is the best account undertaken to date and which advocates strongly that an average deer density of 5 deer per sq km would be required to facilitate widespread restoration of upland habitats, particularly if sheep and hares were to remain. In that scenario, the 10 or 5-8 deer per sq km densities are only interim positions, which is not what properties want to see for planning purposes. On this basis, these two density options should be discarded as they fulfill neither public nor private objectives.
- 4 The very low 1-2 deer per sq km option could not be supported or financed by government or DMG members without testing if 5 deer per sq km achieved a satisfactory outcome first, so this can be discarded in the short to medium term.

Ultimately, there are only two serious deer density options for Caenlochan. One is to retain the current 15-16 deer per sq km and accept reduced outcomes on the higher ground in order to maintain socio- economic conditions in the area relating to deer and upland management by private properties, and the second is to move to 5 deer per sq km over five years or so and try to achieve the desired restoration outcomes on higher ground in some sort of reasonable timescale. Population models will be drawn up within this plan to cover both scenarios. However, the second option has consequences both in terms of opportunity cost, and then ongoing management costs. It is likely to also have environmental costs over by far the greater part of the mountain environment in terms of undergrazing of grassland habitats, and will almost certainly increase the dangers of wildfires throughout the area if this is not properly mitigated. Government will have to support those costs from the outset if this is what it wants. It is likely that this support will be required for many decades.

This is the only honest discussion of options that it is possible to have. For this reason, the current Caenlochan situation requires to be escalated so that everyone understands the choices they are looking at, including Nature Scot and the Scottish Government.

However, the situation at Caenlochan could be made significantly easier by changing the definition of Favourable status.

At present, this requires 90 percent of sample plots on designated features to be at Low or Low/ Medium impact categories. This is a generic definition that Nature Scot use across all their designated sites, and there is little discussion or rationale around this on a site specific basis. Achieving 90 percent L or L/ M impacts is difficult enough in most habitats, never mind in an area where the background grazing pressure is so high, but largely still sympathetic to habitats at middle and lower altitudes. It is easy to speculate that the bar has been set too high, and one potential approach would be to lower it.

It can be argued that in a properly sustainable upland environment in which a diversity of species is being sought, then that can best be brought about through a diversity of grazing impact levels, creating different vegetation structures in different areas, Uniform low impacts could be seen as damaging.

Target grazing impacts could be reduced to 60-70% of plots being at Low or Low/ Medium impacts, or Low or Medium, not Low or Low/ Medium.

While the Scottish Government are bound by legislation to move habitats in to Favourable condition, it is ultimately Nature Scot who decide what Favourable condition is.

If the stated objectives are physically impossible, as almost everyone agrees, then the objective can be re-defined, and the chances of success thereby increased.

Part of the wider environmental context for looking at this will be the likely establishment of nearly 3500 ha of new woodland within South Grampian, the vast majority of which will be native woodland. DMG members are happy to do this because that is a practical and appropriate management use of their land. Increasing native woodland cover on this scale will inevitably draw deer away from more sensitive habitats in the future, and can be seen as part of a longer term solution. There is little doubt that new woodland areas on this scale will create different deer dynamics in the future to those that exist today.

If progress is to be made at Caenlochan, then it has to be approached as a practical and

feasible project, with reasonable certainty of success, and funded by government to make it happen if they believe this is possible within some realistic timeline.

Re-structuring the woodlands in Glen Doll

The FLS woodland area at Glen Doll extends to c 700 ha. It is comprised almost entirely of commercial conifer species, but the area is difficult to access with poor timber extraction up through Glen Clova. In 2021, Storm Arwen caused very significant damage within the woodlands, blowing down a significant proportion of the standing timber, blocking internal roads and access tracks, and making recreational use of the forest very difficult and dangerous.

Significant timber operations are now underway to tidy up the area and to restructure it more generally. This is providing an opportunity to extract commercial timber, to streamline woodland boundaries and fences, to diversify tree species and to improve the riparian zone. In many ways, it is a generational opportunity to redefine and improve the FLS Glen Doll woodland area,



Up until recently, the woodland area has acted as an important part of the overall wintering area for deer, the fences of the plantation now being largely porous. But the very extensive felling and restructuring carries a restocking obligation, with a proportion of more palatable tree species. It is planned to fence the majority, but not all, of the woodland going forwards.

The important detail going forwards is that (1) The felled areas make it much easier to cull significant numbers of deer, and (2) extensive fencing will reduce the area of trees that deer from surrounding areas might shelter in.

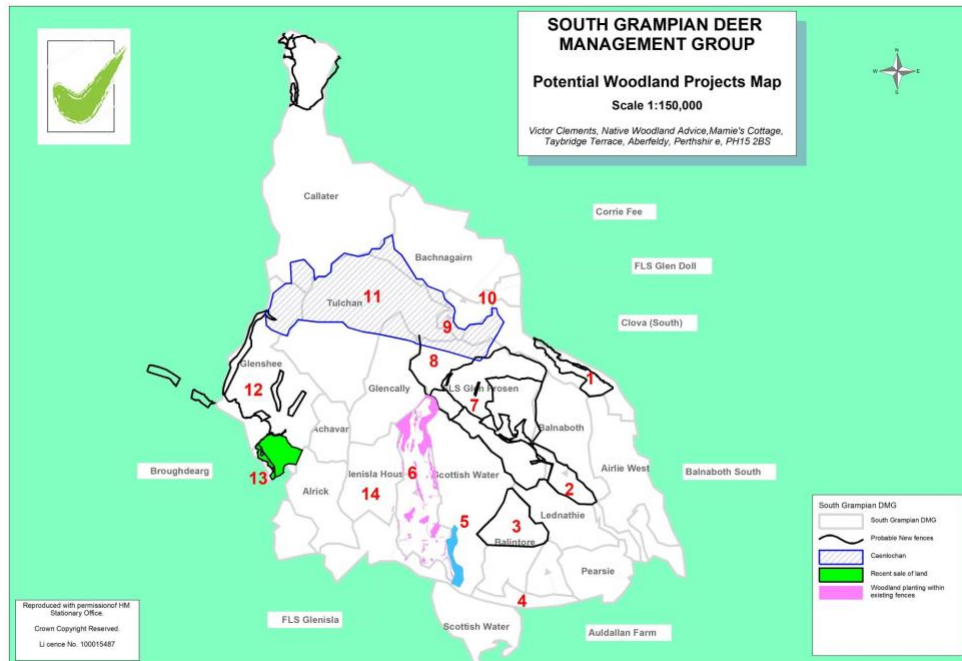
As such, the restructuring of Glen Doll forest will have a significant impact on deer in the surrounding area, which will have to be reduced to accommodate these changes.

Extensive new woodland creation schemes

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There are potentially 14 X significant woodland projects being developed within the SGDMG area at present. Located on the map below. Some of these refer to the restructuring of existing nature woodland, and Caenlochan is included as there is a montane willow element to that. This schemes can be noted below, and as **14. Potential Woodland Projects map** on the website. Accompanying notes are provided as **South Grampians DMG Woodland Projects Information Note**.



There is potentially 3500 ha of woodland creation within the area, with a similar area being enclosed as open ground, or protected for felling and restocking. In total, this represents c 15% of the DMG area, and is a very significant change in land use, concentrated in the middle of the group.

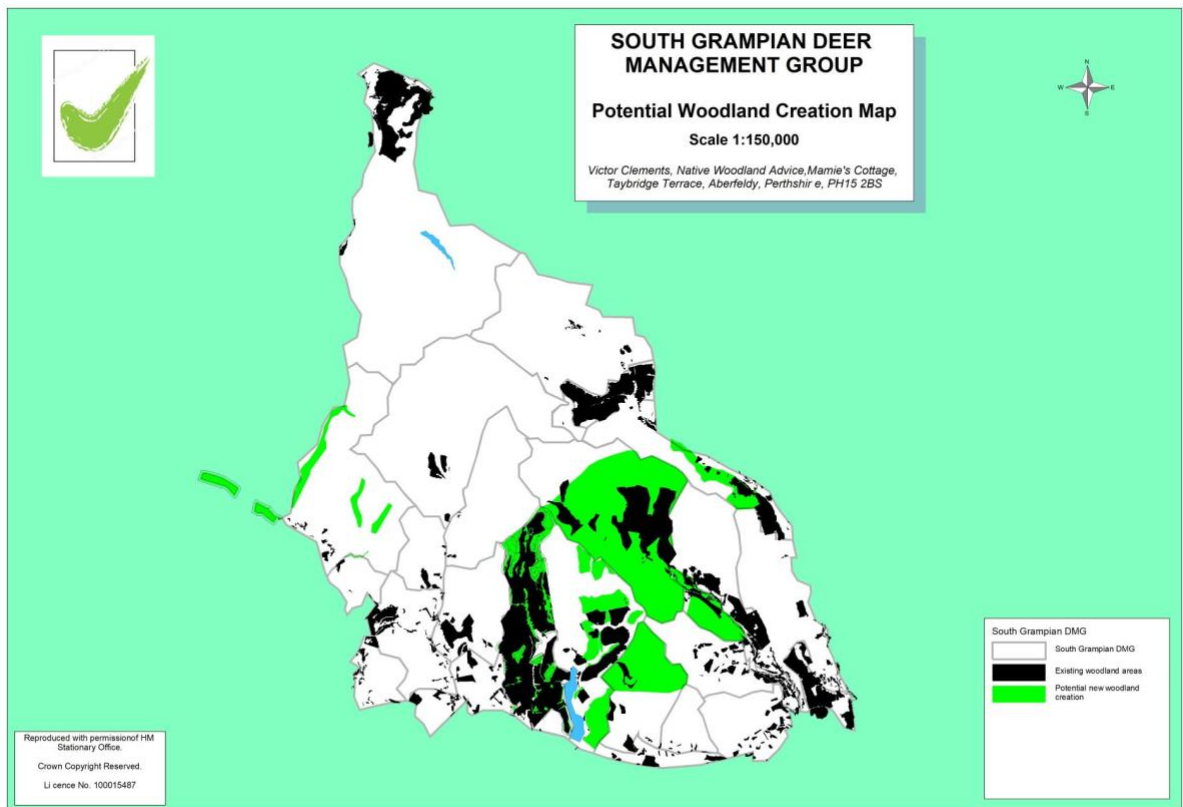
At the moment, all properties are making the risk assessment that individual projects need to be deer fenced, across both public and private sectors. The degree of planting is likely to change the nature of the deer group, splitting it in to smaller sub areas, with different objectives in different parts.

It is important to note however, that many of these projects are still in the early stages of development, and it is not clear what a realistic timeline for some of them are. It is possible that some of them will be reduced in scale, or even cancelled.

In the medium term, such an increased level of woodland creation is likely to change the deer dynamics within the group, and possibly reduce the pressure on areas like Caenlochan.

Most of this new woodland creation will be with native woodland, but a % of commercial conifers will be planted in some areas as well as much of the ground is fertile and productive.

On the map below, available on the website as **13. SG Potential Woodland Creation Map**, the areas of green are potential woodland creation areas, in relation to areas of existing woodland in black.



Agricultural damage

Analysis shows that deer culled to protect agriculture have been relatively modest in numbers in the past, but is increasing in recent years. Some owners and tenant farmers blame this on increasing areas being fenced out for tree planting, and inadequate efforts being made to take compensatory culs to allow for this. Deer are therefore getting forced on to improved grassland where they may have been less of a problem in the past.

Over much of the DMG area, a lot of improved grassland is farmed in-hand by the DMG members themselves, who show a certain amount of toleration to deer in fields, and can show a degree of sensitivity in dealing with issues as they arise.

There are a number of tenant farmers on Scottish Water ground in particular who raise the issue of marauding deer, but changes in land use policy there are likely to now deal with that.

It is important to note however that there are many large groups of very mobile deer in and around the more fertile areas of the DMG, and it will take a very disciplined and determined collaborative effort to be able to successfully reduce these in numbers.

Visitor pressure

South Grampian is unusual in that almost all properties cite visitor pressure on the hills as a significant factor for them to take in to consideration when stalking. Many days on the hill are disrupted, and pressure on the mountains is widely viewed as one key reason why deer are now largely congregated in to very large and mobile groups.

In many other DMG areas, it is likely that maybe only 1-2 properties will list walker pressure as a problem when not specifically prompted on this issue. That so many properties

do so here sets South Grampian apart from the others in this respect.

Confidence

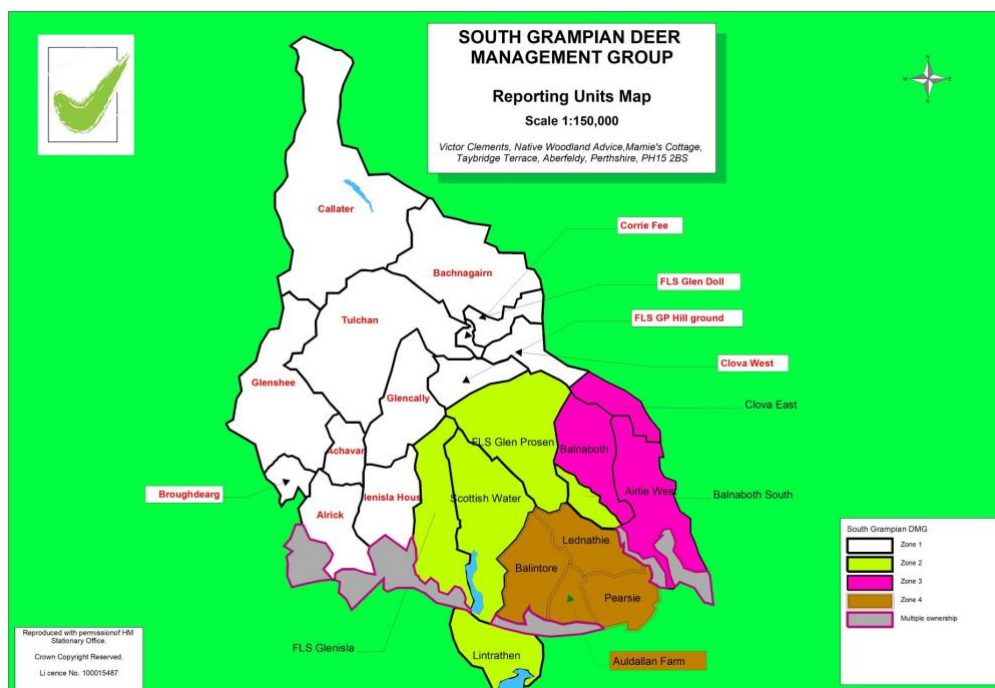
During interviews for this plan, a number of key stalkers explained that they tend not to contribute at meetings, but then feel angry and frustrated afterwards for not having done so. They are knowledgeable and experienced, and in general, want to see a solution to the various problems within the group which they have to engage with in the course of their daily work.

A key recommendation of this report will be to deliver a training course/tutorial for all personnel within the DMG, focused on building confidence, and encouraging people to assert themselves more fully and effectively. It is likely that such a course might also be directed towards public agency staff. The focus for such an initiative would be on allowing personnel to contribute more effectively at deer meetings, which are a potentially difficult environment with a number of pressures, expectations and tensions at play. It should not just be assumed that people can just deal with this.

It is suggested here that a slimmed down version of the Scottish Enterprise Rural Leadership course is what is required, perhaps with funding sourced through the Common Ground Forum. The “common ground” in this situation is in recognizing that contributing effectively at deer meetings is not straightforward for a range of people in different roles, and that such meetings would be more effective if this was addressed.

Future structure of the Deer Group

The map below shows the 4 X sub areas/ zones mentioned earlier in this document, arising largely because of the extensive woodland planting through the middle of the DMG.



The suggestion in this plan is that South Grampian DMG be retained as an entity to support all 4 X areas, but that there is recognized leadership within each of the sub areas.

Other Deer Species

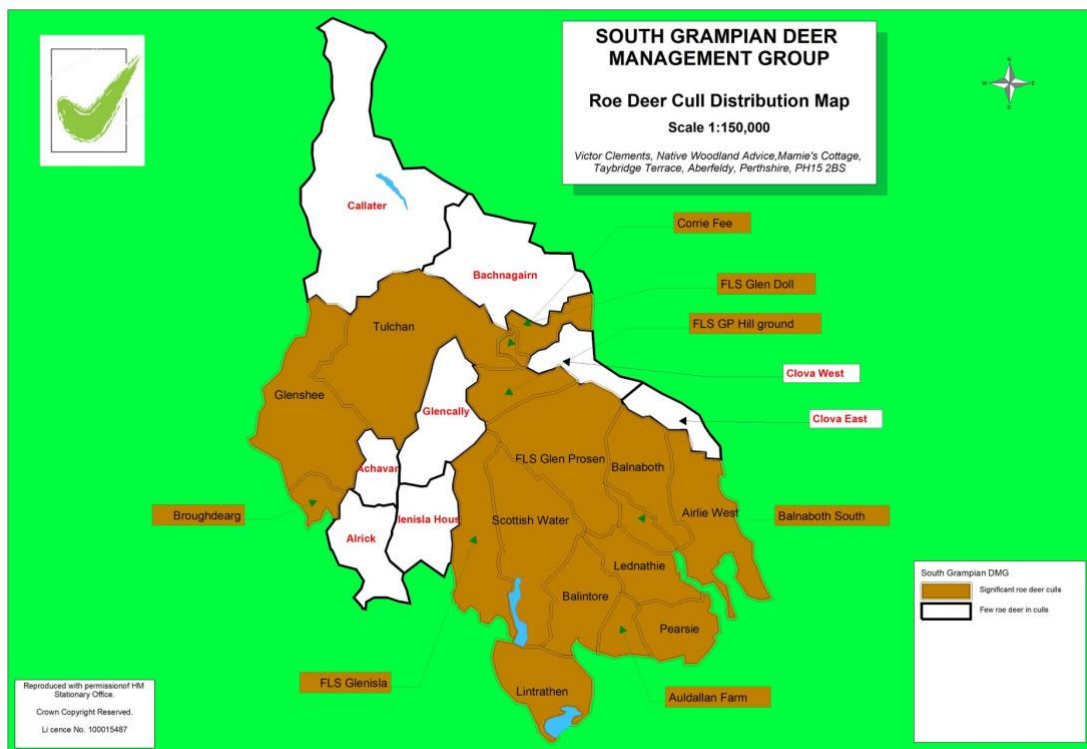
Information on the other deer species has already been provided, but in very brief summary:

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- Roe deer are well distributed through the DMG area, including on the open hill, and it might be anticipated that their numbers will expand in future through additional woodland creation, and if red deer numbers were to be reduced. Many deer plans of this type largely discount roe deer, but it is important not to do that here. Relatively little detail is given on the species so as not to distract from the main issues in South Grampian, but roe are a species which require to be kept on the radar of DMG members. It is anticipated that if drone counting gradually replaces helicopter counts in the period of this plan, then better roe population data will be available, and that should allow for more informed management activity.
- There have only been two sika deer recorded as being culled in South Grampian since 2000, and none in recent years. DMG policy will therefore be to stop the species from becoming resident, and resources should be deployed to prevent this from happening, should their presence be located within the DMG area.
- Finally, fallow deer are more numerous within the FLS Glen Isla blocks. DMG policy will be to try and contain the species within that area, and to not allow numbers to increase. Very significant numbers of fallow deer are present in nearby Strathardle, and down towards Dunkeld. Fallow can certainly thrive in this sort of landscape if they are allowed to do so.

In contrast to many other DMG areas, roe deer are a significant presence within the area, emphasized by the distribution of culls, see below.



9. Moorland Management

Pro-active moorland management for grouse occurs across much of the DMG area, and a majority of private owners have this as a land use objective. FLS Glen Prosen, currently scheduled to be converted in to a sizeable native woodland scheme, was previously a grouse moor as well. Both driven grouse moor management and lesser intensity walked up management are found. In good years, the SGDMG area can be very productive, and owners/ tenants appear prepared to invest in this. The properties with multiple employees all tend to have grouse moor management as a key objective, and deer management staff there tend to be involved with moorland management more generally.

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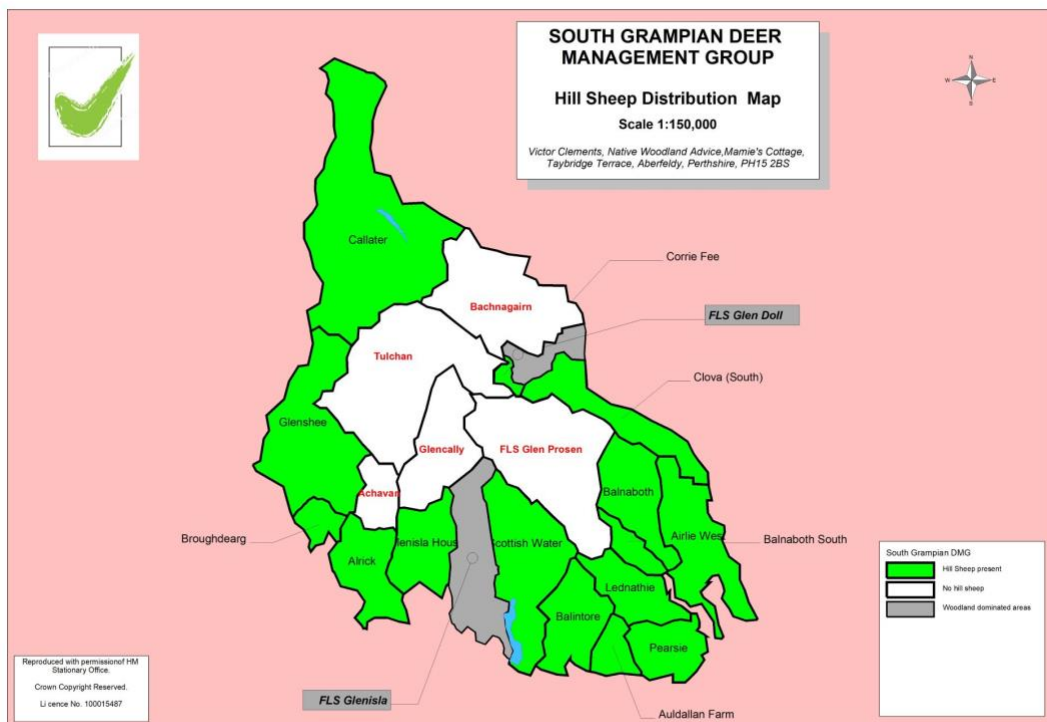
Pro-active moorland management therefore is a key driver for retaining employment within the South Grampian area.

10. Hill Sheep Management

All DMG members were asked about the numbers of sheep within their boundaries, and how this has changed over 5, 10 & 20 years ago.

There are currently 14,450 breeding sheep kept within the area, this compared to just over 7000 red deer counted in spring 2025. Sheep numbers have reduced by 16 % in 20 years. This is a significant drop, but numbers are more stable than many other areas of Scotland. The figures have been provided by each of the DMG members, and include all sheep within their boundaries.

For reasons of confidentiality, sheep numbers on individual properties are not shown, but the following map shows where significant sheep numbers are present on the hill area, and where sheep are not present.

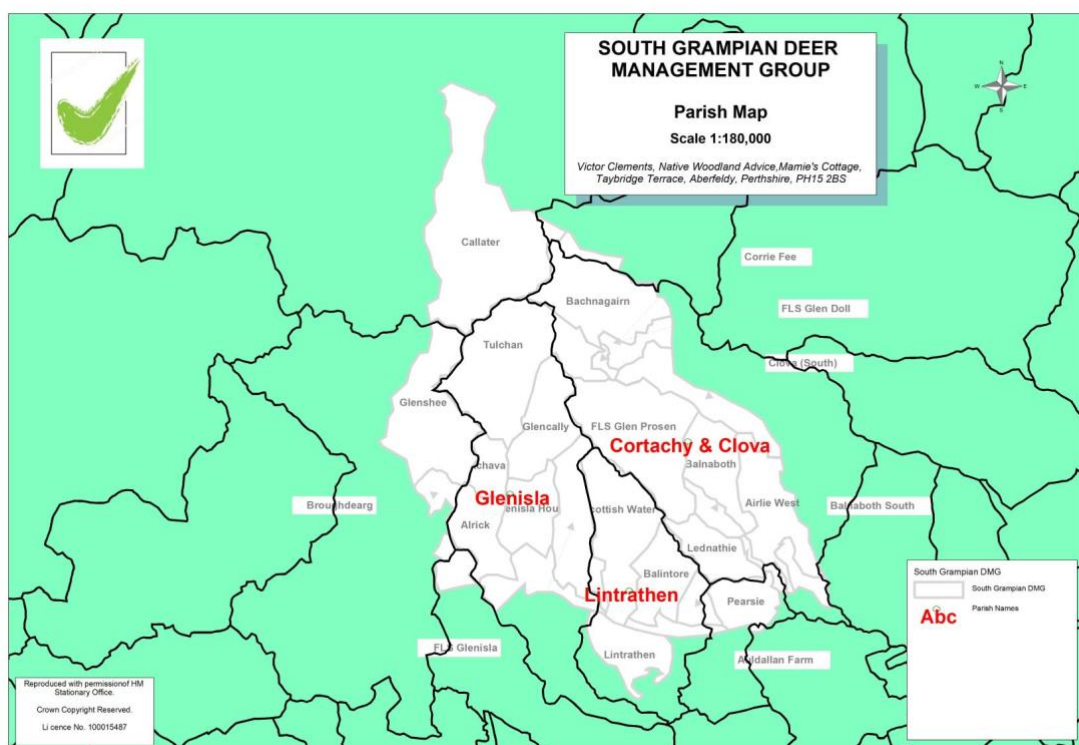


In reality, and as with deer, sheep tend to drift to higher ground as well, and sheep from one property are often present on the hill ground of another, and particularly within the Caenlochan area.

Agricultural census statistics have been sourced to check land use patterns and trends over a 20 year period at a parish level.

There are three main parishes within the overall SGDMG area: Cortachy & Clova, Lintrathen and Glen Isla. Each of the three parishes include some adjacent ground outwith the DMG as well, but looking at the figures helps to establish any trends, and allows us to compare these trends against the information given by individual properties to check or verify changes over that period.

The 3 x parishes can be located on the map below.



Sheep numbers in terms of breeding ewes across the 3 X parishes are summarized below.

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	9724	9006	8231	5482
Glen Isla	6143	4714	4747	4900
Lintrathen	7273	6394	5373	4048
TOTAL:	23,140	20,114	18,351	14,430

The figures suggest a 38% reduction in sheep numbers within the area over 20 years, the largest fall being within the last five years. However, as suggested above, the reduction within the actual DMG area is more modest than this, suggesting the greatest reduction in numbers has been from the surrounding areas within the parishes.

The following table shows the numbers of sheep given by DMG members across the 4 X zones over the 20 year period.

Year	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Total
2025	4300	4500	2300	3350	14450
2020	3700	5600	2100	2850	14250
2015	3600	6100	2800	3300	15800
2005	5550	5600	2800	3300	17250
Reduction	-23%	-20%	-18%	+ 1%	-16%

In Zones 1-3, sheep numbers have declined by c 20% in 20 years, but they are stable in Zone 4. Interestingly however, there has been an increase in numbers in 3 X areas in the last 5 years, and a small increase overall in that time. A number of properties have indicated a willingness to increase numbers going forwards, but there will be reduction/ removal of some flocks as well to facilitate woodland creation. It tends to be the active grouse moors who are considering increasing sheep numbers as part of their overall moorland management regimes.

Cattle

The table below is a summary of total cattle numbers within the area. It is likely that a large number of these animals will be located around the periphery of the hill areas, and on the low ground, and it may well be that a proportion of them are finishing cattle and not reliant on vegetation produced within the area.

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	2490	1386	1282	1370
Glen Isla	2032	1637	1484	1062
Lintrathen	1567	754	876	825
TOTAL:	6089	3777	3642	3257

The cattle within the area have reduced by 46% over the period, with the biggest fall taking place between 20 and 10 years ago. Since then, numbers have been going down, but are much more stable.

Despite the fertile grassland areas within the DMG, there are only c 200 cows grazing on the hill areas across 4 X properties. This is a surprisingly low number for what might once have been regarded as a key stock producing area near the grain growing heartlands on the east coast.

Grass & Crops

Again, these figures below are taken from a wider area than just SGDMG, but they do point to land use trends within the general area.

The first table looks at the area of crops and fallow land:

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	296	288	390	466
Glen Isla	379	230	239	292
Lintrathen	171	152	116	92
TOTAL:	846	670	745	850

The figures suggest that cropping has been stable over the 20 year period, but with a dip about 10 years ago.

The next table looks at improved grassland:

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	1189	1874	1762	1565
Glen Isla	1217	2065	1872	2009
Lintrathen	1390	1467	1372	1059
TOTAL:	3796	5406	5006	4633

The grassland within the area increased up to 2014 or so, before declining again, but is still more than there was in 2004. It is likely that some of this increase was because of the reduction in cropping area, above. There has been some hill land improved during this time, and a modest amount of grassland will have been lost to woodland creation.

Finally, the areas of rough grazing, included on the agricultural census returns, can be

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	19044	17682	15622	13095
Glen Isla	11018	9278	10670	4318
Lintrathen	4865	4186	4269	3022
TOTAL:	34,927	31,146	30,561	20,435

There has been a reduction of agricultural hill grazing area of 41% over 20 years. Some of this may be down to woodland creation, and perhaps some of it has been improved to grassland, but the likelihood will be that some agricultural units are simply no longer operating. Such a reduction in hill area being grazed by livestock is perhaps more significant than might have been imagined.

The figures show the numbers of properties declaring hill grazings in their census returns.

Parish	2004	2014	2019	2024
Cortachy & Clova	17	16	14	9
Glen Isla	20	25	25	18
Lintrathen	15	13	13	13
TOTAL:	52	54	52	40

The figures are very stable in the first three periods, although an increase in Glen Isla is masking declines in the other two areas. However, there has been a significant decrease in holdings in the last five years. Holdings are of different sizes, and sometimes it is the smaller ones who drop out first, but this decline in holdings using hill grazings does tally with the overall decline in hill area being grazed by livestock. This potentially leaves a greater area available for deer.

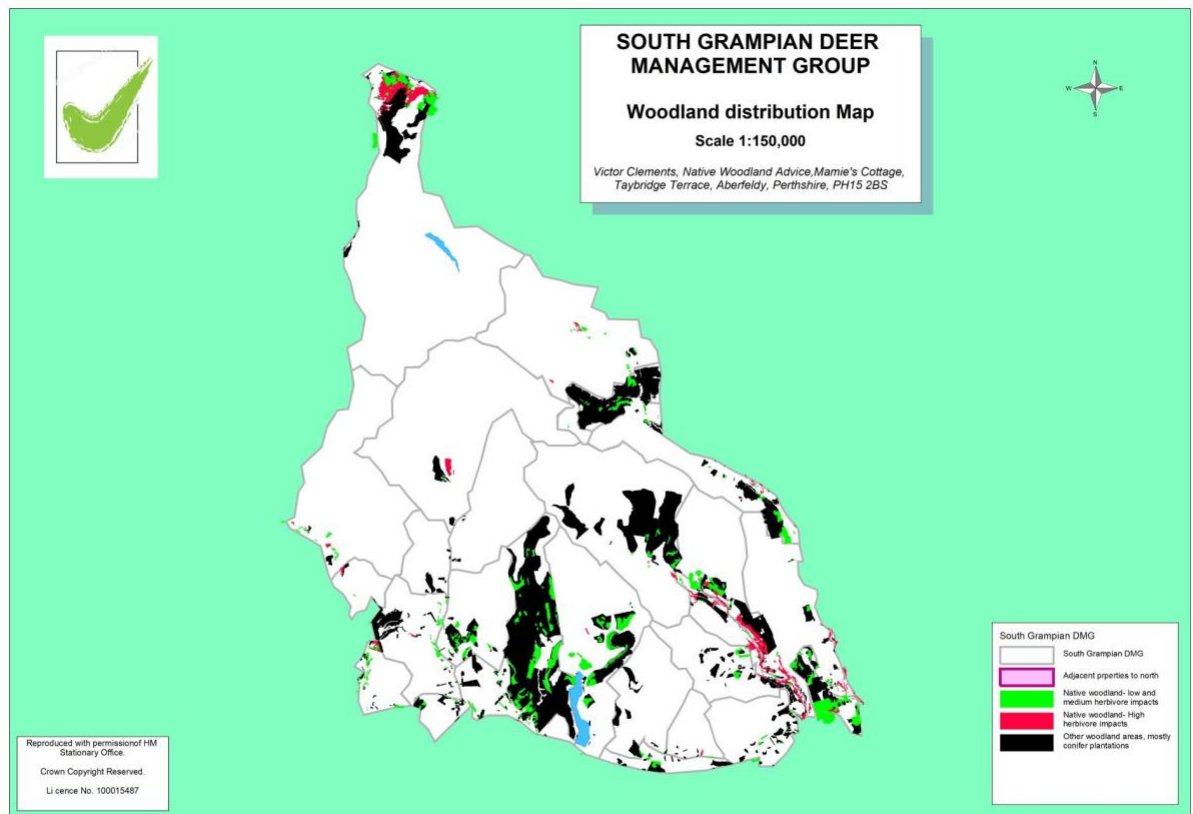
11. Forestry & Woodland Management

The National Forest Index (NFI) gives 6804 ha of woodland within the SGDMG area, or 14% of the whole. This is just under the Scottish average of 18.5%

The major concentration of woodland is in Glenisla and through the middle of the DMG area in general, but there are also significant amounts concentrated to the south and east of the area as well as the concentration of woodlands in the far north of the DMG towards Braemar.

The 2007-2014 NWSS data shows 1691 ha of native woods or 25% of the total, so the majority of the woodland within the SGDMG area is coniferous, and most of that is managed by FLS. Much of this area is on fertile ground, and is genuinely productive. However, some of the glen roads are difficult to negotiate for timber traffic, and this reduces the extent and type of woodland that might otherwise have existed within the DMG. A lot of the private woodland area, largely mixed or native woodland, is managed for shooting.

The following map shows the woodland distribution within the area, shown as **12. SG Woodland Distribution Map** on the website.



There is only one designated woodland site within the area, the Crossbog Pinewood site, which is unusual for a DMG of this type. Deer are not an issue within that area.

The NWSS data shows 74% of the native woodlands at Low or Medium herbivore impacts, which is a fairly high figure. A significant proportion of this area is however likely to be behind fences. The NWSS data is now at least 10 years out of date.

Looking forward, there is likely to be a significant increase in woodland area within the next 5-10 years, potentially 3500 ha. The majority of this is likely to be native species, but there will be a proportion of conifer plantations as well, with people looking to take advantage of the fertile soils present within the area. Of this potential area, 1/3 is within public sector land, mainly FLS, and 2/3 across a range of private properties, with schemes ranging from 150- 700 hectares.

Such an extent of planting would bring the area up to 27 percent tree cover, which would be a significant change in a very short time period.

12. Supplementary Deer Policies

Nature Scot Authorizations

Members will be encouraged to share information within the Group on any out of season

and night shooting authorizations from Nature Scot, over some or all of the land where they carry out the deer control.

The vast majority of deer are culled in season, but woodland deer and deer marauding on farmland in spring can sometimes occur and dealing with this is an important consideration in retaining some flexibility within the Group area. There is no longer a closed season for stags, so authorizations are no longer required.

Winter Mortality

Members will monitor and report any significant levels of winter mortality to the Group, or any significant health issues encountered. It is considered that mortality within the group is approx 2% for adults and 6% for calves in their first year. Recruitment varies significantly across the sub areas, and it is important to quantify this within each area individually. DMG records include a good deal of spot recruitment data, with a lot of variation within this, both between years, and between different properties in the same year. These figures are used in the current population models for SGDMG.

Deer Related Traffic Incidents

It is agreed by the Members that they will keep records of any collisions between deer and cars or other vehicles in their area together with relevant information (eg. location, species of deer, fate of deer, damage to vehicle, human injuries), while also recording dead deer in their annual cull returns and where appropriate, larder sheets. Members may also wish to contribute to the national project collating RTA reports which can be accessed at <http://www.deercollisions.co.uk> Members recognize that deer related traffic accidents are receiving more attention nationally and that there may be places in the Group area where deer can be a particular hazard. Within the SGDMG area, there are a very small number of DVCs recorded, largely because the area is devoid of roads.

A summary of such collisions can be seen at **10. SG DVC map**, covering the period 2000-2018.

Deer Fences

Attaining an up to date picture of the status of these fences should be a priority for the group. Almost all significant woodland areas within the Group area are fenced off from deer, although many areas are retained as deer shelter.

Deer densities are such that it is generally held within the SGDMG area that new plantings/restocked areas be fenced. Group members will take account of the Joint Agency Fencing guidelines, which are shortly to be renewed.

Supplementary/ diversionary Feeding

There are currently five DMG members who feed deer, with the objective being to try and maintain stags in areas where they are unlikely to be culled by others.

Members agree that they will inform the Group if they decide to undertake any such feeding in period of this Plan, or if any significant changes are made to current practice. All deer feeding which takes place will comply with industry Best Practice.

Venison Marketing

Larder provision within the group is generally very good. Group members share a

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commitment to high standards beyond the larder door. However, only five members of the DMG are quality assured, which is low for DMG areas of a similar type and location. Almost all facilities would qualify for the standard, but many members consider the poor returns do not justify additional expense and paperwork. As a matter of general principle, members support the local consumption of locally shot, high quality venison.

A wide range of game dealers and processors are used by group members, with no one organization having a dominant role.

13. Non- native Species Policy

At present, as well as the native red and roe deer, there are known to be very occasional sika deer within the DMG boundary, along with a small population of fallow deer within the forestry in Glen Isla.

Sika Deer

There is no desire from any Group members to see Sika deer become established in the area. For this reason, all Sika deer will be culled within accepted seasons, or using authorizations if required, and such culls reported to the Group for the information of other members.

Fallow deer

It is recognized that there is a very significant fallow deer population to the south and south west of SGDMG area, where some properties place an economic value on them. Within South Grampian, the policy will be to try and contain as small a population as possible within the Glen Isla woodland block, and not to let their numbers spread to adjacent areas.

Other non- native species

Sightings of any other deer species, notably muntjac, will be reported immediately to both the deer group and to Nature Scot, and efforts made to remove such animals as quickly as possible. Group members are encouraged to cull such animals first, and report them later.

There are no wild goats within the area.

14. Communications Policy

The South Grampian DMG is committed to the transparent communication of all relevant information to its members, to government agencies and to the public more widely, with the

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caveat that some sensitive data will be distributed to group members only.

The primary source of information about the Group will be on its website: <https://sgrampianandmg.deer-management.co.uk/> and on which all information relevant to the group can be located. This will include the deer management plan and associated maps, a constitution, minutes of group meetings, and population models.

All enquiries to the Group should be made through the Group Secretary via email, or if necessary, to the Group Chairman. Their contact details are:

South Grampian Deer Management Group

Group Secretary: Victor Clements

victor@nativewoods.co.uk

Independent Chairman

Doug McAdam

Dougmcadam50@gmail.com

The contact details for individual properties will not be available as a matter of course through the Deer Group or website, although the Secretary can put you in touch with the relevant people if appropriate to do so. No cull information on individual properties will be made available outwith the membership of the Group and Nature Scot.

Every effort will be made to deal with non-emergency issues within 10 days. More pressing issues will be dealt with promptly if appropriate.

For more long established or strategic issues, it may be appropriate for the issue to be brought up at a deer management group meeting, which take place at six monthly intervals. The Chairman may recommend this to you. The spring meeting will be an open meeting to which anyone is entitled to attend. Items for inclusion on the Agenda for such meetings must be submitted to the Group Chairman three weeks in advance of the meeting, otherwise they can be taken up under “Any Other Competent Business”. Any item that is not deemed appropriate for discussion on the Agenda will be addressed in some other, appropriate fashion. Please respect the judgement of the Chairman if his view is that, in the first instance, an issue should be dealt with outside a formal group meeting. This may be because of time pressures, or the nature of the issue at hand.

All local Community Councils and other relevant interests will be made aware of meetings in advance, and invited to contribute to the agenda for these.

Local input on the continuing evolution of the group Deer Management Plan is welcomed and encouraged. Property contact details are not being made public through the website, but are available on request to Group members and community interests as required.

Any queries about the running of the DMG can be addressed to Nature Scot, at any of the contact points listed here below:

Nature Scot Contact

Graeme Taylor is the current Nature Scot Wildlife Operations officer covering the South Grampian area: Graeme.Taylor@nature.scot . He is assisted with Section 7 matters by James.Irvine@nature.scot

For more general deer enquiries: licensing@nature.scot

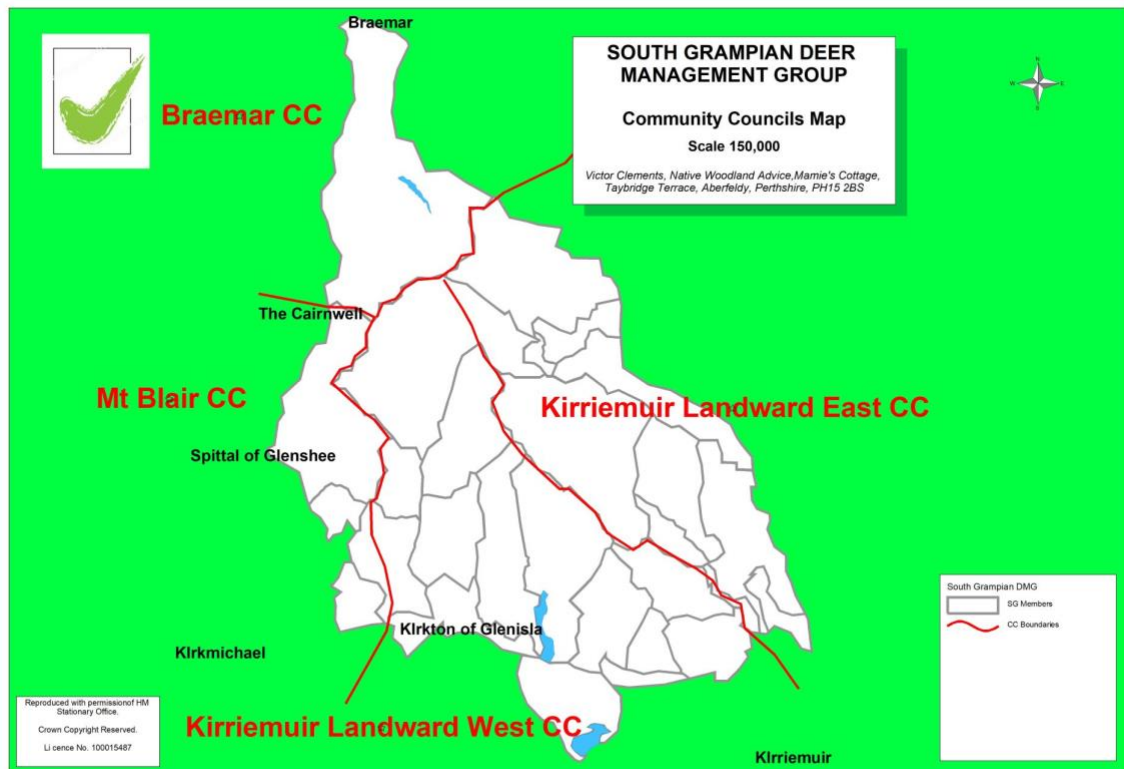
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SGDMG will seek to respond to any requests from media sources or the local public for information, and individual members may arrange, from time to time, appropriate open days and information events if these are requested or deemed to be useful.

SGDMG welcomes comment on all matters either directly or indirectly associated with deer management within the South Grampian area.

The community councils covering the SG DMG area are shown on the map below, and can be located on the website as [5. SG Community Councils Map](#).



15. Training Policy

SGDMG encourage and facilitate the attainment of all qualifications and training necessary for the delivery of effective deer management within their area of operation, and support continuing professional development through the adoption of Best Practice Guidance and other relevant courses .

The recognized and recommended industry standard for culling deer is that all those personnel involved in deer management should attain level of Deer Management Qualification (DMQ) Level 1 or equivalent.

There are 38 X personnel involved with deer management within the area, although some of these play a relatively minor roll, and FLS have a pool of 13 X personnel, most of whom are contract stalkers who will have stalking obligations in other areas as well.

As at August 2025, 33 of the 38 personnel involved in deer management in the SGDMG area have obtained the DMQ Level 1 qualification.

The DMQ Level 2 qualification is increasingly held as the de facto industry standard for professional stalkers, which requires the identification, stalking, dispatching and larding of deer under supervision.

At August 2025, 27 of the 38 personnel involved in deer management in the SGDMG area held the DMQ Level 2 qualification.

For those expected to larder deer and prepare them for the human food chain, industry requirements are that they have attained Trained Hunter status. This is the equivalent of any DMQ course passed after 2006, or an upgraded version of DMQ1 passed before that time.

At August 2025, 31 of the 38 personnel involved in deer management within with SGDMG area had trained hunter status.

All personnel requiring to take deer under special authorizations must be on the Nature Scot “Fit & Competent” register. The requirement for this is to hold the DMQ Level 2 qualification, or DMQ Level 1 plus two references.

At August 2025, 28 X personnel in the SGDMG area required to take deer under authorization, and were on the Fit & Competent register. This relatively low number reflects the fact that the vast majority of deer within the area are culled in season and during daylight hours.

All personnel within the area are encouraged to be proficient in First Aid, manual handling, ATV driving and maintenance and other tasks which are central to their job. In some areas, the use of boats s required. SGDMG will monitor the level of skills among staff in the DMG area, and undertake to facilitate any such courses or training that may be necessary to put right any deficiencies that are identified. All estates will support their staff in attaining the agreed standards, especially in all matters relating to Health & Safety, both of personnel and visiting guests.

Group members are encouraged to bring forward any suggestions for suitable training that might be of relevance to the Group as a whole, or to ask for support in arranging training for their staff. The most relevant training going forwards is likely to be in relation to habitat surveying and monitoring work. While many group members are already capable of doing this, others will require some structured training, and the management of such activity across the area will be an important function for the group to be able to undertake.

16. Reviewing the Plan

This Plan provides an agreed framework for a co-ordinated and co-operative approach to deer management in the area. The actual implementation of the Plan will be decided on an ongoing basis at the Group’s spring and autumn meetings, with scope for the Membership to adjust and adapt the Plan to meet changing circumstances. This Plan, with its attendant maps and databases will be circulated along with the Agenda to all group members prior to meetings, any changes actioned, and the revised plan included with the minutes of that meeting, or at a suitable time thereafter. Group members are therefore encouraged to report all changes in contact details, personnel or management practices that might be relevant to the group, or any potential upcoming projects that might affect deer management within the area, even if such proposals are still at a planning stage.

The population models and maps will be updated on an annual basis as required, with the former adjusted so that it is always looking five years ahead.

The Members agree that there will be a more systematic review of the Plan and its provisions during autumn 2030 and thereafter, 2035, and, if considered necessary, the production of a revised edition of the Plan will be actioned at these points.

Part Four - OPERATION OF THE GROUP

The South Grampian DMG was assessed against the DMG Benchmark document developed by the Association for Deer Management Groups in 2014, 2016 and 2019, with an ADMG health check also undertaken in 2018. In this section of the plan, an account is given of how the Group currently meets the recommended operating criteria and, where appropriate, correcting or amending actions are listed. An informal 2025 re-assessment has been made as part of this management planning exercise.

Area & Boundaries

One of the major issues affecting the group is that it straddles the boundary between the traditional red deer range and the transition zone through to the very fertile and productive arable areas along the east coast. Many of these areas did not have any red deer at all in the past, but land management has changed, and red deer are there now, often in significant numbers. For the deer group, a reasonable level of participation is achieved from these areas, but as the DMG area extends towards the more productive farmland zone, interest and capacity for deer management fragments and this makes everything more difficult.

There is also likely to be deer movement between the NE corner of the DMG and the neighbouring South Deeside/ North Angus area.

As a deer group, the DMG boundaries are therefore less secure than most groups further north and west, and this is something that they have to make allowances for and try to understand a bit better as time goes on. Deer in these areas do have a knock-on effect on some of the main issues facing the group as a whole.

Finally, as part of this plan, 4 X new sub areas have been defined within the overall DMG area, and going forwards, management will be discussed and addressed on this basis.

Action Point

- 1.1 Monitor the operation and accuracy of the 4 X sub area population models during the course of this plan, and review as required.*
- 1.2 Welcome any smaller properties who might wish to join the DMG, including any tenant farmers or woodland properties.*
- 1.3 Be aware of any movements coming through from the South Deeside/ North Angus DMG area, and take these animals in to account when setting cull levels..*

Membership

There is a genuine issue within the DMG at the moment in that 5 X properties are no longer subscribing members, and a number of other properties are very sceptical about having the value of a group at all. Much of this relates to the history and frustrations surrounding Caenlochan over the years, but there are also a number of properties towards the east of the Group area who consider that their management priorities are completely different to others to the north and west, that those issues dominate group meetings, and that their own issues never get properly discussed. Some feel that they are capable of managing their own situation in conjunction with their near neighbours, and a less formal mechanism for doing this might be more effective for them.

It is hugely important for South Grampian DMG to try and resolve these issues, to bring back those properties who are no longer subscribing, and to develop a sub structure that allows the properties around the southern and eastern edges of the DMG to operate better in a way that suits them.

Beyond this, it may be helpful to have a Reporting member status for any smaller properties who do not wish to become DMG members, but who are happy to forward information, and contribute to meetings.

Action Points

- 2.1 Resolve the various issues that have been affecting the Group for many years, and try to re- recruit those properties who are no longer subscribing members.*
- 2.2 As above, implement an effective sub area structure that allows for the differences in management objectives across the area.*
- 2.3 Welcome any smaller properties who wish to become DMG members.*
- 2.4 Have a Reporting Member status for any properties who may not wish to become members as such, but who will receive all DMG communications, and submit count and cull data as required.*

Meetings

The group traditionally meet twice a year, in autumn and late spring, with addition Section 7 meetings as required, although the main Section 7 meetings are combined with DMG meetings now.

A new sub structure may require additional meetings, so it is important to be aware of that, and to support those meetings properly if that is required. Online meetings will make all this easier in many situations.

The DMG should identify 2 X vice chairs to help co-ordinate and run local meetings as required, as well as supporting the DMG Chair in dealing with overall group function and strategy.

Action Points

- 1.1 DMG to decide on most appropriate schedule of meetings going forwards to allow for a sub- area structure, and to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to support this structure.*
- 1.2 DMG to consider the selection of two vice chairs to help in the running of the group.*
- 1.3 Continue making agendas and minutes available on DMG website*

Constitution & Finances

The Group have a constitution in place already, although this will be revised to be more in line with the constitution template endorsed by ADMG.

Over the past year or so, the DMG have moved from quarterly invoices to one annual invoice, and that seems to be working fine.

That some properties within the group do not subscribe puts additional costs on to others. This is begrudged in some quarters, and it is not sustainable for this situation to continue indefinitely. All properties within the area should be subscribing members.

A number of properties within the area question why DMG costs are higher than most other groups of similar size. This is in part due to having an independent chairman, but also because the administrative fee was tendered on the basis that the DMG was quite fractured, and would therefore require more time to support it properly.

For a relatively small group, it should be possible to achieve cost savings if the operation of

South Grampian DMG

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the DMG becomes more settled, but that can only take place by dealing with the various issues that have been causing problems over many years.

As a final issue, South Grampian DMG are one of very few groups in the country not to pay membership subscriptions to ADMG. There are a variety of reasons for this, but if the DMG can get a better direction of travel again and become more sustainable, then they should look to becoming ADMG members again. The DMG do pay ADMG for website usage.

Action Points

- 4.1 Continue with invoicing once annually.*
- 4.2 Prepare budget and accounts in advance of each spring meeting/ AGM.*
- 4.3 Try to recruit 5 X properties as subscribing members, and reduce costs to other members.*
- 4.4 Look to reduce DMG running costs where possible.*
- 4.5 Consider membership of ADMG again.*
- 4.6 Re- vamp the DMG constitution*

Deer Management Plan

This new plan is being developed to try and deal with all the various issues happening within the DMG boundary, and to try and shift the focus away from Caenlchan a bit as the single management issue that has defined the DMG for over 20 years. Planning around all the woodland plantings will be particularly important, with a likely total area approaching 3500 ha over 5- 10 years.

It is the intention to try and have a new plan that can be endorsed at the November 2025 autumn meeting, or failing that, at a spring 2026 meeting of the group. This will include guide deer densities, and population models to achieve that. Changes to the structure of the DMG have also been suggested.

The group will look to take forwards the Working Plan, including it on the agenda of all subsequent meetings going forwards.

The Group strategy should be to remove the requirement for any additional statutory interventions beyond the term of the current Section 7 agreement.

Action Points

- 5.1 Endorse updated DMP by April 2026, if not possible by November 2025.*
- 5.2 Ensure a system of communications is in place whereby local interests have access to the plan, and can input to future development of it.*
- 5.3 Add Working Plan to Agenda of all subsequent meetings of DMG*
- 5.4 Discuss and agree deer cull targets at sub area level to be taken forwards by DMG members, and update population models accordingly.*
- 5.5 Try to remove the requirement for any further statutory interventions beyond the term of the current Section 7 agreement.*

Code of Practice on Deer Management

The code has been endorsed in both this plan and in the constitution of the Group. The terms of the Code will be delivered through implementation of this plan, and the Code will

guide all actions taken by the group and by individual members.

Action Point

6.1 Ensure adherence to code at all times, both by the Group, and by individual members. This action point will provide an opportunity for all members at meetings to bring up issues that may be of concern to them re: deer welfare or management.

ADMG Principles of Collaboration

The ADMG principles of collaboration are accepted and endorsed by the Group and by individual members, namely:

- We acknowledge what we have in common, namely a shared commitment to a sustainable and economically viable Scottish countryside.
- We make a commitment to work together to achieve that.
- We accept that we have a diversity of management objectives and respect each other's objectives.
- We undertake to communicate openly with all relevant parties.
- We commit to negotiate and, where necessary, compromise, in order to accommodate the reasonable land management requirements of neighbours.
- Where there are areas of disagreement we undertake to work together to resolve them.

These principles are also referenced in the South Grampian DMG constitution.

Best Practice Guidance

All deer management within the group area will be carried out in accordance with Best Practice guidance, and group members will input to this process and seek to influence it as it continues to evolve.

Data & Evidence gathering- Deer Counts

There has been a huge number of deer counts covering the whole or part of the DMG area over 25 years. Much of that information has arguably confused the situation and analysis required.

Going forwards, the DMG needs to have the discipline to conduct independent counts every 3-5 years only, and to concentrate on population modelling and impact monitoring for the period between counts.

Foot counts are less useful than they might otherwise be, given the mobility of the deer herd. This is likewise the case with monthly estate counts.

It is likely that in the period of this plan, drone counting will become more cost effective at a DMG or sub area level. This is likely to be more effective within South Grampian than helicopter counts. Drone counts should also be able to detect (1) Roe deer and (2) Mountain hares. Quantifying these additional species is likely to add a significant level of added value to any future counts that are conducted, but the AI technology to do so is not yet complete. The DMG should use recruitment counting on an annual basis, with the caveat that counting the open hill area inevitably leads to an under-estimation of the DMG recruitment rate as a

Action Points

9.1 The group should develop and use population modelling and recruitment counts on an annual basis. Information on mortality shall also be collated where it is felt this might be significantly different to normal levels

9.2 SGDMG to have discipline not to count any more regularly than every 3-5 years.

9.3 There is an obvious role within the DMG area for focused drone counts, but these should be carried out in place of helicopter counts. It may be possible to use drone counts to quantify roe and mountain hare numbers, perhaps in future years when the technology has been tested more.

9.4 All count information to be made available on a Reporting Unit basis, so that neighbours can be more aware of densities on their boundaries.

Data & Evidence Gathering- Culls

Deer cull information within the DMG is good. This DMP however does create a number of new reporting units within a small number of properties, to make cull and count information more apparent and useful to neighbours.

Action Point

10.1 Update the population models and target culls on an annual basis, using recruitment and mortality data collected, as well as actual culls from the previous year.

10.2 All cull data to be presented on a Reporting Unit basis, so that it is more apparent where deer are being culled. This only applies to a small number of properties.

Data & Evidence Gathering- Habitat Monitoring

There have been 5-6 properties who have either conducted their own HIA in recent years, or engaged a contractor to do this on their behalf. For the Caenlochan SSSI/ SAC area, very extensive HIA was carried out in 2018, which demonstrated that impacts were still very much more than target. That work was both extensive and expensive.

For context, Nature Scot are currently looking at HIA methodology, trying to align it better with designated sites SCM methodology. There is no Best Practice methodology for assessing upland grassland habitats, which is arguably one of the most important habitats in the wider DMG area.

Previous analysis in this document suggests that for much of the lower and middle slopes within the DMG, that grazing levels are well within recommended guidelines, but that the much more sensitive montane areas are damaged because of the grazing pressure in the wider area. This represents two very different scenarios.

Deer numbers within the DMG are broadly similar to what they were at the last HIA in 2018, and sheep, if anything, appear to have increased since then by 600 animals in Zone 1. It is realistic therefore to expect that impact levels have not changed much from that time.

The recommendation in this report is that DMG members do NOT participate in HIA, until such times as a clear strategy has been developed for Caenlochan, unless this is useful for their own individual property purposes.

If a strategy emerges during 2025-26 which people are happy to endorse, then a monitoring plan will be developed to help inform that. In the meantime, priority should be given to delivering actual culls and restructuring the DMG.

The assumption at present is that the high montane habitats continue to be highly impacted by grazing pressure.

Action Points

11.1 The DMG will not prioritize HIA monitoring until such times as a clear strategy has been agreed for Caenlochan.

11.2 Nature Scot to align HIA and SCM monitoring methodologies, and devise a Best Practice method for monitoring grassland habitats which stalkers can use to inform their work.

Competence

Of the 38 personnel involved in deer management within the SG DMG area, the following qualifications are held:

DMQ Level 1:	33
DMQ Level 2	27

31 personnel hold trained hunter status, and 28 personnel are on the Nature Scot “Fit and Competent” register. Note: in this latter case, personnel only need to be on the register if they are applying to cull deer under authorization at night or out of season. The greater number of stalkers within the group do not apply for such authorizations, and therefore do not require to be on the register.

Office bearers from the DMG have attended courses ran by the Association of Deer Management Groups in relation to operation and leadership within local groups.

Action Point

12.1 DMG members will seek to ensure that DMQ Level 1 and Trained Hunter status are delivered as the now accepted industry standard for all personnel involved with deer management within the area, and encouragement will be given to professional stalkers to achieve DMQ level 2.

12.2 Training and support will also be sought from ADMG where that is required to help with running of the Deer Management group.

Training

A Training Policy is included earlier in this document.

A number of DMG personnel have brought up the issue of them not feeling confident enough to speak at DMG meetings, and the frustration they then feel about this afterwards. It is proposed that potential funders and training providers be approached about this, to try and design a bespoke course for people, possibly through the Common Ground Forum, or a variation of the Rural Leadership Programme that was run by Scottish Enterprise in the past. ADMG already recognize the importance of leadership in the sector, with travel bursaries being made available for people through the Deer people fund. Making something available for a much wider group of people of all ages in Scotland would provide benefits

South Grampian DMG

Background Information & Policies

more quickly and more widely if that could be achieved. Such a course would look to instil a mixture of personal confidence and development, encouraging people to communicate their thinking, and contribute more effectively to DMG meetings and local initiatives.

Going forwards, it is intended to add a Health & Safety and Wellbeing item to all future meeting agendas, so that important issues relating to staff working environments are not missed at meetings.

Action Points

13.1 Promote and facilitate the uptake of appropriate deer management qualifications.

13.2 Be aware of the ongoing development of Best Practice Guidance and any new techniques or standards that arise from that.

13.3 Review training needs on an annual basis at spring DMG meetings.

13.4 Specifically, look to develop and take forwards a personnel development course for DMG stalking personnel in particular, but also agency and other public sector staff who feel that such an initiative might be useful to them in helping them contribute effectively to DMG meetings.

13.5 Add Health & Safety to the Agenda of meetings.

Venison Marketing

The quality of deer larders across the DMG is generally very good, but only 5 X properties are members of the Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) scheme, so SGDMG is one of the poorer areas in this respect, and very obviously so when compared to the standard of some of the deer larders that are in evidence. Facilities are not the limiting factor in this. It simply appears that estates see no benefit in being part of a quality assurance scheme. This is a common criticism of SQWV accreditation across the country, but the sentiment seems to be particularly strong in South Grampian.

In almost all cases, properties do not consider being SQWV accredited as being worthwhile. The scheme needs to be easier to access, and costs reduced if smaller and medium sized properties in particular are to consider being members.

Action Points

14.1 The DMG members will work to increase SQWV accreditation across the area, and try to identify the barriers to this happening.

Communications

A Communications policy is included in an earlier section of this document.

The annual communications strategy will involve making all relevant documents available through the ADMG and South Grampian DMG websites, including notices to local stakeholders and the opportunity to contribute to the Agenda of meetings, holding one open meeting a year, answering all requests for information from the media and arranging open days and demonstration events where these are appropriate.

All local stakeholders, including community councils have been consulted on the development of this plan. See [5. SG Community Councils Map](#).

Action Point

15.1 Implement the communications strategy as agreed, and ensure a mechanism is in place for dealing with business and issues between meetings.

Part Five - PUBLIC INTEREST OUTCOMES

The South Grampian DMG has been assessed against the DMG Delivery of Public Interest

document developed by Scottish Natural Heritage/ Nature Scot and the Association for Deer Management Groups in 2014, 2016 and 2019, and have taken part in the ADMG health check in 2018. In this section of the plan, an account is given of how the Group currently delivers public benefit and, where appropriate, correcting actions are listed.

Develop Mechanisms to manage deer

SGDMG will undertake an informal assessment process, before and after any new plan being endorsed, and action points will be taken from this to improve management going forwards.

All associated deer plan documents, maps and minutes of meetings will be published on dedicated SGDMG website space, www.sgrampiandmg.deer-management.co.uk

Action Points

PIA 1.1 Publish and endorse the new updated SGDMG Deer Management Plan by April 2026.

PIA 1.2 Re-assess the Group against the updated Benchmark criteria once DMP has been endorsed, by April 2026, and act on any correcting actions which are apparent from this.

PIA 1.3 Review the Working Plan on a six- monthly basis and minute progress and changes.

Delivering Designated Features in to Favourable condition

For over 20 years, the DMG area has been dominated by overgrazing on the Caenlochan SSSI/ SAC site, but there are also features in Unfavourable condition on the nearby Glen Callater and Garbh Choire sites. It is this cluster of features that should be considered, not just the Caenlochan site which is the one with the highest profile.

Commentary of this issue can be found earlier in this document. The priority going forwards is for the DMG and Nature Scot to negotiate a target deer density that can be maintained for the period of this plan, to allow estates to properly plan their land management. This is almost impossible in the current situation, and it is imperative that the uncertainty around this subject is addressed.

Specific actions will be laid out in the Working Plan associated with this document, including draft population models.

There are no other priority designated sites within the DMG area.

Action

PIA 2.1 Agree target deer density for Zone 1 that will ensure an acceptable level of progress across the designated upland features in Unfavourable condition.

Manage Deer to retain existing Native Woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term.



Native woodland in lower Glen Prosen

There are approx 6804 hectares of woodland within the SGDMG area, covering 14 % of the area of the Group (National Forestry Inventory, NFI). This is a bit below the national average of c 18.5 %, but it is important to consider the relatively high proportion of high mountain tops and designated features that would not be suitable for planting in comparison to many other parts of the country.

Of this area of 6804 ha, a high proportion is productive conifers, with the remaining area being comprised of broadleaves, mixed woodlands, young plantations or assumed woodland.

Of the total native woodland area of 1691 ha (NWSS), the following herbivore impact levels are currently given:

Low: 490 ha or 29%

Medium: 769 ha or 45%

High: 143 ha or 8%

Very High: 289 ha or 17%

The SGDMG area therefore had 74% of native woodlands at Low or Medium herbivore impacts at the time of NWSS, one of the better DMG areas in the country, although a significant part of this woodland area will have been behind fences.

Native woodlands as a whole are now considered to be in satisfactory condition by Nature Scot if herbivore impacts are in the low or medium categories, canopy cover is greater or equal to 50%, native species comprise more than or equal to 90 %, and invasive species comprise less than or equal to 10%. However, higher expectations can be made of designated areas, and other high value ancient woodland sites.

Actions

PIA 3.1 The DMG needs to ensure that all personnel can undertake basic herbivore impact monitoring in woodlands, given the scale of woodland area which they might wish to monitor in the period of this plan.

Demonstrate DMG contribution to woodland expansion target

As noted earlier in this document, there is potential for up to 3500 ha of woodland creation

within the next five year period, although the progress of many projects appears to be very slow.

It will be important to take account fully of all this, and implement appropriate compensation culls for areas removed from the open range, and population models and projected densities should reflect this.

Actions

PIA 4.1 SGDMG members to establish up to 3500 ha of new woodland creation over period 2026-31.

PIA 4.2 Population models to fully reflect the compensate culls necessary to facilitate planting projects.

Monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside

Within the DMG area, it is considered that there are the following areas of a range of broad habitat types, taken from the LCS88 dataset. A full summary of the habitat types can be found in the Excel spreadsheet: **SG Habitat Type Summary**. This is a particularly good set of data for this area, with no obvious sections obscured by cloud across the whole area. The data is now over 37 years old.

The main open ground habitats in the group are:

3102 ha of species rich, smooth and nardus dominated upland grasslands, covering 6% of the DMG area.

3084 ha of miscellaneous montane habitats, covering 6% of the DMG area.

23,903 ha of undifferentiated heather moorland, covering 50% of the DMG area.

7060 ha of blanket bog, or 15% of the DMG area.

2908 ha of improved grassland and arable land, covering 6% of the DMG area.

Finally, 469 ha or 1% of the DMG area is covered by miscellaneous features, the greatest part of which is accounted for by water and cliffs.

Action Points

PIA 5.1 As previously suggested, open ground HIA monitoring will not be advised for DMG members until such times as an agreed strategy can be agreed for Caenlochan, and other important changes made to HIA methodology. The only exception to this is blanket bog monitoring, as several DMG members have peatland restoration projects either implemented or pending.

Improve Scotland's ability to store carbon

This implies a focus on woodland creation and peatland restoration projects.

Actions

PIA 6.1 Create 3500 ha of new woodland planting in the period of this plan.

PIA 6.2 Carry out habitat monitoring on the blanket bog areas within the DMG to determine their current condition and ascertain what management action, if any, might be required to bring them in to good condition.

PIA 6.3 Discourage any burning that might impact on peatland sites.

PIA 6.4 Contribute to River Basin Management Planning as appropriate when requests to do so are forthcoming.

Reduce or mitigate the risk of invasive, non- native species

A non- native deer policy is included earlier in this plan.

All sika deer will be removed as they are spotted, and fallow deer will be contained within their current boundaries within the south of the SGDMG area.

All members will be vigilant in relation to feral pigs becoming established within the area. If they do appear, then DMG members will seek to form a policy regarding them.

Action

PIA 7.1 Cull spreading sika deer so that they do not become established within the area.

PIA 7.2 Try to contain fallow deer within their current boundaries within the Glen Isla forest blocks, and prevent them from becoming established elsewhere.

PIA 7.3 Report any sightings of muntjac deer to Nature Scot. Muntjac deer should be shot on sight if possible.

PIA 7.4 Be aware of the possibility of feral pigs becoming established within the area.

Protection of Historic and Cultural Features

There are likely to be many hundreds of sites throughout the DMG area that have archaeological or cultural importance. It is likely that for the majority of these that light grazing by deer and sheep will be beneficial in keeping back rank vegetation growth. At present, the DMG are not aware of any cultural sites that are being negatively impacted by grazing. A greater threat to such features will be woodland creation projects that do not ensure adequate buffer zones around such features, or other development projects. The current woodland grant schemes are very good at flagging up potential sites of cultural or historic value.

Actions

PIA 8.1 The DMG will maintain communication with the local community and look to address any issues that are identified with regards to sites of cultural interest and herbivore grazing.

PIA 8.2 As required by Scottish Forestry, all potential woodland creation projects, including natural regeneration schemes, will be assessed by the applicants for any negative impacts on cultural or archaeological sites.

Delivering higher standards of competence in deer management

A training policy and audit is provided earlier in this document.

Of the 38 personnel who are involved in deer management, 33 have DMQ Level 1, 27 have DMQ Level 2, and 31 have trained hunter status. Only 28 personnel are on the Fit & Competent register, but this is a reflection of the low number of deer culled out of season or at night by estate staff. The SGDMG area therefore has one of the better levels of training in the country, especially in relation to DMQ Level 1.

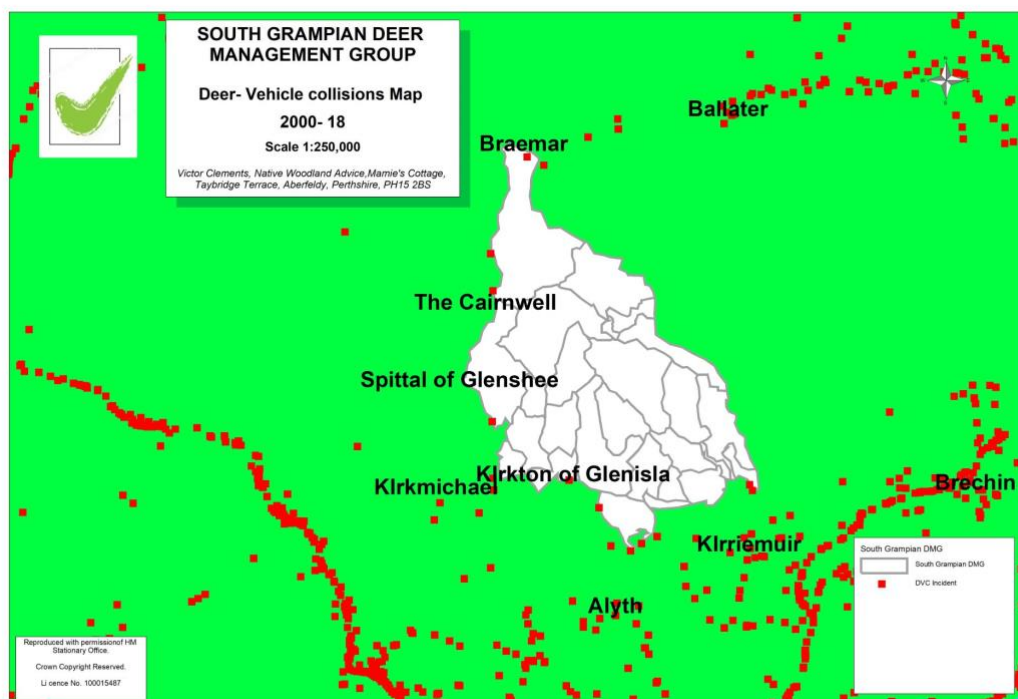
Staff within the DMG area have a wide variety of other qualifications and certificates covering other aspects of their work. These include ATV, Argocat, First Aid, Chainsaw, digger, water bailiff, Health & safety, boat handling etc. There does appear to be quite a strong ethos of training and staff improvement across many of the properties within the DMG.

Action Point

PIA 9.1 Continue to support training efforts within the group as opportunities to do so arise.

Contribute to Public Health and wellbeing

Deer Vehicle Collisions are virtually absent in and around the SG DMG area, but are a lot more abundant on the more lowland areas to the south and east, the vast majority of which will be caused by roe deer. The record of deer collisions from 2000-18 is summarized on the map **10. SG DVC Map**, also copied in here below.



Food safety and meat hygiene is best maintained through appropriate training and facilities, and a high proportion of personnel within the Group have Trained Hunter status. All properties operate their larger facilities to Best Practice standards, although only five of the properties are SQWV accredited, with the added oversight that this provides.

The Trained Hunter training allows personnel to be able to identify any notifiable diseases in deer found in the area. It is not thought that any such problems have been identified in recent years. In any incidences that do occur, the carcass will be held back from the food

chain and a veterinary surgeon asked to inspect.

Members are aware of the threat of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in deer being imported from North America, and ADMG and BDS guidance on this has been circulated to the Group.

All members are reminded to be aware of the risk of tick borne diseases, especially Lyme's Disease, and to communicate such risks to guests and members of the public who might frequent their land through suitable channels.

The sheer number of hill walkers using the area has been mentioned by many properties. There are relatively few ongoing specific access/ deer conflicts within the Group area as a whole, rather pressure exerted on an ongoing basis across much of the area. The larger estates know where the pressure points are, and are generally able to work round these. However, almost all properties have learned that access pressure does make their work much more difficult, and a proportion of stalks are abandoned every year because of this. It tends to be a greater problem for the smaller properties who do not have the same scope of ground that some of their larger neighbours do, and they are generally unable to re-set their plans once ground has been disturbed. There is a feeling that that is just something that has to be accepted, but it puts a lot of pressure on stalkers, and contributes very significantly in the deer congregating in larger and larger groups, which in turn makes them more difficult to stalk, and creates more trampling damage than would otherwise be the case.

Action Points

PIA 10.1 Maintain communication with local Community Councils re: DVCs and look to implement any mitigation which may be deemed helpful in reducing local risk.

PIA 10.2 Remind DMG members on an annual basis about the dangers of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and individual members to ensure safety precautions are taken by anyone who has had recent contact with deer or habitats in North America.

PIA 10.3 DMG to highlight the risks of ticks and Lyme's Disease to their guests and the public more generally through all appropriate channels.

Maximize Economic benefits associated with deer

At this point, it is difficult to write anything meaningful in this section while there is so much uncertainty about what the deer population without the area is going to be in a few years.

However, given some of the choices that may need to be made, it should be an important action point for the DMG to commission some sort of economic impact assessment of various options, something beyond what this plan has been able to produce, and which would withstand public scrutiny going forwards.

Action Points

PIA 11.1 DMG to commission a suitable economic impact assessment of the various options open to DMG members going forwards.

Minimize the economic costs of deer management

This issue can be combined with the previous action point.

Action Points

PIA 12.1 DMG to be aware of changing role and importance of deer management within the area and how the relative economic position changes in the five year period ahead.

Ensure effective communication in deer management issues

Internal communication within the group and with government agencies is very good, and the group has demonstrated an ability to address issues that arise between meetings, dealing with enquiries and putting members of the public in touch with the most relevant people.

The Deer Management Plan, minutes of meetings and other relevant information is being made available through the SG DMG website at

<https://sgrampianmg.deer-management.co.uk/>

There are a number of opportunities to view deer and learn about the natural environment more widely in the area.

Action Point

PIA 13.1 Maintain those actions outlined in the Communications Policy/ Working Plan.

Ensure Deer welfare at individual and population level

There is generally a fairly good cover of heather within much of the DMG area, good access to woodland shelter, and access to better grazing on improved fields. Put together, all these factors tend to result in a deer population that is fairly robust, with high productivity.

A number of properties feed deer in the winter months to protect vulnerable animals and to keep them in locations where they can be readily monitored. More widely, achieving a deer density that allows habitats to move in to favourable condition is likely to produce a more versatile and resilient natural food supply throughout the year, and reduce the need for artificial feeding.

Training and levels of competence within the Group are generally good.

Action Points

PIA 14.1 Focus on bringing natural habitats in to favourable condition status, capable of withstanding browsing pressure and providing good nutrition.

PIA 14.2 Liaise locally on significant woodland management operations where these affect shelter for deer.