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ADMG - KNIGHT FRANK 2006 STAG SEASON REVIEW



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RED DEER REVIEW

Warm weather, hillwalkers and a late rut all contributed towards a changeable season. Tony Jackson presents the 2006 review of Scottish Red Stags

THE KEY elements of the 2006 red deer stalking season in Scotland were the very late rut, a feature that appeared to be general throughout the country, the mild, almost warm weather and the relentless increase in disturbance caused by hill walkers.

A great many stalkers claimed only to have heard the first roar towards the end of September, with no real activity until the first week or so of the following month and more than one forest reported that the rut never really got started, but appeared to be intermittent. Glenturret, Perthshire noted that the rut was very late with stags roaring one day and then quiet for three days, while Garrows, also in Perthshire, did not hear the first roar until 14 October, and very few old and mature stags were seen.

Arthur Duffus, stalker at Balavil, Inverness-shire, found it difficult to understand the rut as the big stags did not appear until the end of the season, while for Brian Green, stalker at Achnacarry South, Inverness-shire the rut started early but came to nothing until the last two weeks of the season. In Argyll, however, the rut started on 1 October at Strone Estate and was steady until the end of the season, while at Strathvaich, Ross-shire a stag was roaring in the third week of August, though the rut proper did not start until a month later. In contrast, at Glenloch, Perthshire while there was sporadic roaring from young stags, mature stags were still holding together and seen holding hinds and roaring in the last week of November.

The overall lateness of the rut and its sporadic nature is largely attributed to the dry summer and extremely mild weather. The early part of the season was, for many forests, very warm and dry with southerly winds, and a lower than average rainfall, a stark contrast to the previous year's season. Allan Cameron, stalker at Inverbroom, Wester Ross, noted, "A very good season with beautiful weather all the way through. The first season in my 13 years here with no snow on the tops for the whole season". It was a conclusion echoed by Ewen Ballantyne, stalker at Arnisdale, Ross-shire, who could not recall such a mild season on the hill, "With the result that the deer were very high and it was a late rut."



Glenquoich

However, not all forests fared so well. Perthshire seems to have suffered from easterly winds and mist. At Invergeldie the last fortnight brought mists and poor light, while weather conditions at Glenturret were also terrible with east winds and mist. At Garrows, although the weather was generally good, a few days were lost to mist in the last week. By contrast, David Pirie, stalker at South Chesthill, reports the mildest October he can recall with summer-like sunshine on the 18 October.

What of the condition of the deer? By far the majority of forests reported that the overall condition of stags was very good to excellent, though a few noted that though the deer were fat, some with kidneys covered in fat, beasts weighed less than expected. Strathvaich, Ross-shire, was one such, as was Arnisdale, also in Ross-shire. The latter observed that, though fat, stags were not as heavy as in previous years.

Several forests also reported that deer were late putting on weight. George Macdonald, stalker from Camusericht, Perthshire stated that stags were in excellent condition throughout the season but, though rolling in fat weighed out lighter than they looked. Only six stags were run from a total of 58 shot. By contrast, at Kinveachy, Inverness-shire, stalker Simon Boulton noted that the deer were slightly up in weight on the previous season but not carrying much fat. Jason Ferguson, stalker from Ardkinglas, Argyll

reported that stags were not only in good condition and fat, even in late run deer, but antler formation was better than average, with some strong dark-antlered animals.

Several forests reported tick problems. At Glen Bruar, Perthshire, few ticks were found on stags in the north of the forest, but in the south they were rampant. Fordie, in Perthshire, also noted many ticks on the deer, and at Remony, also Perthshire whilst no stag carried more than 10 ticks, they were all "monster" size. Atholl also reported an increasing number of ticks, early stags being covered in them.

For many forests the chief problem with which to contend was certainly not the weather or a late rut, but the escalation of hill walking at the height of the season and it is quite apparent that unless, at this critical time, there is some restraint and understanding on the part of those who wish to enjoy the hills, red deer management, commercial stalking and estate income is going to suffer.

North Chesthill Estate, Perthshire reported an increase in incidents and a total disregard on the part of walkers to read signs requesting that the ground be left undisturbed. Deer are chased off the ground and stalks interrupted. "We are being overwhelmed and it is not healthy for deer management or economics. All we want is to be left alone for six to eight weeks".

Another forest, Boreland, Perthshire reported campers leaving litter, while, one beat is now a waste of time at week-ends and on holidays. At Glenquoich, Inverness-shire, more walkers are appearing mid-week and ignoring advisory signs, resulting in very nervous, spooky deer. The same story from Glen Spean, though at Camusericht, although days were disturbed by walkers and mountain bikers, the majority were responsible and asked where to go. There were, however, the usual mindless few who wandered about aimlessly. Alan Cameron, stalker at Inverbroom, Wester Ross noted more hill walkers than ever, mostly being taken out by paid guides but no attempts are made to co-operate.

To balance this, a handful of forests reported no problems with public access. At Culachy, Inverness-shire, for instance, only one day was ruined by walkers, and apart from that there were no problems. However, by far the majority of forests claimed disturbance and doubtless this escalating problem will demand the exercise of considerable tact and understanding on both sides if it is to be resolved.

As usual, there were some notable and curious incidents. A three-antlered stag, last seen two years ago, was back at Glendoe, Inverness-shire, holding hinds, while a stalking party at Coulin, dragging a cull stag off the hill on 18 October, found another stag, still alive despite a nasty wound in its back received while fighting. Two forests reported an increase in blackgame, while another, Auchleeks, Perthshire reported geese migrating to the area almost four weeks later than usual. Ravens, on the same forest, were found to be increasing with large flocks following stalking parties to the hill each morning.

At Corrou, Inverness-shire a sika/red hybrid was shot on Loch Treig side while whistling and holding three hinds against bigger red stags. At Glenquoich stalker Lea Macnally noted that two girls each shot their first stags. Ruby Laing killed the heaviest stag of the season at 17st 3lb, and Eleanor Cooke shot a 13 point head. At Suie, Perthshire, a white-faced hind was seen with two stags, while at Glenmuick, Aberdeenshire, a young stag was seen with a pure white head from the throat upwards. At Glenloch, Perthshire an eagle followed a stalking party, flying a few yards overhead during a long crawl.

Stalker D.Darvil noted that at Ardlair, Wester Ross, on the Fisherfield beat, he and a guest watched an old stag of around 14 years mount the same hind 15 times in 35 minutes, while at Glen Etive, Argyll, Ian Dingwall and guest, stalked and shot a young stag, went to gralloch it, and found another stag lying dead, 25 yards away, which had apparently been killed fighting the previous day.

In conclusion, the 2006 Scottish red stag season will long be remembered for the late and extended rut, the hot, dry summer and generally mild weather during the season and the fact that stags remained in good condition throughout September and October, going in to the winter with ample fat. Hill walkers and mountain bikers, however, continue to cause unnecessary disturbance on many forests.

Aberdeenshire

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Baddoch	Invercauld Trust	various	C Farrel	30	12st 6lb	15st 1lb
Balogie	M Nicol	various	P Littlejohn	22	15st	18st 3lb
Callater	Invercauld Trust	various	M Falconer	50	12st 11lb	16st
Glenmuick	Sir A Walker Okeover	n/a	A B Taylor	92	13st 5lb	17st 5lb
Glen Tanar	M A Bruce	n/a	Eoin Smith	70	13st 7lb	19st 10lb
Mar	n/a	n/a	I Campbell	53	13st 3lb	18st 4lb
Mar Lodge	National Trust for Scotland	n/a	S Cumming	125	12st 10lb	18st 4lb

Angus

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Corrie Fee	Scottish Natural Heritage	n/a	P Stack-Dunne	5	not given	16st 6lb
Glendye	C A Gladstone	n/a	Archie Dykes	69	14st	17st
Glenisla & Glencally	A Bennett & Maj J Gibb	n/a	J Williamson	211	13st 10lb	18st 10lb
Hunthill	H N Keswick	n/a	D Wilson	92	13st 12lb	15st 12lb
Invermark	Earl of Dalhousie	n/a	Fred Taylor	94	13st 6lb	16st 9lb
Rottal	D Ward	n/a	D Collins	39	13st 2lb	17st 12lb

Argyll

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Ardfin	Trustees of Ardfin Estate	n/a	W MacDonald	61	15st 2lb	25st 3lb
Ardkinglas	D Sumsion	n/a	Jason Ferguson	61	10st 7lb	18st 11lb
Argyll Estates	Duke of Argyll	n/a	Tom Kirsop	67	14st	17st 9lb
Blackmount	R P Fleming	n/a	A MacDonald	75	13st 10lb	12st 2lb
Castles	D Rees	n/a	M Brown	5	15st 8lb	17st 7lb
Dalness	R J Fleming	n/a	A Hunter	11	14st 3lb	16st 5lb
Dunlossit	Dunlossit Properties Ltd	various	D J MacPhee	32	14st 7lb	19st
Ederline	Mrs A Wilson	n/a	A Wilson	17	15st 3lb	18st 9lb
Glen Etive	P Fleming	n/a	Ian Dingwall	17	not given	18st 11lb
Glenkinglass	R Schuster	n/a	A Ross	39	14st 7lb	17st
Glen Strae	R Schuster	n/a	M Brown	22	12 st 6lb	17st 9lb
Kilfinichen	A Holman	n/a	L McPhail	39	14st 7lb	20st 7lb
Laggan, Islay	Laggan Properties Ltd	n/a	S Stubbs	26	15st 8lb	21st 4lb
Strone	J M Turnbull	n/a	J M Turnbull	31	13st 7lb	16st 7lb
Tarbert, Jura	Viscount Astor	n/a	G G Muir	50	14st 12lb	20st 5lb

Arran and Bute

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Dougarie Sannox	S C Gibbs C Fforde	various n/a	D Wilcock J A Mckinnon	29 87	15st 2lb 12st 11lb	19st 10lb 26 st 9lb

Caithness

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Dunbeath Glutt	S W Threipland Dunbeath Estates	n/a n/a	W Milne F Mackay	54 27	14st 1lb 13st 6lb	19st 16st 10lb

Inverness-shire

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Aberchalder	Glengarry Estate Trustees	n/a	S Mackenzie	29	14st 6lb	16st 3lb
Achdaliu	West Highland Woodlands	n/a	Alan Currie	38	14st 8lb	22st 2lb
Achnacarry South	D A Cameron	n/a	B Green	48	13st 10lb	17st 7lb
Achnacarry North	D A Cameron	various	A Mcdonald	51	14st 6lb	17st 6lb
Alvie	Dr J Williamson	n/a	G Macdonald	30	13st 2lb	16st 13lb
Ardverikie	Ardverikie Estate Ltd	n/a	D Langlands	140	13st 4lb	17st 2lb
Arnisdale	J Richmond-Watson	n/a	E Ballantyne	39	13st 6lb	17st 9lb
Balavil	A Macpherson-Fletcher	n/a	A Duffus	31	10st 8lb	12st 5lb
Ben Alder & Dalwhinnie	Agro Investment Ltd	n/a	I G Crichton	55	13st 8lb	16st 11lb
Ben More Coigagh	n/a	n/a	G Sutherland	13	not given	
Camusroary	R Crosthwaite-Eyre	n/a	V Stockwell	24	15st 10lb	17st 9lb
Coignafearn	Coignafearn Estate	various	Sandy Dey	205	14st 4lb	19st 6lb
Corrour	Corrour Trust	various	N A Rowantree	230	13st 8lb	19st 2lb
Culachy	Falcon Ridge Holdings	n/a	Scott Bremner	43	13st 6lb	20st 5lb
Dunmaglass	J Hayward	n/a	Iain Hepburn	21	11st 8lb	not given
Garrogie & Stronelarig	C R Connell	n/a	N Stoddart	31	14st 3lb	15st 5lb
Glenbanchor	Glenbanchor Estate	n/a	J Grant	30	13st 7lb	not given
Glen Dessary	Sir Patrick Grant	n/a	n/a	30	15st 7lb	19st 5lb
Glendoe	G & R Vernon	n/a	G Watson	40	13st 12lb	17st 8lb
Glenfinnan	I Leith	n/a	A H Gibson	28	13st 8lb	18st 7lb
Glenmazeran	Englefield Estate	n/a	J Irvine	32	14st 8lb	16st 12lb
Glenquoich	D Gordon	n/a	Lea Macnally	48	14st 3lb	17st 3lb
Glenshero	Alcan Highland Estate	various	B Hendry	152	12st 4lb	17st 7lb
Glen Spean	Messrs Smith & Bruce	n/a	P Hoare	10	not given	
Inverailort	T Leslie	n/a	Archie Gillies	23	15st	18st 4lb

“...the majority of forests reported that the overall condition of stags was very good to excellent”

Affric





Mar Lodge

"A very good season with good weather all the way through"

Allan Cameron, Inverbroom.

Inverness-shire

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Killiechonate	Alcan Highland Estates	various	A Walker	not given	13st 5lb	16st 6lb
Kingairloch/Glensanda	Kingairloch Estate	n/a	D Sturrock	51	14st 1lb	18st 10lb
Kingie	I & H Brown Ltd	n/a	J Cameron	30	14st 4lb	17st 2lb
Kinloch Hourn	H Birkbeck	n/a	D A Cameron	14	14st	16st 2lb
Kinveachy	Reidhaven Trust	various	Simon Boulton	71	14st 2lb	18st 3lb
Mamore	Alcan Highland Estates	various	G Loudon	15	12st 5lb	16st 7lb

Perthshire

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Atholl - Clunes	Bruar Trust	various	R Hepburn	85	12st 12lb	16st 2lb
Atholl-Dalnamein	Bruar Trust	various	Kevin Grant	68	13st 3lb	16st 7lb
Atholl-West Hand	Blair Castle Estates	various	A Reid	72	not given	16st 6lb
Auchleeks	Trustees of I J Mackinlay	n/a	Bob Pirie	45	13st 1lb	16st 6lb
Auchlyne	Mrs Paterson Bancroft	various	G D Coyne	28	14st 2lb	15st 12lb
Boreland	Upper Boreland Trust	n/a	Tim Frost	53	13st	15st 12lb
Camusericht	Agro Investments	various	G Macdonald	58	14st	17st 10lb
North Chesthill	A J Riddell	n/a	H Shearer	26	11st 11lb	14st 10lb
South Chesthill	Maj Gen Ramsay	n/a	D Pirie	50	13st 7lb	16st 6lb
Craiganour	Craiganour Estates	n/a	H Littlejohn	68	9st 6lb	12st 4lb
Corrievarkie	Agro Investments	n/a	R MacGregor	25	12st 1lb	14st 9lb
Dalmunzie	S Winton	n/a	S Hallday	30	not given	20st
Dalnaspidal	Ben Alder	n/a	I Kennedy	55	13st 2lb	15st 4lb
Dunalastair & Crossmount	Iain de Sales la Terrière	n/a	Mark MacKenzie	80	12st 11lb	16st 6lb
Edradynate	M Campbell	A Cargill	A Cargill	21	11st 8lb	13st 8lb
Findynate	not given	n/a	D Stirling	5	12st 10lb	14st 4lb
Fordie	The Lord Tryon	n/a	G Fraser	7	16st 6lb	18st 10lb
Forest Lodge	Blair Castle Estate	various	G Cumming	100	12st 12lb	16st 13lb
Garrows	Garrows c/o Bell Ingram	n/a	R Kippen	38	not given	18st 3lb
Glenartney	Baroness Willoughby	n/a	Alistair Work	117	13st 5lb	18st 9lb
Glenbeich	T Holcroft	n/a	J Murdoch	27	12st	16st 4lb
Glen Bruar	Bruar Trust	various	D M Bernard	40	13st	16st 2lb
Glenloch	S Robertson	n/a	J Barrie/J Sinclair	20	14st	17st
Glenturret	Mr & Mrs Seldon	n/a	Ian MacPhee	3	14st	15st
Innerhadden	L & S Barclay	n/a	C MacIntosh	30	12st 2lb	13st 4lb
Invergeldie	J & R Priestley	n/a	A Rogerson	11	15st 12lb	20st 8lb
North Laggan	Forestry Commission	W Gallant	W Gallant	48	10st 5lb	16st 7lb
Lochs	Loch Estate Trust	n/a	C Murphy	45	13st 1lb	16st
Lude	D Gordon	various	A Stephen	63	12st 7lb	16st 12lb
Meggernie	Mrs B J Malim	n/a	C Murphy	41	14st	17st 12lb

Perthshire

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Monzie Estate	D M Crichton	Glenturret Estate	I Macphee	3	13st 1lb	14st 2lb
Remony Suie	J D Millar Mrs J Bowser	n/a various	A Hogg G D Coyne	19 10	13st 8oz 14st 2lb	16st 12lb 19st 6lb

Ross-Shire & Isle of Lewis

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Ardlair	Clyde Farming	various	D Darvil	25	14st	17st 2lb
Arnisdale	J H Richmond-Watson	various	E Ballantyne	43	13st 6lb	17st 9lb
Dundonnell	Dundonnell Estate	various	A MacDonald	20	not given	19st 2lb
Eishken	N Oppenheim	various	C Macrae	80	12st 6lb	14st 10lb
Inchnadamph	G Vestey	n/a	P MacGregor	66	13st 10lb	16st 3lb
Inverbroom	M Lorimer	n/a	A Cameron	36	13st 6lb	20st
Inverlael	H J E van Benningen	n/a	A MacGillivray	32	not given	23st
Kildermorie	I A Duncan	n/a	D Russell	45	12st 10lb	19st 2lb
Kinlochluichart	Lochluichart Estate	n/a	Jock Logie	70	13st 4lb	17st 6lb
Strathconon	Kirkbi Estates	various	A Cameron	183	12st 4lb	18st 3lb
Strathvaich	Strathvaich Partners	n/a	I Bennett	74	13st 6lb	18st 10lb
Strone	H J E van Benningen	n/a	Ian Fraser	22	not given	16st 3lb
Torridon	National Trust for Scotland	n/a	S MacNally	13	11st 11lb	17st 7lb

Sutherland

Forest	Owner	Tenant	Stalker	Stags Shot	Av Weight	Heaviest
Achentoul	Sir John Nutting	Various	Angus Ross	70	13st 5lb	19st
Ardvar	J G & M Payne	n/a	M Ross	15	12st 9lb	14st 6lb
Benmore	J Vestey	n/a	C Shaw	41	13st 3lb	15st 3lb
Clebrig	J G Nicholson	n/a	H Mackenzie	20	15st 5lb	18st
Croick	J Hall	n/a	A Sutherland	18	17st 4lb	21st
Duchally & Invercassley	Balnagown Castle Properties	Various	Donald Clarke	65	13st 12lb	22st
Kildonan	Mrs M Clay	n/a	A Grant	77	13st 7lb	18st 7lb
Merkland	Trustees of Sheila M G Garton	n/a	A Walker	47	14st 4lb	18st 4lb
Middle Inver	Caledonian Forestry	n/a	C MacLeod	6	10st 7lb	not given
Reay	6th Duke of Westminster	n/a	S R Hubbert	178	13st 6lb	18st 2lb



Ben Damp

"For the second year running Brian Spooner from Diss, Norfolk shot the heaviest reported stag in Sutherland on Balnagown."

Ronnie Hepburn - 5th generation stalker

Dick Playfair

Ronnie Hepburn, Senior Hill Keeper on the Clunes, Dalnamein and Glen Bruar beats on Atholl, relishes challenges - three in particular; stalking, foxes, and what has been described as a good walk spoiled, golf!

Ronnie is a fifth generation stalker following in the footsteps of his great, great grandfather, although that chain will now be broken unless one of his daughters does a career u-turn. But Ronnie's brother has two sons, so there is hope for continuity on that side of the family.

Ronnie's first real job on the hill was at Invercauld in 1976 where, having just left school, he did a season's grouse beating, "a fantastic year for grouse," and was ponyman to Peter Fraser on Baddoch for the stags. Winter he spent behind the counter of the ski-hire shop in Glenshee, and in Spring the following year applied to Atholl Estates for the position of apprentice gamekeeper. He stayed at Atholl for a further seven years, first at Tulliemet pheasant rearing and on the grouse, then moving to the Home beat, and after having one season on the ponies, he took up the position of under-keeper. In 1980 he joined the Atholl Highlanders, and clearly that first spell at Atholl is one of fond and happy memories with Iain Atholl, the 10th Duke, at the helm.



However, it was at Invermark where he moved in 1984 that he discovered his love of stalking, which stays with him to this day and always will. He says:

"I'm absolutely passionate about deer, and when it comes to the defence or justification of deer stalking, I have absolutely no reservations."

At Invermark he initially worked on one of the lower beats which concentrated on grouse, then moving onto a beat where the emphasis was on stalking, but discovered the tangle of 'politics' that surrounded grouse even then. "Not that the 'politics' of deer these days is any better," he says. For Ronnie, Glen Esk was an "amazing" place to live and to bring up a young family. "The glen held so much. It had a significant population, and socially was a great community with loads going on." Ronnie and his wife Liz were a part of all of that, and loved it.

He has great memories of stalking on Invermark where he was for 16 years, and one stag in particular.

"It had antlers which stuck out sideways like handlebars," he says. "We kept seeing it all season with different guests, but never had the chance of a shot. Then, bizarrely, on the last day of the season it just appeared, walking up this burn towards us for what was to be its last time. It was about 8 years old. I've still got the antlers."

And there was the day he took out the Estate cooks.

"On days when there were no guests, Lord Dalhousie would ask us to take out members of staff. It was a good idea. One day I was out with Daphne and Anne, walking quietly in single file up the side of this steep burn. Suddenly behind me there's this noise. I turn around and Daphne has vanished. 'Where's Daphne?' I ask Anne. She'd fallen straight down into this burn, right up to her neck in water - it was the only deep part of the burn for miles.

We hauled her out and took her home, although she was none the worse for wear for her experience, but for me it ruined a good day's stalking! I saw her just the other day, and we still laugh about it!"

In 2000, Ronnie and family moved back to Blair Atholl - he felt it was the right time to move, and the sad, sudden and early death of Colin Reid meant a vacancy for a stalker on Clunes, which Ronnie describes as "a very wet hill, probably the wettest hill I have ever stalked - but none of the guests seem to mind."

Clunes is one of five stalking beats on the Estate, shooting in the region of 80 stags, with 80 more on Dalnamein, and a further 40 on Glen Bruar. 290 hinds were shot collectively over the three beats last season, and Ronnie says that numbers-wise they are now where the Estate wants them to be. All the venison, all Quality Assured, is centrally larderred and goes to Highland Game.

In Ronnie's years as a stalker a lot has changed, kit in particular.

"The quality of the rifles and telescopic sights is now far better, and moderators and bi-pods have improved accuracy no end. Clothing has improved too, which for the wet hill I work on is a real bonus! But good walkie-talkies have really revolutionised working. We don't use ponies on Clunes but, where they do, ponymen don't have to rely on instinct any longer. Gone are the days of waiting for the stalker to wave a hankey or light a fire."

What else has changed?

"On Clunes, access isn't a big issue - it's too low lying and uninteresting for hill walkers, and of no relevance to Munro-baggers. But there are honeypots on the Estate, and the road to Glen Bruar is popular with mountain bikers and walkers alike. But generally there are few problems, although there are more people about now.

"Litter however is an issue. Why is it that people are happy to carry their food and drink out into the countryside, but not carry the rubbish back?"

Deer fencing is another issue which gets Ronnie animated. "I strongly believe that you cannot grow trees without fencing," he says. "Certainly you may need some reduction in numbers to compensate for the ground you are taking away from the deer, but I don't understand culling and culling to nothing instead of fencing where woodland interests and deer conflict. Young trees could become well established in an area without fencing. However, a change in the weather or wind direction could cause deer to go into that area and damage the trees overnight."

He doesn't agree with the deer vs grouse conflict either. "Some grouse moor owners do not want deer at all as they blame them for the demise of the grouse. It is not deer that is the problem, but the ticks that they carry. I have seen many good bags of grouse shot over ground where deer were prevalent."

On a lighter note, Ronnie tells of another memorable day's stalking with a German guest who had never been out before. "In the morning we had stalked into a stag, and the guest had taken a shot just before lunch and missed.

He was furious. John Milne, the ghillie, had carried the lunch up, but the guest wasn't happy - swearing, cursing and not eating anything. John and I had a smile about that.

"Then, after lunch we stalked into another stag, which the guest shot cleanly, everything goes quiet after the noise of the shot, and the remainder of the deer move away. As soon as I get to my feet, the German rugby tackles me, hurls me to the ground, climbs on top of me and starts kissing me. John could not help himself!"

Ronnie is serious when occasion requires. He is on the Executive Committee of the ADMG and the Committee of the SGA, but easily sees the funny side.

When not stalking, there is nothing he enjoys more than being up early on a clear sunny morning with a rifle on his back looking for a fox, or his next game of golf, and this year in June the Atholl Highlanders team has a repeat golf match against the Men of Lonach on neutral ground at Braemar.

And he looks forward to the next round, whether one in the breech or over 18 holes, with that infectious enthusiasm that all who know him will recognise.



Why own a Deer Forest?

Angus Cheape FRICS

I have often thought that the last real countrymen left in Scotland are hill shepherds, stalkers and professional huntsmen. Those who aspire to own a deer forest are well placed to encourage all three and it should be remembered that hunting foxes on foot in the hills is the equal in terms of skill and endurance to the most rugged deer stalking. Yet again in 2006, as has been the case for the previous five years or more, very few genuine Highland estates changed hands and a brief look at what this type of property has to offer an enthusiastic new ownership may be worthwhile.

The Red Deer is the largest wild mammal remaining in the British Isles. Until the Middle Ages natural predation and a hungry human population maintained numbers in balance with the environment. Since the Highland Clearances in the early and mid 19 century and the changing social patterns involving the sale of large tracts of land by impoverished Clan Chiefs to rich incomers, the deer have prospered both in range and numbers. There are possibly as many as 400,000 Red Deer in Scotland at present, about double the number estimated in the mid 1960s.

I doubt even the most prejudiced conservationist would dare argue that Red Deer are other than the most magnificent animals which have adapted remarkably to the hills from their natural woodland habitat. There are of course, as I suggested last year, places where deer are not always welcome; for instance in some eastern parts of Scotland where grouse are a much more valuable and appropriate resource. Nonetheless great stretches of country would be semi-derelict without the deer and the prime objective of deer forest owners should be to succour and preserve the deer herd for posterity.

Notwithstanding the statutory powers conferred on Scottish Natural Heritage and the strong influence of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, vigorous input from the owners of deer forests and other hill land is

essential if viable communities are to survive and prosper in remote areas. National Parks were intended to breathe new life but all too often the introduction of a draconian planning authority has the contrary effect of stifling enterprise through an excess of centralised control and regulation.

ADMG, working in close harmony with the Deer Commission for Scotland, now provides an essential and effective standard by which the perception of biodiversity and the concerns of conservationists can be accurately measured. This should provide genuine reassurance for those with a mind to invest in our wild land.

Demand appears to remain strong and values, although difficult to quantify in precise terms, suggest figures in the region of £40,000 per stag, £5,000-£12,000 per salmon (again it is important to remember that there are many variables) and driven grouse in the region of £5,000 per brace. Not all sales of land or fishing rights necessarily reflect the average but most agents will still apply the rule of thumb.

During much of the year, the effect of the Land Reform Act was most noticeable in the acquisition by the community of the South Uist Estate extending to about 90,000 acres and including the greater part of Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay. Aside from the crofting townships, the community now owns a wide range of assets including fish farming interests, quarries, a let farm and a deer forest with a renowned and skilfully managed herd of Red Deer. Land reform as such has not impacted on the market outwith the crofting counties and recent legislation need not be a cause for concern. Health and safety and impractical food hygiene regulations risk more trouble for owners than the Land Reform Act.

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