

## We are in limbo land

*Photo: Glyn Satterley.  
End of the stag season.*



Richard Cooke, Chairman  
Association of Deer Management Groups

**We are in limbo land. The Deer Review, comprised of the SNH 2016 DMG Assessments, the SNH Report, and the Parliamentary Review by the ECCLR Committee, are all concluded. It remains only now for the Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, to express her conclusions and announce any follow-up actions. While this is imminent at the time of writing, with a print deadline looming I must write on the basis of what we know rather than speculate.**

We do know that the progress made by the DMGs over the last two years has been acknowledged, and that there will be an expectation that it should continue. We need no encouragement to maintain the present pace and direction of travel. Almost all DMGs now have comprehensive and workable deer management plans (DMPs) available online and are putting them into action. The priority for 2017 is for all Groups to get into habitat monitoring and, if the two exemplary DMGs in the north that I have met with over the last month are anything to go by, that process is already well under way. Both are into their second year of Habitat Impact Assessments (HIAs) and have few if any gaps in overall coverage. They are now refining their approaches and beginning to interrogate the data that they are gathering.

This is the path that all DMGs must tread as a matter of some urgency. We expect that there will be a further review in 2019 and SNH is likely to carry out new Assessments of DMG progress in as little as 24

months. However HIAs and all other aspects of DMP delivery should not be viewed as necessary just from an accountability point of view. As habitat managers we can all benefit from increasing our understanding of the complex relationships between environmental condition, herbivore impacts, climate, and land use change (eg forestry and woodland expansion as currently promoted and supported by Government). If we have our own habitat impact information we will also be in a better position to argue that sustainable management is about IMPACTS not purely deer densities, as, disappointingly, was the focus of the SNH 2016 Report. I would direct your attention to excellent and relevant articles by James Fenton and Robbie Rowantree in this issue of Scope.

ADMG will be supporting Member Groups in implementing their DMPs. Our forthcoming Birnam Seminar on 17 July for DMG office bearers will focus on DMPs, HIAs and conflict management. We have commissioned the first in a series of online tutorials based on Best Practice, these being on HIAs (the Scottish Venison Partnership with SQWV and SNH is also working on carcase handling videos). We will also be working with SNH to test and roll out SWARD, the deer data processing system now in its final stages of development. And on our stand at Scone we will be offering one-to-one consultant clinics on Plan writing and implementation. We are also offering a free service, through Linzi Seivwright, to proof read and comment on new or DIY Deer Management Plans.

In summary, what is abundantly clear is that the deer sector must move forward as one. Where some DMGs have less capacity to do so ADMG is there to help. You only have to ask.



## MCGOWAN LTD TAILORED PROJECT PLANNING AND DELIVERY SOLUTIONS FOR PEATLAND RESTORATION

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Natural England  
Peak District National Park  
RSPB  
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Yorkshire Water

National Trust  
Moors for the Future  
Private Landowners  
Scottish Natural Heritage  
Severn Trent  
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# Deer Management in Scotland:

## The report to the Scottish Government from Scottish Natural Heritage – a deer manager's personal view

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Robbie Rowantree

**Many, more expert than myself, have highlighted the numerous inconsistencies in the use and presentation of the data in the Report on Deer Management to the**

**Scottish Government from Scottish Natural Heritage.**

**If this standard of evidence had been presented in a legal context it would, I am sure, have been treated as a mix of assumption and conjecture. It has, in all likelihood, undermined the credibility of SNH to "inform the debate" on sustainable deer management in a collaborative way in the eyes of the practitioners.**

This is a great pity, as at the level where I operate, which is as a crofter, working land manager and secretary of a Deer Management Group, we have developed, over many years, an effective working relationship with local officers of SNH. The strong message that it was impacts on habitat rather than the total number of herbivores, of which deer are a major component in our area, was widely accepted.

To quote the Convener of the former RACCE committee, Rob Gibson MSP, in his letter to the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change on 5 February 2014 he said: *"The committee concurs with the agencies that it is the impacts of deer rather than their absolute number that is most important when considering appropriate approaches to deer management."* To have reverted to a Scotland-wide population model, based on counts that have wide variation in method, and a timescale spanning nearly fifty years, can only be seen as deeply regressive.

We have very good attendance at our DMG meetings including members of the public, and we have offered support and information to a proposed community buy-out of land that is in the red deer range. We have relayed information to the public on deer vehicle collisions and the Group is easily contactable on any deer issues that are raised in our area. Nevertheless, deer management planning has been the main function of the Group and we have modified our Plan to meet the challenges outlined in the *Scottish Land Use Strategy* (SLUS) and *Scotland's Wild Deer - a National Approach* (WDNA). We have also refreshed our planning process in the light of a clarified SNH view of 'the public interest'.

However, the public interest can be quite a challenging target to hit, as it is a variable rather than a constant.

To illustrate my point here is an example from my early schooling. In the 1960s I attended a remote, single room school near the Caithness/ Sutherland boundary called Aultnabreac. The very near railway station is regarded as one of the most inaccessible in the whole of the Scottish rail network, 12 miles from the nearest road. I spent an idyllic childhood here in the heart of what is known as the Flow Country - a vast area of relatively unspoilt wet heathland and blanket bog, with still intact peatland pool systems. In the late 1970s the 'public interest' was in increased forest cover

and timber production and, when linked to some perverse tax incentives, it led to this land of my boyhood being dramatically changed to commercial non-indigenous monoculture forestry in a few short years.

The cost and difficulty of removing the trees and restoring this habitat to as near its original condition as possible has been many millions of pounds. That reversal, it appears, is now in 'the public interest' also.

I was fortunate to have been involved in the early stages of agreeing a method for establishing the DMG Benchmark assessment and I was broadly in favour of the approach adopted, as it flowed logically from a UK and Scottish commitment to the wider international treaty and European environmental legislation framework to the SLUS and to WDNA. The Code of Practice on Deer Management and Best Practice Guidance interpreted this for managers and practitioners.

So I was surprised that the Review focused to quite a large extent on the document *Scotland's Biodiversity - a Route Map to 2020*. It is referenced only once in the SLUS 2016 - 2021, in a policy context table (page 17) and is only one of a suite of bullet points in WDNA and its various annexes. However, it appears half a dozen times in the Review document and is stressed in both the main findings and the conclusion of the assessment.

Graeme Dey, Convener of the Scottish Parliament's ECCLR Committee in his letter to the Cabinet Secretary on the 25 November 2016, following the evidence session on the 1 of November 2016 into Scotland's Biodiversity - a Route Map to 2020 raised concern that *"the number of strategies and their lack of 'join up' has resulted in a lack of clarity over the strategic purpose and therefore in a lack of clarity in the approach for those tasked with delivering a 'step change' for biodiversity in Scotland."*

I can only assume he includes Deer Management Groups in "those who lack clarity" on the step change required. I would not like to infer that the production of the Review document and its very narrow focus on deer numbers/density rather than impacts, coincides conveniently with scrutiny of the 2020 biodiversity targets. The future shape and aim of deer management in Scotland needs to be set in full recognition that it is only one, albeit a critical one, of many pressures on habitats.

I would also like to see the full suite of Aichi targets fully adopted. Review of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee's document *Mapping of the UK Biodiversity Indicators against the Aichi Targets* which is the template that SNH adopts and adapts for Scotland, has some omissions that, in my opinion, undermine the integrity of the Aichi approach.

The five strategic goals, as they are one of the main drivers of Scottish Environment policy, should be well known to the ECCLR committee and particularly Strategic Goal E: *Enhance implementation through planning, knowledge management and capacity building*. This covers targets 17 – 20.



Targets 17 and 18 have no indicator proposed by JNCC and targets 19 and 20 have only the most cursory reference to data gathered. Target 18 states: *"By 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention with the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels."*

A brief review of the available information on meeting this target is disappointing and, without the buy-in from local communities, including communities of interest, the enhanced implementation proposed will be impossible to deliver. The tone of many of the responses to the Committee on the Deer Management Review indicate that the land managers who will implement many of the proposed actions needed to meet the biodiversity targets at the very least feel done unto, rather than their practices and traditional knowledge being respected. It has all the hallmarks of a 'top-down, we know best approach' that leads to poorer outcomes for people and habitats.

The assumptions in section 7.1 of the SNH Report under the heading Wider Social and Economic Impacts should also be challenged. Here it states that: *"available information suggests that if deer densities were lower across much of Scotland, the benefits arising from deer could be largely maintained, and many of the costs (such as deer-vehicle collisions and impacts on forestry productivity) reduced leading to overall enhanced delivery of public benefits."* There is no reference in the document to the source of this 'available information', and therefore such a conclusion must be considered erroneous.

This statement shows a serious misunderstanding of what the uniquely Scottish deer stalking experience is all about. The only type of hunting that is vaguely like traditional Scottish stalking is the upland reindeer hunts in Norway.

The opportunity for mainly European hunters to spend time in open country, where there is a reasonable number of animals to be seen and stalked cannot be underestimated. The bulk of European hunting takes place in woodland, by shooting from high-seats, driving with dogs, or baying with dogs. It is not a visual hunt in the way that Scottish stalking is, and uses a very different set of field-craft skills. Upland stalking in Scotland is regarded by most hunters as one of the most challenging and enjoyable hunting experiences and underpins the draw of international visitors. I doubt there would be much of an attraction to international visitors to come to Scotland and do what they do in their own country.

Many contributors to the 'deer debate' argue that the size and quality of deer would be enhanced and while this is undoubtedly true, it is not trophies that hunters come to Scotland for. It is the visual hunt that has been part of the tradition of the Highlands for many hundreds of years.

It is often stated that stalking was part of the 'Balmoralisation' of the Highlands, but the most cursory research reveals that the love of the chase was very much a part of the Highlander's psyche long before Queen Victoria. This tradition is often overlooked and receives one sentence in the SNH Review (page 54).

In conclusion, three of the great Gaelic poets in their finest works extolled the deer of the open hill.

Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) in his poem The Sugar Burn (Allt an t-Siùcair ) writes:

*Your land is full of stags, heifers, fawns and does.  
Your glens have overflowed with hunting in rugged  
trees and plains.  
How beautiful, fair-headed, dewy is your bog-cotton,  
white and soft on hillocks.  
The moorland brown grouse swarm around in gentle,  
white and soft clusters.*



Duncan Ban MacIntyre (Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir) in his poem "In Praise of Ben Doran" (Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain) tells us of the deer - without giving us the number or the density, unfortunately:

*O they are in Ben Dorain,  
So numerous, various,  
The stags that go roaring,  
So tall and imperious.*

And Sutherland's own Rob Donn talked of the effects of the winter on deer in the Reay Forest in The Song of Winter (Oran a' Gheamraidh)

*Every out-lying creature  
How sinew'd soe'er  
Seeks the refuge of shelter  
The race of the antler  
They snort and they falter  
A cold in their lair.*

It would be a pity if these traditions are to be lost in the same way that the Flow Country of my boyhood was lost, in a flurry of well-intentioned but possibly flawed 'public interest' policy.

The 'silver bullet' solution of dramatic reductions in deer numbers/density might at first appear attractive. If this route emerges then a working demonstration project should be taken forward. This would need to be highly transparent and would need to be clear on the financial implications of any actions taken. Given the comments in the Review of potential effects of getting this wrong, it could well be treated as 'spend-to-save'.

Many of the theories that are being proposed could be tested and used to work up improvements to Best Practice, and give confidence to the land managers who are going to have to implement this on a national scale that it is cost effective and continues to underpin the socio-economics of rural and remote areas.

My traditions, our communities and livelihoods depend on it.

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## From Hill to Grill - Ullapool High School pupils meet their meat

**This spring, second year pupils from Ullapool High School spent two days on the hill with professional deer stalkers to learn about wild venison as part of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership scheme's (CALLP) Outdoor and Woodland Learning Project.**

John Venters from the Assynt Foundation, Don O'Driscoll and Romany Garnett of John Muir Trust, and Highland Council Rangers Andy Summers and Jenny Grant, taught the pupils tracking techniques to allow them to get up close to red deer. They learned how to navigate across rough and uneven terrain, identify tracks, and how to avoid being sensed. They were also shown recently culled deer and given a lesson on butchering methods out on the hill. The deer were then transported to Glencanisp Lodge where the pupils learned more about butchery and got a taste of barbecued venison, ahead of a venison-focused cooking session at Ullapool High School where the pupils made a selection of taster dishes, including meatballs, chilli and cottage pie.

CALLP Education Manager Fiona Saywell said: "Many people's only experience of meat is plastic-wrapped products that are indistinguishable from the animal they came from. The aim of the Hill to Grill programme is to show the pupils how wild venison gets from the open hill onto our plates. The children really impressed the stalkers with their attitude. They were happy to stay quiet while patiently crawling on the ground towards the deer and keen to get hands-on."

Anne Hunter, Deputy Head Teacher of Ullapool High School said: "This was an excellent opportunity and a true cross curricular project which put learning into a realistic context. We could never have done anything like this without the fantastic support of CALLP. I am sure other schools would love to have this opportunity."



Hands on at the butchery demo.  
Photo: Fiona Saywell

Pupil Macy Paton said: "It was really good fun stalking the deer, and very interesting seeing the deer butchered, getting to hold the organs and helping to skin one." Her classmate Darcy Graham added: "It was worth the cold and frozen toes! It gives you an appreciation for nature."

CALLP and the Outdoor and Woodland Learning Project are hugely grateful to Assynt Foundation, John Muir Trust and Highland Council Rangers for sharing their knowledge, expertise and skills to help facilitate successful delivery of the Hill to Grill programme. This was a pilot run, and due to its success we plan to repeat the programme next year.

The Outdoor and Woodland Learning Project is being delivered by the Culag Community Woodland Trust and is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage and The Gannochy Trust.



# Red Deer: Time for New Thinking



Dr James Fenton

**Everything we read in the press gives us the impression that there are too many red deer, that they are overgrazing our hills and are damaging 'habitat'. If people read this often enough, they will come to believe it! However, this is only one perspective and others are possible**

## What determines red deer population size?

A key question is: 'What ultimately determines the natural population of deer in a given landscape?' In fact this question has been answered by the research over the years by Jo Pemberton and her team on an unmanaged deer population on Rum. Ultimately the deer carrying capacity is determined by the quality and extent of the 'greens' (areas of better quality grassland), overlain by climate. Indeed there is evidence for the carrying capacity of deer increasing owing to longer growing seasons.

Deer count figures for a given time on a given estate need to be used with caution: the number of deer at a given site can vary significantly over time. For example, heavy snow on Rannoch Moor results in lots of deer entering Glencoe for shelter. This will be episodic, and may not happen every year. And such a temporary influx of deer may make a nonsense of trying to keep deer numbers down within Glencoe itself.

A cold winter might concentrate deer in a small area, resulting in major vegetation impact. A wet spring might result in high mortality, reducing vegetation impact. These are natural events, but do mean that aiming for 'standardised deer numbers' in a given area is arbitrary.

Although vegetation composition is primarily determined by soils and climate, different grazing levels do result in different vegetation types. There is no answer to the question: 'What is the correct vegetation type?' and 'high grazing impact' does not equate to 'habitat damage':

'damage' is a value-laden word referring to the type of vegetation we humans want in an area, which is often different to what would be present in a natural system.

In any given Highland landscape, there will always be some vegetation types virtually ungrazed adjacent to types very heavily grazed: a whole landscape is never 'overgrazed', it is only that certain vegetation types within it can show high grazing pressure from red deer.

## How many deer should there be?

So how many deer should there be? There is no answer to this question without a stated objective: 'natural' populations will fluctuate, and vary both spatially and temporally: there is not a *priori* reason why at times they should not naturally be high. 'Overgrazing' only has meaning in relation to a stated objective. Certainly if you want trees to regenerate without fencing, then low numbers will be needed: however experience shows that these low numbers will often be an order of magnitude below the carrying capacity of the vegetation: in this case it is the objective which needs questioning, not the number of deer.

There is no unambiguous evidence that humans have caused woodland loss over wide tracts of the Highlands, and the desire to 'reforest' Scotland as an ecological restoration objective needs serious review. Indeed, the lack of natural woodland cover in much of upland Scotland relates more to us being in an 'oligocratic phase' of an interglacial (when trees naturally decline) than to grazing levels and human impact.

If our desire to add trees to the landscape is put aside, then the perceived issue of 'overgrazing' fades away. Additionally, SNH's own report shows no correlation between herbivore density and the extent of erosion.

It is worth re-reading the results of the Letterewe study carried out by Jos Milner and her team which looked at the issue in detail in one area of Wester Ross (published in 2002 as the book *A Red Deer Herd and its Habitat*). This concluded: "Over-grazing is not generally applied to natural



Grazing, Wester Ross. Photo: James Fenton



Ardtalla stag. Photo: James Fenton

ecosystems, even under heavy grazing pressure, because wild herbivores are regulated by their food supply during the unfavourable season ... It is not clear that existing deer populations are incompatible with the maintenance of biodiversity in the open landscapes that have characterised much of the Highlands for the past few centuries. If this is Scotland's natural heritage, wild red deer form an important component of the system and there may be little to fear from traditionally managed populations of Scotland's largest and most striking mammal."

### The role of predators

You often read that deer populations are high owing to the absence of predators, so a key question becomes: 'Would the presence of wolves result in deer numbers low enough to allow woodland expansion without fences?' There is, in fact, 10,000 years of evidence that the answer is 'No': woodland cover in Scotland declined to very low levels in the pre-1700 period when wolves were present in the landscape and human impact was minimal over large swathes of the Highlands. Hence it is improbable that it is the absence of predators that has caused such woodland decline. As it is, stalking takes the place of predators – and wolves would have to eat more red deer than the number currently shot. Hence 'absence of predators' is a red herring.

Scotland is perhaps the only country in Europe to have retained significant populations of large, indigenous herbivores (red deer) throughout historical times. Instead of being seen as a conservation success story, this is seen as a problem! This perhaps arises because the absence or rarity of large herbivores tends to be seen as unnatural because we are not used to seeing them around and we think: 'If there are lots of large herbivores, something must be wrong'.

However red deer are a keystone species, shaping the Highland landscape. We should celebrate them and not treat them as 'vermin' just because they naturally eat trees! It is the mismatch between the ecological carrying capacity of the vegetation and the order of magnitude lower capacity necessary to allow significant woodland regeneration that is the key to understanding the Highland landscape. Reducing the deer to the latter is like continually pushing a barrel uphill – as soon as you stop, the system reverts to its natural balance. It is just that the natural balance between deer and their habitat in the Highlands does not include trees! Is this not the simplest explanation for our largely open landscapes? If we want more trees, we will have to keep numbers way below the carrying capacity for ever: does this not make it a questionable approach?

A logical conclusion of this is that red deer stalking should not be about trying to keep numbers way below the ecological carrying capacity of the vegetation, about trying to transform the landscape to coincide with many people's notions of 'what it should be like'. Instead it could be about harvesting a sustainable surplus of a native species – a land management activity with minimal environmental impact and conducive to maintaining the natural aspects of the Highlands. In my lifetime I have witnessed a serious decline in the naturalness of the Highlands, both through the addition of artefacts, including tracks, and the loss of the open hill and moorland: and this saddens me.

### Dr James Fenton

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# Lord Burton's Famous Twenty Pointer - the most talked-about stag in Europe



Lord Burton (second left, back row) at Glenquoich Lodge standing beside King Edward VII

Iain Thornber

**On Friday 25 August 1893 the sound of a rifle shot echoed round Coire nan Gall, a remote and wild place lying between Loch Quoich and Loch Nevis, in the Knoydart DMG area. The man who pulled the trigger was Sir Michael Arthur Bass (1837-1909), 1st Baron Burton, and the stag he killed became even more famous than Landseer's 'Monarch of the Glen' - not because it had twenty points - but whether it was a genuine product of the Scottish Highlands or an English deer park.**

Lord Burton leased Glenquoich for thirty-three years and in that period, 2,599 stags were killed, 208 of which had twelve points or more. The stag, which was despatched in Coire nan Gall at a reputed range of 350 yards by a Gibbs-Metford-Farquharson rifle, has often been described as the Glenquoich twenty-pointer. In fact it was shot on the adjacent Glenkingie forest, rented from Donald Cameron of Lochiel from 1874 to 1905.

The stag was killed during an excursion Lord Burton made over the hill to Loch Nevis with his daughter Nellie (later Baroness Burton), James Baillie of Dochfour (his future son-in-law), two other guests and two stalkers, James Henderson and his son Robert. There was no plan to stalk but James Henderson told his son to take a rifle 'just in case'. Near the watershed they disturbed some sheep that ran off down into the corrie taking about 35 stags with them. The stags stood for a moment and, to please his daughter, Lord Burton took a shot at what appeared to be

the best of them, little knowing at what he was firing. The body must have rolled a distance because Lord Burton and his party carried on their way leaving the stalkers to do the necessary. It was only in the evening, on returning home, that he learned of the magnificent trophy he had acquired.

The Glenkingie head was shown at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901 along with thirty-six others from the Highlands, including Balmoral. It was also displayed at a Northern Meeting Bazaar in Inverness and, later, in Germany. It attracted great attention wherever it was seen and no one raised any doubt that it was a genuine example of a pure-bred Scottish red deer.

That came two years after Lord Burton's death when, for no reason other than that he had obviously been put up to it, Frank Wallace (1881-1962) a Scottish based sporting painter, author and illustrator, stated in a roundup of the 1912 stalking season in *Country Life*, that there was more than a suspicion that Lord Burton's 16 stone 6 pound stag might not have been a true 'Highlander'.

And so began a furious exchange of letters. Lochiel, who was not only an experienced stalker but a member of the House of Commons Select Committee on the Game Laws and The Deer Forest Commission, was the first to wade in. He reminded Wallace that Coire nan Gall was far removed from any habitation, let alone deer parks, concluding, "This head was an ordinary type of Highland stag, and had no resemblance whatsoever to that of a park stag. It is difficult to conceive how it could have been any other stag but one born and bred in this most inaccessible district."



Unsure of himself now Wallace began quoting John Guille Millais (1865-1931) the naturalist, and gardener specialising in wildlife and flower portraiture, who wrote, in his *British Deer and their Horns* (1897), "the clumsy-looking tops [of Lord Burton's twenty pointer] are not the least like those of a typical wild Highland head, but on the other hand, closely resemble the formation which is found in certain parks."

In his *Mammals of Great Britain and Ireland* (1906) Millais went further by admitting that he had not included Lord Burton's stag, because he did not believe it to be genuine. Examining the head 'in the flesh' he told his readers that he found it to be an old worn beast suffering from decline with horns only weighing about a pound or two and were not such as would be carried by a Highland stag in its prime. He concluded, "The lessees and owners of Highland forests are without doubt perfectly right in introducing fresh blood from the south, but these stags, if not confined, wander off into the forests and become perfectly wild and the stalkers, to please their masters, never say a word when they are shot."

Allan Gordon Cameron, author of *The Wild Red Deer of Scotland* (1923), who should have been more cautious, joined the fray and along with some others began tying themselves in knots about which English park the twenty-

pointer might have come from, and when. But neither James Henderson, who was the head stalker during the greater part of Lord Burton's tenancy, nor George Malcolm, who had been the factor throughout, were having any of it.

Meticulous records had been kept and although some stags had been imported from three different parks they could account for them all. Moreover their ears were marked by a particular cut to prevent them being shot if they got out of the purpose- built deer park. No such mark can be seen on the head today. The long correspondence was brought to a close by George Malcolm in April 1913 when he wrote that Lord Burton had never doubted the purity of the twenty-tined stag's descent and as no man was ever more sensitive and scrupulous than he about fictitious claims or unfounded assertions, there was little more to be said.

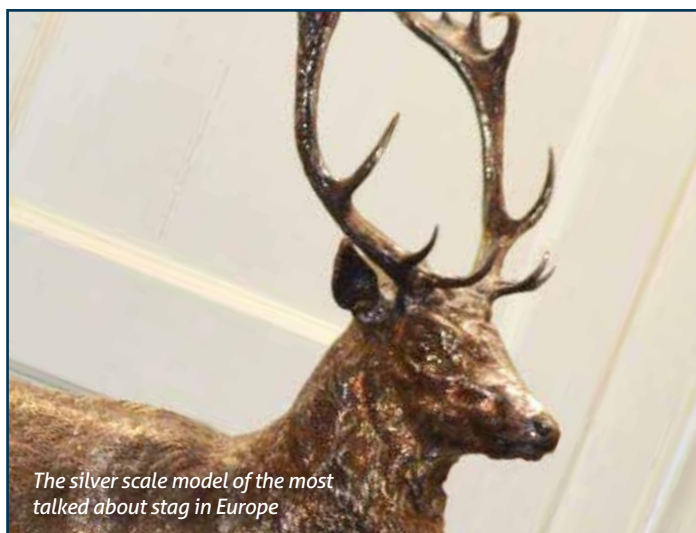
When the Honourable Nellie Bass married James Baillie of Dochfour in 1894 the people of Glengarry and Glenquoich presented them with an exquisitely scaled model in Scottish silver of the much-discussed stag they had witnessed being killed the previous year.

**Iain Thornber**

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Head of the Glenquoich  
20 pointer, Dochfour



The silver scale model of the most  
talked about stag in Europe



# SQWV standards for producers and processors reviewed and upgraded

SQWV has always required members and their staff to demonstrate best practice when handling carcasses, reminding them that it is more than a deer carcass - it is a foodstuff and must be handled accordingly.

Since the incidence of *E Coli* O157 that was linked back to venison in 2015 a considerable amount of work has been carried out to review the practices and processes by which venison reaches the food chain. The purpose of this work was to identify any weak links in the chain that could cause a repetition of the 2015 issues and in addition cause significant reputational risk to perception of Wild Venison with our customers.

The review has led to a number of changes in the SQWV standards that have been agreed by the SQWV Board. The SQWV Board consists of representatives from all sectors of the venison industry from producer to processor, and who are well known across the industry. Their views are certainly representative of the many, rather than the few.

The message that the changes to the standards aims to deliver is that every effort must be made to ensure food safety is not compromised.

The standards now require that the Trained Hunter Declaration (THD) can only be signed by a qualified stalker who has DSC 1 (or equivalent) and also has DSC 2, or is able to demonstrate that he or she is working towards achieving this qualification. The cull, carcass inspection and gralloch may be carried out by another person, but she or he must be under the supervision of a qualified stalker, who must sign the THD.

SQWV also wants to establish how many stalkers have completed any relevant food safety training in the last five years. While DSC 1 and 2 cover food safety in depth, it may be many years since some stalkers completed this training, and best practice may have changed over the years. There is a recommendation in the standards that where stalkers have not done any relevant training in the last five years they should aim to do so.

Particular attention is to be paid to contamination of carcasses. Where a carcass has been grossly contaminated due to shot damage, or damage during evisceration, or to any part of the green gralloch, the carcass must not be presented for human consumption. If there is minor contamination this should be left *in situ* so the official veterinarian at the game dealer can make a full inspection. Water in the form of light rinsing should only be used to remove very minor marking such as a few blood spots in a carcass.

Where the water supply in the larder is not a mains supply, the standards now require for the water to be tested by an accredited laboratory at least annually to determine that it is potable and therefore safe to use in a food processing environment.

In addition to the SQWV Producer standards are the SQWV Processor standards. These cover the handling of carcasses from the point of uplift from the larder. One key element in any aspect of food safety, and in particular for wild game, is traceability and the maintenance of the cold chain.

Deer larders are often in remote locations, and often have only a few carcasses to collect at any time. In providing an efficient service, game dealers often have to manage a serious logistical challenge. However this does not excuse them from the responsibilities of ensuring that the venison they handle reaches the consumer in a safe condition. The new SQWV Processing standards reinforce the requirements for a fully traceable collection process, and one that maintains the hygiene and cold chain requirements already set in place by the producers.

The message from the SQWV Board is that the changes to the standards, for both producer and processor should not be difficult to achieve. These will allow all involved in the scheme to demonstrate current knowledge and understanding of food quality and safety together with Best Practice, and will reinforce the message to the consumer that wild venison is of a high quality and a safe food to eat.

## For more information please contact:

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*Enhanced larder measures are a part of the drive to improve standards further*



# Annual Report – Scottish Venison Partnership



Bill Bewsher,  
Chairman, Scottish Venison Partnership

**It has been another busy year for the Scottish Venison Partnership in which much has been achieved or put in process as SVP continues**

**to develop how it operates and how it is perceived in wider circles, not least by the media and by Government.**

SVP continues to be the go-to source of information about the Scottish venison sector, and part of the drive around Scottish Venison Day last year was to generate more media exposure. This was achieved with the venison story being extensively told across a range of media outlets: the Scottish media; BBC (national coverage); BBC Radio 4 (national coverage), the Times, Daily Telegraph, and a number of other specialist food, sporting and meat sector publications and online. We are hoping to repeat that same level of interest this year.

Much time has been occupied with the ongoing post-*E Coli* O157 incident measures that were discussed by the sector with Food Standards Scotland. We have been closely engaged with SQWV (see their separate report) in their changes to producer and processor standards to tighten procedures for getting carcasses from the hill or the woods into the food chain, and to minimise the risk of contamination. The revised SQWV standards are now published, and SVP will be producing, with co-funding from SQWV and Scottish Natural Heritage, three short films to be made widely available on YouTube. These will incorporate the changes to the standards and focus on a gralloch on the hill, basic larder work, and field dressing a roe deer, supporting the Best Practice approach. We intend to commence production in early July.

There has been pressure placed on SVP to try and resolve supply chain issues particularly in low ground areas to enable more venison from roe deer to find routes to market. One area flagged up has been the lack of available larder/chill facilities across Scotland's central belt and, on the premise that having better available - albeit shared - facilities might encourage a higher cull, a project was undertaken last year to try and understand what uplift in numbers might be achieved and whether a commercial case exists for support for developing such a larder/chill network. SVP worked with SAC and SAOS in setting up this project. All the lowland deer groups and a number of individual stalkers were approached for information, most of whom chose not to make numbers available.

There are however a couple of areas where such a proposal might be legitimately supported if there was a strong business case. In all likelihood however there should be a range of options that allow either contracts with game dealers to be set up with bulk collections of carcasses at one end of the spectrum to the ability to service the requirement of the local butcher at the other, provided that all legal and license requirements are met. This work is ongoing.

SVP has also been involved in bringing forward a contract for a research study into establishing the prevalence of *E Coli* O157 in wild deer. The bid process for this work has

now commenced although it is not known at this time where the contract for the work will be awarded.

A further bid for funding has also just been made by the Moredun Research Institute in conjunction with SVP to Interface for a project to develop TB testing in farmed deer.

For some time SVP has been pursuing the PGI application for Scottish Wild Venison. This has now been substantially revised from the original draft and re-presented with a view to the final text for the application going forward this year. Despite Brexit, PGI we are advised, will still have relevance and SVP has been working on a designation for 'Scottish Wild' to make the distinction between that and farmed venison, or venison from other sources.

On the deer farming front, interest in setting up new deer farms continues at a slow but steady pace, and a further bid for a one year or two year demonstration project will be submitted to the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund for support. This would also incorporate an element to enhance current collection of, or access to, market data. We recognise the paucity of the market information on venison that is available, with SVP gleaning information where it can from other sources to build a picture of what is happening and how the market is moving. It would be good if SVP had better access to such information or resources that enabled easier compilation and analysis of market information.

SVP finances, funded through the 2p/kilo levy and a grant from Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) and for which the organisation is most grateful, are sound at present. We do need however to spread collection of the levy to other processors so that the future work of SVP can be assured.



*The SQWV producer standards have now been upgraded since this shot. One area covered is the gralloch on the hill. Photo: Glyn Satterley*

# The Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy for Working Hill Ponies

**This increasingly popular event, this year held on Sunday 2 July in the Main Ring at the Scottish Game Fair at Scone Palace was conceived by GWCT and ADMG as a memorial to Fred Taylor, head stalker on Invermark Estate.**

The competition is for hill ponies that are either working or that have worked on an estate or deer forest. They must be appropriately turned out with tack for the hill and their handler in estate tweeds. This year a record number of 20 ponies have been entered.

The event is generously sponsored by John Rigby & Co who will present a stalking rifle to the winning estate, and a bottle of Rigby 18 year old malt whisky to each entrant. The Highland Pony Society will also present a coveted Bronze Medal and the rosettes. The stabling for the ponies on the day of the event has been sponsored by Davidsons Veterinary Supplies.

The judge for 2017 is Drew Harris, formerly stalker on Kilchoan Estate, Knoydart.

Entries at the time of going to press are as follows:

Estate/deer forest	Entered by:	No of ponies entered
Ardverikie	Dougie Langlands	2
Balmoral, H M The Queen	Sylvia Ormiston	4
Blair Castle	Debbie McLauchlan	2
Dalncardoch	Duncan Fernie	1
Glen Prosen	Eric Stark	2
Invercauld	Andrew Reid	2
Invercauld Home Beat – Moors Partnership	Fiona McCulloch	2
Invermark	Garry MacLennan	2
Reay Forest	David Allison	2
Strathvaich	Donald Macrae	1



*Judging in the main ring in 2016.  
Photo: Dick Playfair*