

ADVICE NOTE

Organising a DMG Ground Count

Open range Deer Management Groups across Scotland now have, or are developing, Deer Management Plans that set out target deer populations which meet the individual and combined management objectives of all landholdings in a DMG. A basic requirement of deer management planning is to understand the shared deer population. SNH aerial counts will increasingly focus on designated sites rather than whole populations. That being the case an annual DMG ground foot count is the only realistic method of monitoring deer numbers and population trends on regular basis.

Most DMGs have carried out annual ground counts as a matter of routine over many years. However some are less successful than others. Reasons for count failure include:

- Weather conditions
- Lack of manpower
- Irregular counting
- Lack of full participation
- Lack of direction and organisation

This Advice Note is intended to set out some simple principles of successful deer counting which, if followed, should provide a basis for a succession of count results to an acceptable level of accuracy. It is accepted that counting wild deer populations is not an exact science and that accuracy will vary from year to year, not least because of variable weather and ground conditions. However, if a count is carried out consistently at the same time of year involving the same personnel operating to an established count pattern, possible inaccuracies are likely to be detected and factored in.

Conditions

Ideal count conditions in most cases are full snow cover across the whole count area and clear skies. However such conditions no longer occur on a regular annual basis and many ground counts are therefore likely to take place on 'black' ground where deer may be more widely distributed across their range. The count system must be sufficiently robust to achieve good results under black ground conditions.

Timing

The timing of deer counting, in late winter/early spring in most cases, can vary from Group to Group but in each case should, as far as possible, take place at the same time each year to ensure like for like comparison with previous count results.

Planning

Effective advance planning of a ground count is essential to a successful outcome and each DMG should appoint a designated count co-ordinator and, where appropriate, sub-area count leaders. Some weeks in advance of the proposed count date, the count team should meet to agree the count procedure as to timings, communication arrangements and reporting of results.

Contingency arrangements should also be agreed to ensure that, if count personnel are unavailable on the day there is a fall-back arrangement to ensure that no ground is missed. Where individual landholdings fail to count, for whatever reason, the overall accuracy and value of the whole count may be destroyed and those who do participate are therefore let down. It is for the count co-ordinator to ensure that arrangements are in place to achieve full coverage under all circumstances.

Communication

Communication both before, during and after are an essential component of a successful ground count and there is no substitute for an advance meeting involving all count personnel with follow up by the count co-ordinator in respect of any absentees. This meeting will establish procedures which should provide for last minute communications to confirm the decision to proceed or, if the conditions are unsuitable, to set a new provisional date. During the count, radio communications are helpful in co-ordinating count movements and reporting deer presence and movements across boundaries. Some DMGs share a common radio network but it is accepted that this is not possible in all cases.

Method

Where there are sufficient personnel available, the common method of each landholding, taking responsibility for counting its own ground, but communicating where possible with neighbours, can provide a satisfactory result and acceptable levels of accuracy. Where some estates lack resident staff or there is an overall manpower shortage a 'line abreast' approach may be more effective. This involves all the count personnel within the DMG acting as a team and moving in line across the count area from one end of the DMG to the other. If necessary this approach can enable counting to be carried out over a longer period than a single day where geography allows an overnight pause without a likelihood of deer movement in or out of the area already counted. Recording the position of each group of deer by GPS, in a notebook, or marking a map is desirable.

Classification

Where large numbers of deer are to be counted it is acceptable to carry out unclassified counts. This may involve counting mature males separately and all other deer, hinds, calves and young males together as 'others'. Where this method is used to establish overall numbers, the population can be classified by follow up sample counts to establish average proportions of females, juveniles and young males and to assess sex ratio and recruitment across the whole population. These sample counts should be carried out within a few weeks of the main count but not necessarily on the same day on each landholding.

Results

On completion of the count, the count co-ordinator or sub area count leader will take responsibility for collating reports from all participants and presenting these in established spreadsheet format for early circulation to Group members. To increase the value of the spreadsheet it should include figures from the preceding count or series of counts for comparative purposes.

Note: See also Best Practice Guide *Population movement – Open Range Country*