

Despite pressure to reduce numbers deer must continue to be seen as a valuable asset

Richard Cooke who stepped down as Chairman of ADMG last year is presented with a painting by Ian MacGillivray by HRH The Princess Royal at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair in September 2021 to mark his time both as ADMG Chair and previously Secretary, with Tom Turnbull, ADMG's new Chairman.

Photo: Ian Jacobs



Tom Turnbull, Chairman, Association of Deer Management Groups

Two years of the pandemic have put considerable pressure on deer managers and the venison industry. When combined with the wait for the implementation of the Deer Working Group Report recommendations, we can be forgiven for feeling that the last two years have been a challenge to say the least. Deer Management Groups have dealt admirably with the hurdles that they have faced and should be commended for the fact that deer management has continued despite the drop in venison value and the absence of sporting income for a season.

The climate crisis has become the single most important factor when it comes to rural policy, the emphasis on tree planting and carbon capture has led to a switch in priorities for many land managers and has seen a change in the market place for land. These changes in emphasis will provide fresh challenges for DMGs not only in the

short term but the long term too. Habitat creation and increased tree cover will be beneficial to deer and it will be very important to consider the impacts of land management decisions now on deer management in twenty years' time.

It is encouraging to note NatureScot's commitment to continue to support Deer Management Groups and this will be vital when we consider how the Deer Working Group recommendations will be implemented. We should be in little doubt that pressure will continue to reduce deer numbers and we must use population models and careful cull planning to influence decision making when we manage the deer that remain a valuable asset for so many.

ADMG will continue to provide guidance on all aspects of upland deer management and we will endeavour to represent the interests of all deer managers whatever their land management objectives. There will clearly be challenges ahead but I feel Deer Management Groups are in a very good place to meet these head on.

Are our deer densities too high, are they hampering biodiversity recovery, and what does habitat restoration mean for our deer in the future?



Christopher J. Sandom
University of Sussex

Wild large herbivore densities are not unnaturally high in Scotland and in my view even higher numbers in the future could be a sign of successful nature recovery.

My career started in the Scottish Highlands at the Alladale Wilderness Reserve and restoring the Caledonian Pine Forest was a key goal. An obvious barrier to this were red deer eating the saplings. The simple solutions were to reduce their numbers or fence them out. Deer were seen as the problem.

The red deer population at that time was about 13/km², so we felt it was clear that this density was too high, even unnaturally high, and they were 'overbrowsing'.

There has been much written about how deer numbers in the UK are a threat to the countryside and why our deer population needs to be reduced, controlled and more robustly managed. Some recent media headlines state: "Deer numbers placing unprecedented pressure on environment" and "Wild deer set to wreak havoc in UK as venison demand plunges".

But, are these numbers really that high in the big scheme of things? What are natural densities of large herbivores? In some recent research, led by Camilla Flojgaard at Aarhus University in Denmark, we studied the relationship between total large >5kg herbivore biomass and net primary productivity in conservation areas across the world and I think the results are really interesting.

Looking at protected areas across Africa there is a positive relationship between net primary productivity and large herbivore biomass. The more productive the ecosystem, the greater the number of large herbivores it can support.

In contrast, on other continents this relationship was either much weaker - in North America the large herbivore biomass is really low for the productivity - or there was no relationship (Europe, Asia and South America).

In Europe, herbivore biomass was found to be either much lower compared to African sites of similar productivity, or on the higher side of African sites (but within natural variation). In general, the lower biomass levels are from protected nature areas, while the higher levels were from rewilding sites.

The red deer density at Alladale while I was there (13/km²) is about 1700 kg/km², which, for the same productivity, is very low compared to the ~4500 kg/km² you would expect based on the relationship between NPP and herbivore biomass in Africa.

So, what is going on here? Is 13 red deer/km² unnaturally high and a threat to nature in Scotland and, if so, how are sites in Africa coping with far higher amounts of large herbivores?

To be honest, the Alladale head stalker/ranger pointed the answer out to me way back. The effects of large herbivores depend not only on their densities but on the condition of the environment around them. And it wasn't the deer that ate all the mature trees in the first place, was it? These trees were cut down to provide timber for buildings and ships, leaving a degraded ecosystem.



Photo: Neil McIntyre

The degradation of the ecosystem as a whole is the reason red deer are having a really strong and limiting effect on natural tree regeneration. Few old trees in the landscape today don't spread much viable seed. Dense swaths of heather, bracken, and grass don't offer much space for trees to germinate. Only a few seedlings are getting established and so almost any number of deer will limit tree re-establishment.

Is browsing by large herbivores reducing the number of trees regenerating? Yes. But should we be painting them as the villains of the piece? My view is 'no'. This is a problem created by people and the solution needs to be focused on restoring nature as a system.

This restoration may well involve reducing large herbivore numbers now, but this should be seen as an opportunity for restoration to allow richer and more diverse and abundant nature in the future, from plants to large predators. If this happens, a richer and more diverse community of large herbivores, including red deer, will be able to make use of and help create a diverse mixture of habitats including open grassland and moorland, scrubland and woodland by driving their critical ecological processes.

While we perceive herbivore numbers to be really high in many parts of the world, compared to the more intact ecosystems in Africa (or from the past) herbivore communities are actually severely degraded in their diversity (numbers of species) and abundance. The excellent *The Serengeti Rules* film highlighted how the recovery in abundance of wildebeest in the Serengeti following rinderpest decimating their population was feared and resisted, but the recovery was spectacular and now seen as natural.

Ecosystems outside Africa are generally more degraded, and will likely take longer to recover, and may need recovery of the vegetation and carnivores first. But it may be possible to have our own spectacular recoveries of nature, including large numbers of magnificent large herbivores like red deer.

This is an area begging for more research. We should be looking at the consequences for our deer populations as we promote widespread tree planting to combat the climate emergency. In its early stages, it may require reductions in deer numbers but, in the longer term could provide a more diverse ecosystem in the future that has high abundance of red deer playing their important role as an ecosystem engineer.

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Thanks to lead author Camilla Flojgaard and to my co-authors Jens-Christian Svenning, Pil Pedersen and Rasmus Ejrnæs

Exploring a natural baseline for large-herbivore biomass in ecological restoration published November 2021

Abbreviated link to the Journal of Applied Ecology:
<https://bit.ly/3tBddmJ>

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New study finds that controlled burning of natural environments could help offset carbon emissions



Article supplied by Jacqueline Garget,
University of Cambridge

Planting trees and suppressing wildfires does not necessarily maximise the carbon storage of natural ecosystems. A new study published by Dr Adam Pellegrini, Head of the Disturbance Ecology and Ecosystem Function Group at the University of Cambridge's Department of Plant Sciences has found that prescribed burning can actually lock in or increase carbon in the soils of temperate forests, savannahs and grasslands. The study, published in *Nature Geoscience*, points to a new method of manipulating the world's natural capacity for carbon capture and storage that can also help to maintain natural ecosystem processes.

"Using controlled burns in forests to mitigate future wildfire severity is a relatively well-known process. But we've found that in ecosystems, including temperate forests, savannahs and grasslands, fire can stabilise or even increase soil carbon," says Dr Adam Pellegrini, first author of the study. Adding *"most of the fires in natural ecosystems around the globe are controlled burns, so we should see this as an opportunity. Humans are manipulating a process, so we may as well figure out how to manipulate it to maximise carbon storage in the soil."*

Fire burns plant matter and organic layers within the soil, and in severe wildfires this leads to erosion and leaching of carbon. It can take years or even decades for lost soil carbon to re-accumulate. But the study shows that fires can also cause other transformations within soils that can offset these immediate carbon losses, and that may stabilise ecosystem carbon. Fire stabilises carbon within the soil in several ways. It creates charcoal, which is very resistant to decomposition, and forms aggregates - physical clumps of soil that can protect carbon-rich organic matter at the centre. Fire can also increase the amount of carbon bound tightly to minerals in the soil.

"Ecosystems can store huge amounts of carbon when the frequency and intensity of fires is just right. It's all about the balance of carbon going into soils from dead plant biomass, and carbon going out of soils from decomposition, erosion and leaching," says Dr Pellegrini.

When fires are too frequent or intense - as is often the case in densely planted forests - they burn all the dead plant material that would otherwise decompose and release carbon into the soil. High-intensity fires can also destabilise the soil, breaking off carbon-based organic matter from minerals and killing soil bacteria and fungi.

Without fire, soil carbon is recycled - organic matter from plants is consumed by microbes and released as carbon dioxide or methane. But infrequent, cooler fires can increase the retention of soil carbon through the formation of charcoal and soil aggregates that protect from decomposition. The authors say that ecosystems can also be managed to increase the amount of carbon stored in their soils. Much of the carbon in grasslands is stored below-ground, in the roots of plants. Controlled burning, which helps encourage grass growth, can increase root biomass and therefore increase the amount of carbon stored.

"In considering how ecosystems should be managed to capture and store carbon from the atmosphere, fire is often seen as a bad thing. We hope this new study will show that when managed properly, fire can also be good - both for maintaining biodiversity and for carbon storage," says Dr Pellegrini.

The study focuses on carbon stored in topsoils, defined as those less than 30 centimetres deep. More carbon is stored in the world's soil than in the global vegetation and the atmosphere combined. Natural fires occur in most ecosystems worldwide, making fire an important process in global carbon cycling.

Reference

Pellegrini et al, 2021, Fire effects on the persistence of soil organic matter and long-term carbon storage, *Nature Geoscience*

This research was funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation. This press release was written by Jacqueline Garget from the Office of External Affairs and Communications

Other links:

Fire: The Great Manipulator (cam.ac.uk)

Controlled burning of natural environments could help offset our carbon emissions | University of Cambridge

NatureScot updates risk assessment for feral pigs

NatureScot has updated its non-native species risk assessment for feral pigs in Scotland.

As background, Scottish Natural Heritage, now NatureScot, commissioned the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) to prepare a non-native species risk assessment as part of its feasibility study into options for controlling feral pigs in Scotland and to inform the development of the Scottish Government’s policy on feral pigs. APHA first completed the risk assessment in 2015 and the Scottish Government Centre of Expertise on Animal Disease Outbreaks (EPIC) peer-reviewed the risk assessment in 2016.

The original risk assessment has now been updated and a summary sheet added to highlight the key risks identified in the assessment.

Wild boar and feral pigs (*Sus scrofa*) are among the most widely distributed mammals in the world either as a native or as an introduced species, characterised by the highest reproductive rate among ungulates, with annual increases in population which may exceed 200%. Recreational hunting has rarely been able to control the growth of wild boar and feral pig populations that are increasing in numbers and range.

Their environmental and economic impact includes damage to crops and livestock, vehicle collisions, transmission of diseases to wildlife, livestock and people and reduction in plant and animal abundance and richness. Current trends indicate that the impact of wild boar and feral pigs is likely to continue to increase.

In the UK, wild boar were hunted to extinction by 1300 AD but became re-established in recent decades as a result of escapes from wild boar farms and illegal releases of hybrids between wild boar and domestic pigs. Boar can interbreed with domestic pigs and the genetics of the established feral populations may come from a mix of both wild boar and domestic pigs. NatureScot therefore refers to these animals as feral pigs.

In Scotland, as well as in the rest of the UK, feral pig populations still appear to be isolated from each other. Scotland is in the favourable position of being able to develop a pro-active approach to feral pig population management before potential conflicts escalate.

There are breeding populations of feral pigs in Lochaber and Dumfries & Galloway with small pockets elsewhere with these animals thought to be a mixture of wild boar, domesticated pigs and hybrids, as is the case in populations in England.

The project reviews practical, humane and cost-effective options for managing populations of feral pigs with its results providing NatureScot with science-based evidence to develop informed policies for the management of feral pigs in Scotland.

The updated risk assessment is available here:

www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1288-updated-non-native-species-risk-assessment-feral-pigs-scotland

New Wild Game Guide for Scotland

The Wild Game Guide (WGG) provides guidance for the Scottish wild game food sector, as well as enforcement officers, on the food hygiene legal requirements which apply to the hunting, processing and supply of wild game into the food chain.

Whilst the applicable food hygiene regulatory requirements are the same across the UK, this revised guide has been produced for hunters, suppliers and processors of wild game in Scotland, as well as relevant Scottish enforcement officers.

The creation for the first time of a standalone Scottish guide will allow FSS to be more attentive to specific Scottish stakeholder priorities, and in any future development of the guide.

The guide was fully reviewed and revised from 2020 - 2021 with the new FSS document published in December 2021. The review of the guide involved a public consultation which closed in December 2020 and which sought views from stakeholders on content and presentation. It is hoped that the revised guide is more user-friendly and brings greater clarity to the legal requirements which apply in the various circumstances in which wild game is hunted and supplied for human consumption including the various supply chains to market.

The guide was developed in close cooperation with the wild game industry, including ADMG, Scottish Venison Association, BDS, BASC, SGA and others.

The new wild game guide can be downloaded here:

www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/FSS_Wild_Game_Guide-_December_2021.pdf



Regenerating Rona

Photo: Bill Cowie

This short preface provides a brief introduction to a comprehensive article on deer and woodland on the Island of Rona by Victor Clements, published in Scottish Forestry (Winter 2021).

Rona is a small island in the Scottish Inner Hebrides lying between the Sound of Raasay and the Inner Sound just north of the neighbouring island of Raasay and east of the Trotternish peninsula of Skye. The island is inhabited and extends to about 963 hectares or 2,400 acres. It is approx 8km long by 2km wide.

There has been a programme of woodland regeneration on Rona largely over the last 30 years and funded through various Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) and Scottish Forestry Grant Schemes (SFGS). The trees have established well despite numbers of deer, but it is not apparent that the deer are setting the trees back.

Raasay and Rona have had a troubled past, since their sale in 1843 and Raasay's clearance of people to make way for sheep and the subsequent re-occupation of the island in the 1920s. This resulted in a trial and jail sentences for those involved despite public sentiment being very much on their side.

Both islands were purchased by the UK Government and Rona was virtually abandoned, the last crofting family leaving in 1943.

The exodus to Raasay reduced the pressure on the natural resources of Rona, and the areas of runrig underlying some of the older woodland areas suggests a modest expansion of woodland during this period. There were however about 500 sheep remaining, so any woodland expansion would have been limited. There were red deer on Raasay, but it is not apparent that there were any on Rona at this time.

In 1992, Rona was again sold to the current Danish owners Dorte Jensen and her husband Arne Fremmich, Raasay remaining the property of the UK Government, now Scottish Ministers.

Most of the remaining 500 sheep were removed in 1987. Through the 1990s, a number of WGS contracts were put in place. No fencing was required and there were still no known red deer on the island. By 2003, these earlier WGS schemes were considered to have been a success, and a new Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme was available. A plan to introduce some red deer to the island at this time was considered controversial; however, with a deer management plan agreed with the agencies the introduction received a green light and six red hinds and two stags were delivered.

Deer activity had also been observed at the northern end of Rona, and it appeared there could already be a small number of deer present. Numbers grew, and by 2012, there were an estimated 100 animals on the island, with around 35 stags, most probably offspring of the introduced animals, but there was also increasing evidence of deer moving between Rona and Raasay. But at a density of 12 deer per sq km what effect was this having on the trees?

In this thorough article by Victor Clements first published in Scottish Forestry (Winter 2021 issue) he examines the inter-relation between deer and woodland on the island, what the current situation is and what the options might be for the future. There is an interesting dynamic happening on Rona that can usefully inform other woodland regeneration initiatives throughout Scotland.

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Read the full article here: <https://bit.ly/3pJQgwy>

Remembering Captain Alwyne Farquharson of Invercauld MC

Captain Alwyne Arthur Compton Farquharson M.C. of Invercauld and Monaltrie, 16th Chief of Clan Farquharson, died on Wednesday 6 October 2021 at home in Norfolk at the age of 102

He is believed to have been Scotland's oldest and longest serving clan chief and was chieftain of the Ballater Highland Games on Deeside for 73 years. He served in the Second World War and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery during the Normandy Landings. Alwyne was also a founder of the Association of Deer Management Groups in 1992 and had also been at the forefront in setting up the East Grampian DMG in the late 1970s.

He was born on 1 May 1919, eldest son of Major Edward Compton of Newby Hall in Yorkshire and Sylvia Farquharson, younger daughter of Alexander Haldane Farquharson of Invercauld. Alwyne's Aunt Myrtle, who had inherited Invercauld and who was the elder sister of his mother Sylvia, was killed in a bombing raid in 1941. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, Alwyne moved to Aberdeenshire to assume the role of Chief and become the 16th Laird of Invercauld, roles he cherished for many decades.

Alwyne dedicated himself to becoming a responsible and benevolent landowner and was known affectionately by tenants and staff as 'The Laird'. His lands spread from Aberdeenshire to Perthshire and included the Torloisk Estate on the Isle of Mull, which he inherited from his father. As Clan Chief, Alwyne was always keen to meet clan members from across the world. The progenitor of the Clan Farquharson was Finlay Mor Farquharson, who was born in about 1480 and died at the battle of Pinkie Cleugh in 1547, when he was hit in the chest by a cannonball fired from an English ship. He was the Royal Standard Bearer.

Finlay Mor had many children, and they in turn had descendants who have spread far and wide; the clan is now scattered around the globe, with clan societies in many disparate countries including the United States, Canada, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand. Alwyne could trace his lineage back to Farquhar, 4th Son of Alexander Ciar (Shaw) Mackintosh of Rothiemurcus (1411-1492), whose descendants include the Farquharsons.

He enjoyed regaling clan members with stories of Farquharson activities and was always interested in their ties to genealogy and Scotland. In 2014, he gave permission for the rebirth of the Invercauld Highlanders, Guard of Honour for the Chiefs of Clan Farquharson.

In 2007, Alwyne leased Braemar Castle, home of the Farquharson Clan, to the Community of Braemar, which runs it as a visitor attraction. His role as Scotland's oldest Clan Chief is recognised in the Iconic Scotland exhibition, currently running as part of the Great Tapestry of Scotland display in the Scottish Borders.



Alwyne was Educated at Eton College and then Magdalen College, Oxford, where his studies in Land Economy were interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, just after his twentieth birthday. He joined the Royal Scots Greys, eventually attaining the rank of Captain, an achievement he very was proud of. He initially was posted to Egypt as mounted cavalry but the Royal Scots Greys were subsequently motorised with tanks. He saw active service at El Alamein and fought at the Battle for Caen on 10 June 1944, after which he was awarded the Military Cross for his lone actions in determining the position of the enemy, despite being seriously wounded in the foot in the process.

Alwyne was a member of Aberdeenshire County Council from 1949 until 1975, a Justice of the Peace for Aberdeenshire in 1951 and Vice-Patron of the Braemar Royal Highland Gathering. He married firstly, in 1949 Frances Gordon (born Oldham), and after Frances's death in 1991 he married secondly Patricia de Winton (born Simms-Adams) who has keenly supported him in his role as Chieftain of the Ballater Highland Games.

In over 70 years as Chieftain, Alwyne never failed to attend the event, marching onto the field every year including his last Games in 2019 at the grand age of 100 when the event organisers celebrated his birthday with massed pipe bands and the attendance of the Lonach Highlanders and the Balmoral Guard. Even at the age of 100, he was still able to make eloquent, unscripted speeches.

Alwyne had no issue but had a twin sister Mary and a younger brother Robert (known as Robin), both of whom had children. He had several nephews and a niece, as well as five step-children from his two marriages and was an affectionate uncle and step-father. He is succeeded as Chief of Clan Farquharson by his great-nephew, Philip Farquharson, who becomes the 17th Laird of Invercauld.

Obituary first published in Scottish Field. Reproduced with permission.



Home is the hunter



Iain Thornber

High to the north east of the village of Kinlochewe in the parish of Garioch, is Strath Chrombuill overlooked by an old stalker's house called Leckie. Originally the strath was part of the extensive Garioch estate. The quality and quantity of its deer was once exceptional, thanks largely to its owner, Mr (later Sir) Arthur Bignold of Lochrosque who, over two decades, created some wonderful habitat and shelter for deer by planting over eight million trees pre-1923. A fine pipe march 'Arthur Bignold of Lochrosque' is named after him.

Leckie (from the Gaelic word leacaidh meaning flaggy as in flagstones) was home to an exceptional stalker called James Ferguson who was well-liked by Mr Edward Hickman his employer at the time and by Mr Duncan Mathieson, the estate head stalker.

At some stage James approached Duncan Mathieson saying that when he died, he wished to be buried far out on the hill amongst the deer he loved. It was an unusual request. However, James persisted and being so highly thought of, his wish was granted. Sometime before he died, he fell ill and his wife employed a nurse to help look after him. On one occasion, he told them of a dream he had had the previous night. It was, he recounted, a lovely sunny day and that he was on the hill with a stalking party, when suddenly he was alone in the foothills of Groban - a high hill above the head of Glen Tanagaidh. James died on the 19th January 1930 and the burial took place on Groban three days later. Interestingly the 22nd of January was fine

and sunny - the only settled day in a prolonged period of wind and rain - it was as if the day of his funeral was the one he had dreamt of earlier!

Stories of coffins being carried long distances over the hills are not new but first-hand accounts and photographs are rare. When I was researching this one, I was given the following which I thought worthy of repeating for its style and detail.

'By the death of Mr James Ferguson, Leckie, Kinlochewe, Ross-shire, in his sixty-sixth year, an interesting personality has been removed from our midst. Mr Ferguson, who was a native of Insh, Kingussie, will be much missed by a wide circle of friends, particularly in the Kinlochewe district, where he resided during the past twenty-two years. He was well known in other parts of Ross and Inverness, and spent some time in Park Forest, on the Island of Lewis. He also served on the Drummond Hay estate in Perthshire.

'Mr Ferguson was a man of keen intellect and an ardent lover of nature. His chief pastime was reading and his favourite books were: - "The Volume of the Sacred Law," "Spurgeon's Works," "The Poems of Burns" and the "English Dictionary." Truly a comprehensive collection. To quote his own words: "In these books I find all the information I require."

'He often expressed the wish that when he died, he would like nothing better than his remains would be laid to rest among the hills with which his duties had made him so familiar. He had pointed out to his colleagues the spot where he desired to be laid, and so his wishes were respected and his desire duly fulfilled under circumstances which are unique in the annals of the Highlands.



'At 10 a.m. on a winter's day a party numbering fifty had gathered from far and near to render their last tribute to their departed friend. It was fortunately a beautiful morning, and in view of the extremely hard task of bearing the remains six miles into the heart of the hills it was doubly so. There were in all thirty-six pall bearers divided into nine parties of four, and on looking round I could not but admire the splendid physique of these men. Their looks proclaimed them what they were, hardy, experienced hillmen, worthy bearers of the mortal remains of one who was, in this respect, in a class by himself.

'We left the main road at 11:30 a.m. and wended our way along the rough track which goes up the side of Allt na Muic. On reaching the top of Gleann na Muic - about a mile and a half from the road - a halt was called and a cairn erected to mark the first resting place - this being an old established custom in the Highlands. (Each man contributing a stone to the cairn where they probably partook of a dram as it was recorded that 15 bottles of whisky were consumed that day).

'After a brief rest, we proceeded with our task, which, owing to the nature of the ground, was becoming more and more difficult. On reaching the summit of Cairn Homish (now shown as Meall an Odhar on OS maps) a magnificent panorama lay before us. Nestling at the base of the surrounding hills a beautiful green valley (Glen Tanagaidh) through which a river meandered like a bar of silver in the bright sunshine, broken here and there with the shadows cast by the hills, which reminded us that, after all, life is made up of "sunshine and shadows." A herd of deer were browsing peacefully by the side of the river, unaware of our approach.

'At the foot of the Groban, about two miles across the valley, discernible only to those whose eyes were accustomed to searching the hillsides, lay the spot chosen by Mr Ferguson often designated by him as his "Paradise on Earth". Colleagues acted as pall-bearers on the last stage of the journey, and at 2:15 p.m. the mortal remains of Mr Ferguson lay at rest. In a few heartfelt words, which expressed the thoughts of all of us, Mr Mathieson rendered thanks unto the Most High for enabling us to carry out an almost super-human task.

'The cairn was then erected at the head of the grave, and inside the cairn was placed a casket containing the following words: - "On this, the twenty-second day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and thirty, we, the undersigned, laid to rest the mortal remains of James Ferguson, Leckie, - Aig Foish (Gaelic 'at rest') Then followed the names of the thirty-six pall-bearers. Deep sympathy is felt for his widow and daughter, also to his surviving brothers in their sad bereavement'.

The final word though must go to Charles Kingsley, the well-known English poet who, although writing more than fifty years earlier, penned a verse in *The Outlaw*, which might well have been written for the occasion:

*Ye'll bury me 'twixt the brae and the burn,
in a glen far away,*

*Where I may hear the heathcock crow,
and the great harts bray;*

*And gin my ghaist can walk, mither,
I'll go glowering at the sky,*

*The livelong night on the black hill sides
where the dun deer lie.*

Iain Thornber

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Images

A rare photograph showing James Ferguson's coffin and the burial party on the way to Groban. (Photograph supplied by Mr Norman Kelman, Head Stalker, Kinlochewe Estate)

The Ross-shire hills near where James Ferguson was buried. (Photograph Miles Welsh)

SCOTTISH VENISON UPDATE



The SVA Committee presents outgoing SVA Chairman Bill Bewsher with an engraved Scandinavian hunting knife as a memento to mark his time in the Chair. Richard Cooke has been appointed as the new SVA Chairman.



Dick Playfair, Secretary,
Scottish Venison Association

"It was the best of times it was the worst of times ..." A quote from Charles Dickens that sums up the last two years of the UK

venison market rather well. The worst of times with the closure for lengthy periods of the hospitality, restaurant, catering, food service and events sectors – a huge blow. But conversely retail sales have been strong and continued to grow and the strictures placed on producers by food service market constraints have encouraged new thinking, entrepreneurial spirit, and breaking the mould. "We always did it this way" for many no longer applies and parting company with tradition has brought benefits for those who have taken a leap of faith that were not apparent pre-Covid.

Then there is the backdrop of a climate emergency, action to tackle climate change, restore woodlands (and plant new ones creating more habitat for deer in the process), restore peatland and strive for an equitable balance across food production that is carbon neutral on the balance sheet. Here venison potentially has a tremendous story to tell because we have to accept, despite the calls from some corners, that our deer species must be an intrinsic and accepted part of our future biodiversity, our landscape – or at least our native species should be.

On the back of this the arguments for sustainable deer management – whether collaborative or otherwise – are incredibly strong, not just when approached from the point of lessening environmental impacts or rising to the climate change challenge, but also in putting natural healthy protein into the food chain and onto the table.

"Eat venison and save the planet" was a catchy headline in the food press in 2021. A slight exaggeration perhaps but as we embark on a project to assess the impact of wild deer, deer management and venison production in terms of carbon footprint, and the production of a 'Statement of Intent' from the wild venison sector is a good start point on that road, one cannot help but think that we may already be well on the way – especially given the mitigating factors of woodland planting and peatland restoration that are already happening, and in a far better place than others in the domestic red meat sector for example.

And everyone involved in deer management is only too aware now that hunting or stalking can assume a much broader mantle of acceptability if healthy food (as well as climate action) is a consequence of that activity, and that those measures play an important part in supporting an environment that meets global biodiversity targets. Marginalised in some quarters the hunter/deer manager is becoming increasingly recognised for their positive contribution towards tackling climate change.

The good news over the last two years has been in retail where the Scottish Venison Association has been fortunate to benefit from research by Kantar and The Knowledge Bank, funded by the Scottish Government but assessing the position across the whole UK. At the end of 2019 that research showed that retail sales of venison were up by 20% in volume and 12% in value over the same period the preceding year. Follow up research in May 2021 showed retail sales continuing to rise, by 20% in Scotland and 30% in London and SE England against the equivalent period the year before. The Scottish Government also funded £60,000 of online marketing in spring 2021 to support Scottish producers and processors but which, regardless, will have benefitted the venison sector across the whole UK.

SCOTTISH VENISON UPDATE

The downside has been the stop-start of catering and food service after a significant period of shut down. Figures vary but this might account for as much as 60% of total venison outturn in a good year. And it continues to be a fight to win this back – venison is both premium cost and high risk in terms of menu choice. This uncertainty has been exacerbated also by export to Europe. Brexit has without doubt taken its toll and whilst initial struggles to ship roe and red venison to Europe were severely testing and ways through the mire have now been achieved more red tape inevitably means higher costs, as does single loads rather than 'groupage'.

The other bonus from Covid however has been that the industry has been forced to think about other markets, local markets, supply to local butchers, setting up stand-alone estate outlets and venison sales, local processing, a return to mail order, winning media coverage, and beefing up presence online. All these have been positive steps for a number of producers.

The established route to market from hill to larder to game dealer to customer is now no longer the only accepted way. Most recently the Scottish Venison Association has been

awarded a £80,000 fund from the Scotland Food and Drink Partnership as part of the Covid recovery plan to help a number of local pilot processing projects over the line as demonstration units, harnessing the local stalking resource to supply local chill and processing hubs for marketing of product in their immediate areas and further afield.

Three projects have been selected in Moray, Argyll and Dumfries and Galloway for support from this fund which is being administered by SAOS.

All are filling a space where current cover is thin and we hope that these three new projects can be of benefit and aid the learning curve for the whole sector as we explore and promote alternative routes to market, which we will need in addition to the service provided by the mainstream processors as volumes once again increase.

So, viewing the big picture, all is far from doom and gloom. Wild venison right now has much in its favour - and it is vital that we don't lose the opportunities that current circumstances and challenging times offer.

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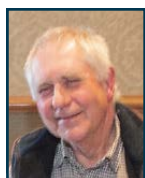
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Photo: Neil McIntyre

Deer, carbon capture, climate change, woodland regeneration – what are the issues, what is the future?



Winston Churchill

Climate change is such a huge subject that it is difficult to know where to start. Clearly, industry has a lot to do to reduce emissions and unsustainable logging in the rainforests must be stopped to address the emergency that faces the world today!

Trees play an important part in capturing and storing carbon. Taking Scotland in isolation our wee country was once completely covered in woodland but man (our forefathers) removed almost all the native woodlands. They also killed out the large carnivores (bears, wolves and lynx) to protect their cattle and sheep. After the Highland Clearances, large sporting estates were established, and sheep numbers were increased. The combination of sheep and the increase in numbers of deer (for sport) prevented any regeneration of woodlands. There are hundreds of thousands of acres that are purely open hill which is entirely manmade – had nature been left to do its own thing, the lower slopes of our hills would still be woodland. There would be a natural tree line and above that would still be open land.

History of commercial forestry and how it has affected deer populations

The Forestry Commission was formed during the 1920s – it was set up to grow sustainable timber crops. During the 1960s, private forestry investment was encouraged

by tax benefits and many additional thousands of acres were planted during the late 1960s, 1970s and early 80s with commercial crops. Part of the process of commercial forestry is to remove the sheep from land before planting which removed much of the grazing/browsing problems – deer however are not so easy to remove and in many forests across Scotland, deer numbers continue to increase aligned with the habitat created by forestry.

I can only comment from my experience on the Cowal Peninsula. I moved to Cowal during spring 1983 when there was a major change in land use underway. Sheep farming was in decline and forestry was expanding with thousands of acres of young plantation. Despite the fact that we extend our culling seasons and have a full-time team throughout the winter culling months, red deer numbers seem to have increased year on year over the years that I have lived here. Difficulties with access, the climate, and the scale of the habitat have also allowed the deer to increase.

The vision for future woodlands and the issues related to deer

The UK and Scottish governments are committed to planting more and more trees. Their preference is native woodlands which will be there for the long haul and are reported to provide a much better carbon store than commercial woodlands which have a cycle of approximately 35 to 40 years. Native woodlands are much more vulnerable to browsing than the main commercial tree (Sitka spruce). Deer densities should be no more than 5 per square kilometre for native woodlands to succeed - we estimate that here in South Argyll we currently have



*Looking down Loch Long.
Photo: Winston Churchill*

20+ per square kilometre! Hence mile after mile of deer fencing which we know has a shelf life of 20 years at best – deer are past masters at breaking and entering so we know that deer will eventually colonise these new woodlands. In the short term, whilst the fences are good and the trees are small enough not to offer cover, deer will be excluded or at very low densities, but long term, when the fences fail, and the trees are big enough to offer cover, densities will increase, and we will have even more deer.

What is the solution?

Forest Enterprise Scotland (now Forestry and Land Scotland) went to war with deer more than 20 years ago costing the public millions of pounds and there are still plenty of deer in their woodlands. The private sector went down the route of leasing for sporting stalking – this has created a situation in some instances of absentee tenants using the land for sport in their spare time and this has allowed deer numbers to increase quickly. What is the solution? I do not have an easy answer to that – the reality is that if hinds are not shot all year round, I don't think numbers will decrease sufficiently to meet regeneration targets (max 5/ square kilometre). Who amongst us would shoot hinds in the summer? I don't know anyone who would do that and whilst we kill large numbers of deer, we have a compassion for them and to shoot hinds in milk does not fit with that compassion. If we had the large predators here, nature would deal with the problem in the same way as it does in the natural world in the few wildernesses that still exist, but does society want wolves back?

Why do deer carcasses have such low value?

The per kg price paid for a deer carcass was higher 40 years ago than it is today. Why is this? Food prices have been held down by farming efficiency linked to

supermarket price capping. At the same time the cost of carcass collection, processing, packaging, waste disposal etc has continued to increase – not to mention ever tightening food processing legislation (all of which bring their own costs). If this trend continues, deer carcasses will eventually have no value. Thrown into the bargain, tonnes of venison are still imported into the UK each year and a low carcass value does not create the incentive needed to kill more deer.

Red meat linked to climate change

Climate change is happening at an alarming and accelerating pace. Mankind is now much better informed as to what is causing this and how to counter it – change must come – hopefully in time.

There has been much talk about red meat related to methane which is a greenhouse gas! The reality is that man is an omnivore and meat has been part of mankind's diet from when we lived in caves. The world is overpopulated with humans which creates an ever-growing demand on producing sufficient food/meat for the market – this in turn creates more methane.

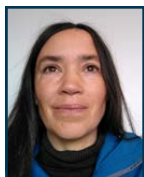
If we take the red meat of wild venison in isolation, then it must be the most environmentally friendly meat available. Deer are out there in our woodlands whether we like it or not – we do not farm these deer - we simply cull/harvest them for the benefit of our woodlands. In terms of carbon capture and reducing methane, venison surely comes out on top?

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Hill to Grill – truly putting learning into context



Romany Garnett
Conservation Officer, John Muir Trust

It's cold, really cold. Northwest Scotland has yet to thaw from a long winter. Fully dressed in hat, scarves and waterproofs a group of school pupils focus keenly on the group of stags ahead. The young people, who would normally be in the classroom, are crawling through the heather. Movements are tense and excited as binoculars are grabbed; the anticipation is palpable.

It's late February and we are camera stalking on the second day of our five-day Hill to Grill programme. Run by the John Muir Trust, this programme offers young people a hands-on experience of sustainable land management and of the job industry. The programme also covers issues around food sustainability, production and animal welfare, as well as basic outdoor skills like navigation. This is part of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership's (CALLP) Outdoor and Woodland Learning Project.

Rosy cheeks grow red during the day as the pupils navigate difficult, rough terrain and learn stalking techniques, like walking downwind from the deer. After a packed lunch on the hill, basic compass and map skills are practised, and each student takes it in turns to navigate to a point on the map.

During the first day of the programme a presentation is given in the classroom to prepare the pupils for what is involved. A picture quiz tests them on the different types of deer in the area and antlers are passed around the classroom.

Their day camera stalking on the hill is followed by experiencing a real deer carcass on day three. A recently culled deer is examined on the hill and pupils are given a chance to study its anatomy - including parts of the respiratory, circulatory, and digestive systems. They are also able to identify the parts of deer that they would normally have served on the table. Reactions vary from wonder and excitement to dislike that develops into curiosity. The carcass is then taken to the nearby larder where it is skinned, and butchering methods are explained. The larder day is rounded off with well-earned barbecued venison burgers and rolls from the local butchers. The head stalker from Reay Forest Estate joins us and talks about his work and what it entails. There is a vegetarian option of a foraging walk for those who prefer. Hazelnut spread, sorrel and wild garlic are served up, along with pine needle tea and locally made rowan jelly.

The last two days of the Hill to Grill programme focus on the marketing opportunities of local food production. Back at school, a cooking challenge is set – and teams must create a venison burger recipe, design the packaging, develop a marketing campaign, and make a logo. A panel of judges is selected from nearby restaurants to evaluate the final product. The atmosphere is tense as they decide on the winning team.

The Hill to Grill programme is described by the Deputy Head at Ullapool High School as "an excellent opportunity and a true cross curricular project which puts learning into a realistic context." It has been fine-tuned over the years by CALLP staff who were working for the Scottish Wildlife Trust.



Photos: Katrina Martin/Scottish Wildlife Trust

The success of the programme is partly due to the multi-dimensional approach given from various partners and their perspectives. Many people are involved in its delivery including local stalkers from estates with differing objectives and the Highland wildlife rangers.

John Muir Trust is now leading on the delivery of the programme at Ullapool High School. This is part of the Trust's aim to accelerate the transformation of the land in its care, managing it to address wider issues such as the decline of biodiversity, climate change and thriving rural communities.

Just as much as the Trust's work focuses on practical land projects such as planting native woodland and restoring peatlands, it also aims to bring people closer to the land at a fundamental level. Whether that is through improving

access paths or connecting young people to the land through programmes like Hill to Grill, or the parallel Junior Rangers initiative. The development of the Assynt Community Larder, and a women's deer stalking group (supported by the Pebble Trust and Rural Communities Ideas into Action Fund - administered by the Scottish Government) show that there is huge potential to change perceptions of how land can be managed, and to open access to deer stalking allowing more people to be involved and benefit. Without an experience of what nature can offer us as individuals, and direct access to connecting with the landscape on a deeper level, there is little incentive to support its restoration.

Romany Garnett is Conservation Officer, Quinag, John Muir Trust



Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) moves to SAI Global

Scottish Quality Wild Venison Ltd (SQWV) has engaged SAI Global to manage the SQWV standards and to provide the next phase of quality assurance service for Scottish venison producers.

SQWV has for almost 20 years, maintained, developed, and promoted quality assurance standards throughout the wild venison industry in Scotland, achieving this by working closely with producers and processors and the onward supply chain to support the commitment of its scheme's members and deliver return on investment for them.

Jamie Stewart, Chairman, SQWV Ltd says:

"SAI Global have worked in the assurance industry for 100 years and we look forward to combining their experience with our highly respected standards, to promote wild Scottish produce. With an experienced team of assessors who are committed and passionate about wildlife and the countryside, SAI Global is well placed to deliver a robust audit and a valuable and highly credible scheme for SQWV."

Benefits for wild venison estates/managers and individual stalkers who register with SQWV include:

- Demonstrating adherence to the highest welfare and environmental standards

- Ensuring traceability within the food chain from source to consumer
- Increasing confidence knowing they are operating according to Best Practice
- Building customer trust – the SQWV logo represents high production and provenance standards
- Increasing safety – the more sites that sign up to SQWV Assurance, the safer deer management becomes.

Jamie Stewart says:

"This new relationship will drive confidence in the Scottish Quality Wild Venison assurance scheme, for our licensees, purchasers, retailers, and consumers alike, who want to enjoy Scotland's wonderful wild venison product."

The new SAI Global/SQWV website is now online at <https://saiaassurance.co.uk/sqwv>

To contact SAI Global

T: 01908 249974

Or there is also a 'chat' function on the website

Chasing the Deer – The Red Deer through the Seasons by Neil McIntyre

A review by Dick Playfair



Dick Playfair, Secretary,
Scottish Venison Association

Chasing the deer is a beautiful book. For a book with many pictures it is also a compelling read. For those with any

interest in deer, deer management, country sport and tradition, the politics affecting our wild deer, and, not least, deer welfare, this is an absolute must.

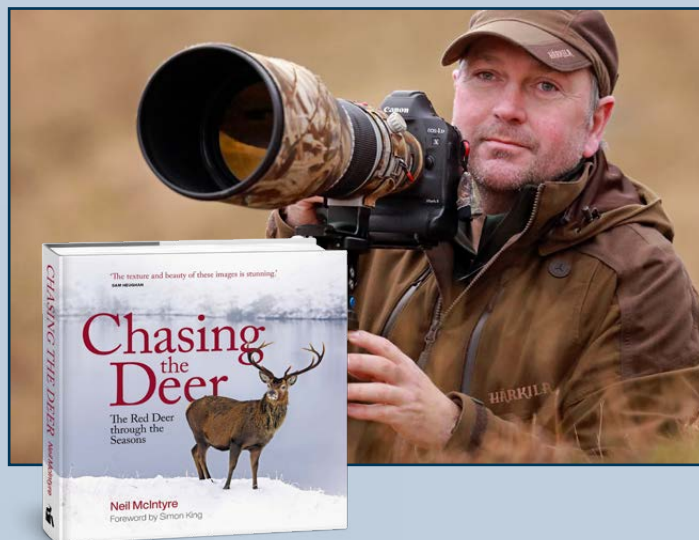
Neil McIntyre, who has Scottish stalking and the hills in his blood, but is best known as one of our leading wildlife photographers, not only presents us with many of his spectacular images of our largest land mammal and its habitat, taken over the years, but also puts it right on the line when it comes to his thoughts on how current trends and political pressure are impacting on our wild red deer. He also gives us some insight into the painstaking skills and field-craft, and the challenges of capturing such pictures.

ADMG has been featuring Neil's photography to illustrate its regular newsletters, indeed his photos feature in this issue of SCOPE and the latest annual review. Whilst his pictures will sell the book - Neil writes that *"ironically it is necessary to be closer to the deer to get a good quality picture than to shoot them with a rifle"* – when coupled with the words this is without doubt Neil championing the case for the deer.

Through the book's 220 pages he takes us through the red deer year, the seasons and the life cycle – the physiology of deer from birth to death. It's a highly informative read and, of course, illustrated throughout with brilliant imagery. This journey through the seasons forms the book's first half whilst the second explores the pressures on upland deer, the impact of rewilding, and the complexities around deer, trees and regeneration with some space also given to the independent Deer Working Group report of which Neil writes:

"In my view this report undermines our red deer and legitimises as many practices and ways as possible to cull them. Notably absent from the report is any mention of the many good things about red deer, how they are an asset to many and how much progress has been made over the past decade in how deer are managed."

He expresses clear concern that red deer numbers are now in decline because of the extent and pressure of the cull (and refutes the popular and much promoted mantra that deer numbers are out of control). He says that we need to address *"how to encourage rewilding without massacring the deer."*



From this book it is evident that Neil has a real empathy for his subject. He understands how deer act, react, and interact with humans, other wild animals and their habitat. He has looked into their eyes and has seen what they see. That comes across very strongly – copious information wrapped with beautiful images, one of the most poignant being that of a lone calf on a snow-covered hillside and the stark caption: *"without its mother it will certainly die."*

This is a 'manifesto' for our deer unequivocally stating and illustrating their case. We should want them and value them as a part of our natural and cultural heritage but, he writes: *"if pressure groups want deer out of the forest and now (out of) the high peatlands, where are they supposed to go?"*

Questions about deer welfare in the current climate are also asked and the case made for its importance: *"Whatever the structure of any future deer management, the welfare of the deer themselves should be paramount."* And: *"When the emphasis (for culling) seems to be on numbers and speed ethics seem to be going out of the window."*

Would a copy in every school be too much to ask? There would be huge value in that. For those who love deer and their place in our hills, woods and mountains they will cherish this stunning work – and for those who see deer as a challenge to their own objectives then Neil's words and pictures will certainly offer pause for thought.

Chasing the Deer is available for readers of SCOPE (RRP £24.99) with a special discount of £5 off. Visit sandstonepress.com/books/chasing-the-deer and use the code **ScopeDeer5** at checkout.

For more of Neil's images see www.neilmcintyre.com

Newsletter produced by

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