



The black curve shows the overall trend and the grey shading shows the 95% confidence intervals. The red dots show the annual estimates and the thin lines the 95% confidence intervals based on the subset of DMAs counted in each year.

From: Assessing Progress in Deer Management: report to Scottish Government from Scottish Natural Heritage September 2019

Photo: Laurie Campbell



**Tom Turnbull, Chairman**  
Association of Deer Management Groups

## We read continually that deer numbers are out of control – but is this really the case in the upland deer range?

We hear it so much that we almost take it for granted – that we have an ever-expanding deer population that's out of control, historically high deer numbers, and now one million deer in Scotland. But what is that figure based on, if anything, and why do red deer in the highlands where we have the best population/density information receive all the bad press?

We understand the 2019 Deer Working Group (DWG) report and its ramifications for deer managers in the highlands including the recently implemented withdrawal of the close season for stags. But what does it say about deer numbers in Scotland? It highlights an increasing population since the 1950s, 'a dominant factor' for this being increasing tree cover in certain parts from 6.6% in 1947 to 18% in 2011. Red deer have expanded their range and roe, sika and fallow deer have increased too.

The report also states that whilst on the open hill visual counts can be made for red deer, measuring deer numbers in other areas is less straightforward. Deer numbers are routinely counted in Deer Management Group (DMG) areas

by foot and helicopter and, since the report (Albon et al. updated in 2019) SNH now NatureScot, has concluded the open hill red deer population has levelled out, citing in 2019 it had reduced to an estimated average density of 9.35 deer/sq km (see figure above). This is no idle claim but rooted in science from the James Hutton Institute.

Why is it then that DMGs and the highlands continue to receive all the attention? DMGs will continue to reduce numbers based on habitat impacts. They will continue to improve peatlands and create woodland in line with Scottish Government objectives. We should be very proud that we liaise, collaborate and manage deer on a landscape scale. DMG members are in the front line in responding to the climate change challenge – and their work isn't just about managing deer.

The figure of one million deer in Scotland is growing arms and legs, but if we have an increasing 'deer problem' this isn't in the DMG area. Our counts and culls point to a reducing upland population of around 300,000. So where are the rest?

# Chairman's editorial

Continued...

And if deer numbers are reducing on the open hill and significant numbers of sheep have been removed (sheep numbers currently total 6.61 million), then our habitat should be improving too. DMGs monitor habitat so we know the direction of travel and places where impacts remain of concern. It shouldn't actually be about numbers at all, but about impacts. Forthcoming changes to agricultural policy are also likely to prompt further improvements in line with Scotland's biodiversity targets too.

So why do DMGs continue to be the focus of attention for Scottish Government? I think it's because our structure allows Government to communicate its message and have

that translated into action on the ground. We are the focus of attention because we're organised and very visible (with websites, management plans etc). Large landholdings and structured groups enable landscape scale objectives to be delivered meaning Government can put another tick on its scorecard.

Other areas like the lowlands and urban fringe however don't have the benefit of a collaborative management structure (except in a few areas). Here to a great extent reliance is on the goodwill, expertise, enthusiasm and the financial input of vocational/recreational stalkers, often operating without formal deer management plans, to get to grips with Government policy and deliver

on the ground where they have access. Those recreational stalkers quietly get on with it but are not on any register.

So, to Government, to the Strategic Deer Board and to NatureScot, it would be good to know how you intend to reduce the significant deer population that falls beyond the upland red deer range to 10 deer/sq km when deer are uncounched and numbers therefore unknown over more than half of Scotland. We understand the direction of travel, but recognition would be welcome where targets have already been achieved and progress has been made, and there should be proper planning and support where they have not.



Dick Playfair, Scottish Venison Association.

## Venison Strategy refreshed

**The Scottish Venison Strategy, *Beyond the Glen*, launched in September 2018 by Marie Gougeon MSP, then Minister for Rural Affairs, has been given a refresh five years down the line.**

The refresh has been undertaken for a number of reasons and falls in line with similar updates being taken by other aspects of Scotland's food and drinks sector, not least because of what has taken place both nationally and globally in the intervening period. The focus of the strategy has also changed from increasing volume from farmed production to using increasing volume anticipated from wild production in line with Scotland's ambition to harvest an additional 50,000 animals per annum and to step up its actions in response to the climate change crisis.

Factors that have impacted on our food and drink sector in general that have come into play since 2018 include Brexit, the Covid 19 pandemic, the Ukraine war and its effect on energy and other costs, and the climate emergency which was declared in April 2019 by the Scottish Government.

Particular to the Scottish venison sector there have been a number of other key influencing factors. These included the report of the independent Deer Working Group to Scottish Government published in 2019, an anticipated increase in deer numbers and culls in England and Wales coupled with the emergence of more effective systems of deer management there as well as the launch of British Quality Wild Venison, the UK cost of living crisis, and increased costs of borrowing and higher interest rates.

Scotland will also see a new Bill expected early in 2024 that will have implications for our deer management sector in relation to climate change and the Scottish biodiversity challenge objectives. The work of the Strategic Deer Board in overseeing the implementation of the recommendations of the independent Deer Working Group is ongoing but changes are already happening, for example the cessation of a closed season for male deer (all species) from 21 October, changes to bullet weights, and use of night vision, thermal and digital sights.

The original 2018 strategy was produced against a very different backdrop. It assumed given conditions then that venison would be in short supply, market data showing significant growth particularly in retail venison sales across Scotland and London and SE England particularly. There was also a healthy export trade with Europe, albeit we continue to import venison into the UK from New Zealand and other countries to maintain all year-round availability. Covid 19 however effectively shut down all channels of trade except retail and mail order for 18 months which dealt a significant blow to progress.

In *Beyond the Glen* we laid out a need to top up available product through our deer farming capability and a diminution of imports. Farmed venison continues to have a place at the premium end of the retail sector and the new strategy acknowledges that this area needs to be supported and increased as market forces change, but that other routes to market for farmed venison are also required. Costs for fencing have increased significantly due to increases in the price of steel and the knock-on effect has been that set-up costs for new farms have this cost to bear as well as higher interest rates.

We also need to consider the implications of the sector's greenhouse gas emissions, an element that did not feature at all in the 2018 strategy. There are increasing demands right across the food chain to know more about carbon footprint and methane emissions and the sector has commissioned work through SAC to identify where such reductions can be made. Accepting that we want deer as an asset in our natural environment then we must accept that emissions will be inevitable, but that significant mitigation is possible at producer level through planting and restoration of woodland and restoration of peatland also. This is important work in convincing trade customers and consumers about the 'sustainability' of venison not just in terms of the herd on the hill or in the woods but also how we get that product to market.

In addition to Scottish Venison Association restructuring and funding the strategy also identifies areas where spend will be required if the sector is to expand and compete. Among the headline actions from the refreshed strategy are:

### **Improve and establish new supply chains**

- Work with the wholesale sector to open the door to public sector opportunities
- Support the market for Scottish venison in London and SE England
- Increase local processing and local sales in Scotland for both wild and farmed venison



*Increasing venison sales through local independent butchers is important.*

### **Enhance quality assurance**

- Develop the SQWV assurance scheme and make relevant to smaller processors
- Encourage British Quality Wild Venison and SQWV working together

### **Skills development**

- Commission a gap analysis across skills and training provision for the venison sector
- Promote knowledge transfer/best practice events for farmed and wild venison
- Implement knowledge transfer opportunities from small processor pilot project

### **Deer Farming**

- Support and encourage development of local processing and local supply chain

### **Develop area-based facilities for routes to local markets**

- Call for a special fund or access through Food Processing Marketing Co-op Grant Scheme in its new form to support local venison projects
- Investigate potential of shared capacity in public sector chills
- Produce template for small/medium volume chill/butchery units
- Encourage local enterprise company support for venison initiatives

### **Communications**

- PR campaign across key markets (London and SE England and Scotland) to run annually for five years to change attitudes towards eating venison, and promote healthy eating and environmental/sustainable objectives
- Develop web-based education programme for Scottish schools

### **R & D**

- Continue work with research institutes on programme of deer health research

### **Market research and consumer insight**

- Regularly update supply of market data, plus commissioning of new venison usage/attitudinal research

### **Reducing carbon footprint**

- Work to reduce carbon footprint across the sector, with publication and promotion of SAC recommendations

### **Risk analysis**

- Work to better understand the threats and risks to the sector particularly from major events and consequences affecting the supply chain

### **Scottish Venison – the brand**

- Development of Scottish Venison the brand, review of website, and revisit potential for PGI status for Scottish Wild Venison.



Isle of Rona venison, packed and ready for the boat.

Photo: Bill Cowie



Dick Playfair, Scottish Venison Association

## New report assesses Scottish Venison sector's infrastructure and capacity

**A breakdown in October 2022 in the supply chain in certain quarters right at the peak of the rut saw some estates with larders full and carcase collections delayed. That in itself was one reason behind the commissioning of this important report.**

The Scottish venison supply chain has always been fragile. The number of volume processors or Approved Game Handling Establishments (AGHEs) barely reaches into double figures and some areas on the geographical fringes find getting their carcasses into the supply chain via an AGHE difficult if not impossible.

JF Consulting, was appointed in March 2023 by the Scottish Venison Association and SAOS to undertake this Scottish Government-funded project, its key objective being to assess the current infrastructure and capacity of the Scottish venison processing sector and requirements for future growth.

It isn't just about product to market, but also a need to support Scottish Government's environmental and

biodiversity recovery targets. The call by NatureScot to work towards an additional 50,000 deer culled per annum to keep on top of impacts and to allow regeneration of woodland, new planting, and restoration of peatland begged the question "but what if we don't have the processor infrastructure to cope with the venison output?"

The project examined upland and lowland Scotland; Scottish AGHEs and their coverage; non-Scottish based AGHEs and their role; local chills and collection centres; the meat wholesale sector; local processing and direct sales; local butchers and other routes to market.

Another objective was to identify where there were failings in the current supply chain and potential opportunities to ensure that an additional cull would result in that extra venison being made available through safe, legal channels for human consumption.

JF Consulting based their research on a series of interviews and fact-finding sessions with a range of businesses and individuals involved in the sector – not just the volume players, but also those culling and processing small volumes locally or who are exploring innovative or different routes to market. In total over 40 stakeholders were interviewed and opinions of 22 wholesalers sought in a parallel project. This has been therefore a comprehensive review of the complete supply chain as well as seeking the views of a number of industry bodies too including ADMG and the Scottish Venison Association.

The report incorporated a number of conclusions and recommendations and, in terms of this review of it, that is where its focus lies. What did the report tell us and what action can be taken or prioritized to ensure that as we produce more venison from the wild in can reach the market safely and legally? Of course, what happens thereafter is very much in the hands of the buying public and whether they ask for or choose venison. How we achieve that was not within the scope of this report.

**In terms of conclusions the JF Consulting report made the following key points:**

- There is an increasing conservation imperative to increase the harvest of wild deer not just in Scotland but across the UK. However, from additional work undertaken by BASC in the context of this report it is evident that the primary process of putting a carcass into the food chain by either the estate or vocational stalker is actually at a net cost to the producer. To expect more carcasses to be supplied consequently means expecting producers to incur even greater losses.
- Any additional harvest is not uniform across Scotland and there are certain areas where action is more pressing than others. Phasing is also necessary so that a situation of oversupply and a consequential reduction in price is avoided.
- The sector is adaptable and could increase output at non-peak times of the year. This would require planning, and potentially upscaling and investment from processors. Producers could be incentivised to spread their cull into summer and winter months so allowing processors to iron out the peaks and troughs in supply to some degree, and to process more. That means a culture change from having an intense 6-week period in September/October when guests are on the hill to shoot stags. There is also a role for local, low volume processors in broadening product availability by extending their 'harvesting' periods.
- New markets should be developed, one obvious one being the wholesale sector and its links specifically into public sector contracts. This could however require an enhanced quality assurance scheme.
- Terminology needs to change. The whole process needs to be presented more as "harvesting an iconic Scottish product" and the market needs to be supported by a campaign to raise and sustain venison's profile, attributes and desirability.

- The industry's leadership body can only do its job in coordinating all necessary activity if it is sufficiently resourced.

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**The report also made a number of recommendations with regard to infrastructure and processing:**

- Increased production should be phased.
- The industry Quality Assurance scheme should be re-assessed and developed, possibly to include 'end to end' assurance that has relevance to the consumer.
- Marketing requires funding to be undertaken effectively locally, nationally (UK) and overseas (Europe). More research on the size of the current and potential markets is important. Scottish Wild Venison PGI status could bring significant long-term benefit.
- Venison's fragile processing infrastructure needs support at all scales and the next Food Processor Marketing Co-operation Grant Scheme must be open to applications from the sector no matter their size.
- Scotland's lowland areas – arguably where most action in relation to an increased cull needs to be taken – are worst equipped in terms of infrastructure. Solutions are needed so that vocational stalkers and stalking syndicates can play their part with access to community-based or state-owned chills. Shared access to the network of FLS chills should be explored.
- All would benefit from a specification/prototype for a standard design larder/chill. This would ease the commissioning and future funding process. Modular options that can be expanded to handle increased volume would be useful.
- Extending the cull into the shoulder months would be of benefit. Currently there is a concerted six-week period of ultra-high volume coinciding with the rut that has processors working at full capacity for a product that they do not want

to sell on the UK market. A system needs to be in place also that allows producers to operate at, or at least, break even.

- The UK market for the sale of rutted venison should be explored. It would require differentiation from regular venison and, whilst stronger and 'gamier', chefs often suggest that it can still be utilised effectively and attractively.
- The wholesale market holds the key to public sector provision as well as other aspects of the food service, restaurant and catering trade. Ways to develop venison distribution through these channels should be prioritised.

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**The report also made a smaller number of strategic recommendations for the sector:**

- Scottish Venison's representative body should maintain strong links with Government, Scotland Food and Drink and the broader food sector. Venison has always been perceived as being on the fringes of the mainstream whereas, despite its unique challenges and processes, it really should be seen as a valued an integral part of the whole.
- There is a need to develop better trust and understanding between producers and processors, establish who is the customer and supplier, and be better aware of the benefits and successful outcomes of working together.
- Training is vital and those culling the deer must be properly trained. Training needs to be affordable, but there also should be a renewal process. Skills and practices change and those in the sector need a system that makes sure they keep up to speed.
- Education must be enhanced at all levels – there remains a lack of knowledge generally. Better understanding will mean greater acceptability. We should look to see how other sectors do it and learn from them.



Stocking the local filling station shelves brings important sales for Winston Churchill venison



Alan McDonnell, Conservation Manager, Trees for Life

## Our Argyll Venison Road Trip

**It's funny where an idea can take you. When my colleague Nicola suggested that we, Trees for Life, should look to do something practical to provide a way of getting more venison from our local hills into local communities and markets, it made perfect sense – on one level anyway. From our limited knowledge, there looked to be a good amount of headroom between what customers are paying for venison and the price that estates receive for the product and indeed the tight margins earned by processors. So, we reasoned, all we need to do to establish a local venison economy in support of proposals like our own Affric Highlands initiative is to find a way to sell more venison locally and keep more of the margins in the locality – easy, right?**

Undeterred by having no clue what to do next, we began reaching out to people who we reckoned could help solve the puzzle. Through last spring and summer, we spoke with a range of people – stalkers, estates, processors, a restaurateur, a caterer, Scottish Venison, Scotland Food and Drink, HIE, a chef, people with community venison aspirations.

Part of me expected to be told to forget it, that this was no subject for amateurs and it would never work. Instead, we met with buckets of enthusiasm from people who'd thought the same thoughts but also with the experience to tell us that local venison businesses can start and work, provided they're built on more sophisticated models than those we'd naively imagined.

On the advice of Scottish Venison, we got in touch with Winston Churchill and, long story short, organised a road trip to meet the man who has been there and done it with locally sourced venison and retail. The intention was to try to co-develop a plan for action.

From the network of around 30 people we'd been talking with, 15 likely (and not-so likely) suspects were warmly welcomed by Winston and his son Angus at their business near Dunoon.

Brains crammed with insight from Winston, particularly on the diversity of markets needed to sustain the business, we retired to a hotel in Dunoon. The conversation ran all evening, through the next morning's breakfast and, fuelled by gallons



Carcasses in the chill at Winston Churchill Venison.

Photos: Alan McDonnell

of strong coffee at Strone Estate courtesy of Tom Turnbull, all the way to lunch and beyond as we all travelled home.

A little dazed, we emerged clutching a plan for action, rough but coherent. Its focus is on marketing to grow the demand for this great product, investing in capacity to supply quality and on providing practical support to aspiring new local enterprises. David Lowes, Managing Partner at Glenfalloch, spoke for many of us who went on this venison journey:

*"Our visit to Winston Churchill Game was fascinating and informative in so many ways. The big take-away was the vital role that increasing venison consumption can play in improving biodiversity by incentivising appropriate cull levels. There are clear opportunities to improve venison marketing and to broaden its appeal as a genuinely carbon positive product. Now we need industry focus and support from the Scottish Government to make it happen."*

Happily, we soon discovered how well this fits into the approach in the

refreshed Scottish Venison Strategy, which will provide the ideal vehicle for progress and, critically, for seeking the investment needed to get things moving.

At the same time, through the Common Ground Forum, ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK are collaborating to interest government in supporting a subsidy to help unlock the true value of this amazing natural asset. Amid the contentious history of deer management and the need for realistic expectations, there is also room for cautious optimism for the future.

## Deer – Political Update

**Following a vote of the Scottish Parliament on 27 September, the changes to close seasons for male deer came into force on 21 October. Therefore, there is no legal close season for male deer from this year.**

Changes have also taken place permitting the use of night sights and amending minimum ammunition weights. These came into force during the first week of November.

The Wild Deer Best Practice Group has drafted new guidance on the use of thermal and night vision sights, and changes to existing guidance regarding bullet weights. NatureScot has also re-written

the Night Shooting Code of Practice which will be published along with the updated WDBP guides. No guides mention open/closed seasons for male deer there is nothing to be updated on this change.

Regarding further primary legislation concerning deer and the consultation on Scotland's Biodiversity Strategic Framework it is proposed that there will be a full public consultation on proposals for changes to deer legislation, and alongside that formal process Scottish Government will hold workshops and meetings with stakeholders to discuss these proposals in more detail. These are likely to take place early in 2024.



**Dick Playfair**, Scottish Venison Association

## Perthshire Game – early days yet but satisfying a local market need

**Tom Rust and Oli Whyte, the collective brains behind Perthshire Game, were managing deer on a small piece of forestry near Blairgowrie with the opportunity for more ground to manage. Tom worked as a land agent with Bell Ingram in Perth and Oli for Forestry and Land Scotland, but they decided to abandon those career paths this year to move into the venison sector on a modest scale. From one end of the supply chain to the other.**

Perthshire Game's larder/chill and small butchery unit is situated in a converted steading at Lethendy Farm Cottages and was installed in part through frustration that the nearest outlet for their roe carcasses was in Fife. The round trip there, plus the cost of the stalking, meant it wasn't a viable proposition for any venture of a commercial nature.

An opportunity was taken to purchase a second-hand chill, in 'kit form' from an estate in East Anglia for £4,500. This unit was ready to be rebuilt at their base, and included all related equipment – rails, gambrels, waste trays, chopping boards, knives etc. The purchase plus van hire, concrete at around £600 and other parts and materials totalling £2,000 was the approximate outlay to bring the project to fruition.

Of course, there was labour provided free and 'in-house' and the good will and time of friends with some manual work and 'heavy lifting', but that was enough to see the installation through. The build was completed in January this year and a Venison Dealer Licence awarded in February along with the necessary food business certification from Perth and Kinross Council who, by all accounts, were very good to deal with and their EHO's understanding of what the business was about. A



few further stipulations were made before certification was granted but these were reasonable and able to be quickly achieved.

By March this year Perthshire Game was in business and selling at the farmers market in Perth. From there they have expanded to sell at other farmers' markets in Aberfeldy and Blairgowrie, at outlets such as the Scones of Lethendy Farm's Strawberry Shop (which was out of stock of their product when I passed last – wrong day of the week, but a good sign), and Loch Leven's Larder as well as larger events such as the Blair Castle Horse Trials. They are also supplying a number of restaurants in Perth and setting up a small mail order business which means a rebuild of their website. Provenance is undoubtedly important; local product, processed locally and sold locally with minimal food miles.

Such a system and its scale will have its drawbacks and a major one already is size. The chill can accommodate 12 stags, or 15 hinds, or around 25 roe. To meet food hygiene regulations, Perthshire Game must hang all carcasses either in-skin or jackets off. Consequently, all the skinning is done in one sitting and there is a thorough clean down before skinned carcasses are stored in the chiller. Capacity also means that there is only enough for what

Tom and Oli and a very few select contacts are culling (with a small fee charged to outsiders for use), and literally no room for expansion.

Not yet a year in business, thoughts are already moving towards what happens next and a business plan for 'organic growth'. Whilst they have funded everything to date themselves, a measure of grant support would be welcome for the step up. They have been in conversation with Tayside Business Gateway, and have ambitions of a larger set up and expanded processing capacity.

In terms of butchery by their own admission they have learned most of what they know from Youtube. From their early efforts and a lot going into the mince pile, carcass yield is now much better with practice and very little waste which makes sense when it's your business and everything counts.

What Tom and Oli have done, like a number of others in the sector, is not to wait for support before embarking on their venture but literally 'bitten the bullet' and self-funded their project. Hopefully they have embarked on a journey that will allow them to achieve their ambitions and, whilst still early days, are proof of what can be done with belief, limited funding and a little help from your friends.



## The Country Food Trust – Scottish Wild Venison Scheme

**The Scottish Venison Association has been liaising with the Country Food Trust (CFT) to support and promote its initiative to supply venison from the Scottish uplands and lowlands into the charitable sector in Scotland.**

The preferred approach with CFT is outlined below.

- Estates/deer forests/land holdings (producers) agree individually on an annual basis with CFT to donate a specific number of carcasses to the Trust – this agreement should cover approximate timing of supply, deer species and sex. Producers may wish to do this as part of their own environment, social and governance (ESG) programmes, charitable giving objectives or for philanthropic or other reasons.
- The whole carcass is donated to CFT. Those carcasses donated to CFT are uplifted as per normal routine collection by the game dealer/processor.
- The game dealer/processor breaks down the carcass, then supplying CFT for further processing for ambient meals and onward supply to community kitchens.
- As this commitment by a producer is a charitable donation the game dealer/processor retains the strip loin and haunches without any payment to the producer. This is to cover their costs including collection/transport.

To ensure that best quality in terms of end product is achieved the Scottish Venison Association advises against rutted male venison being included or this initiative.

Until there is a change in the law there is no requirement for the carcass to have been culled using non-lead ammunition.

The producer may choose to make separate arrangements with CFT and their game dealer/processor.

# THE COUNTRY FOOD TRUST

For this and more information contact :  
[sj@thecountryfoodtrust.org](mailto:sj@thecountryfoodtrust.org)



Photo: The Common Ground Forum

## The Common Ground Forum – new beginnings in Scotland’s upland deer sector

**Organisations and individuals across the Highlands have come together to form The Common Ground Forum (CGF). Initiated by the Association of Deer Management Groups and Scottish Environment LINK with the aim of setting aside long entrenched disagreements over some areas relating to deer management, the Forum includes deer stalkers, foresters, farmers, landowners, community representatives, nature conservationists and many others.**

This coming together represents a commitment to work together while respecting different viewpoints, and already a number of joint initiatives are planned. Particular emphasis is put on what the coming changes will mean for those directly involved in managing deer and in providing support and reassurance in the face of the changes associated with the climate and biodiversity crises, for which an increasing level of deer cull has been identified as a required action by Scottish Government agency NatureScot.

The ‘Our Common Ground Accord’ was launched in October. This sets out seven commitments including identifying a common purpose, respecting others’ objectives, and working for mutually beneficial solutions. The Accord has so far been signed by more than 25 of the key organisations with an interest in wild deer management.

Those organisations that have signed up can be seen on the new website [www.thecommongroundforum.scot](http://www.thecommongroundforum.scot)

The Scottish Government is developing draft deer legislation, based on the 2019 Deer Working Group report and recommendations, for introduction in 2024, to be preceded by a consultation later this year. While there will inevitably be a range of views on what may be proposed, the Accord is intended to ensure that areas of agreement can be identified and jointly supported while remaining differences can be debated and represented respectfully.

Tom Turnbull, Chairman, The Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) said:

*“Whilst it is clear that there are still significant differences in approach to deer management there are also areas on which we can all agree. The Forum will endeavour to come together to discuss some of the divisive topics within deer management and find solutions where possible. Key to the process will be the deer managers tasked with delivering challenging Scottish Government targets for climate and biodiversity. Having been involved in collaborative deer management for many years this process and the creation of the Common Ground Forum has been a breath of fresh air in an often heated debate over deer management objectives.”*

Representing Scottish Environment LINK’s Deer Group, Duncan Orr-Ewing said:

*“Everyone in the deer sector is aware that significant change is coming as we look to respond to the twin challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss and the associated need to reduce deer populations in some areas. We accept that these changes will be hard for many and could create further divisions between the people involved, so the Common Ground Forum offers a long overdue channel for navigating change with empathy and building positive relationships that focus on solutions.”*

Lea McNally representing the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) on the Common Ground Forum said:

*“The SGA is pleased to be a part of The Common Ground Forum after participating in the successful Finding the Common Ground project. We now need to address some of the different approaches identified by the original project. It’s refreshing to see the momentum going forward as it is obvious there are still significant issues to address as we try to achieve the Government’s aims for sustainable upland deer management.”*



Photo: Forestry and Land Scotland

## First FLS deer larder sharing agreement with a private estate

**A private estate near Thurso has become the first ever in Scotland to enter into a deer larder sharing agreement with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), in a move designed to encourage collaboration in managing deer.**

The shared deer larder helps both partners as they are managing the same deer population and facilitates access for the estate to a deer larder to produce Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV assured) simultaneously helping to reduce deer browsing impacts, on a landscape scale.

The FLS agreement with Achkeepster Estate is the first such partnership between Forestry and Land Scotland and a private estate.

Speaking about the agreement, Megan Bregazzi, the FLS Wildlife

Ranger Manager who implemented and manages the agreement, said it creates a blueprint for other such agreements where private estates adjoin national forest estates and where a joint approach to reduce deer impacts is beneficial. She said:

*"Supporting a neighbour in their deer cull is clearly of benefit to our own management activities on the national forest estate. Ultimately we're both trying to reduce deer browsing pressure."*

*"In effect this is collaborative deer management in action - the agreement works for both parties because the estate now has access to a larder where they can process and sell quality assured venison from their estate and at the same time it helps us to reduce the shared deer population overall."*

To help protect Scotland's national forests and land from the negative impacts of deer FLS employs a number of techniques, including regular deer culling and fencing, to keep numbers down to a sustainable level, keeping animals healthy and mitigating against habitat loss.

Speaking about the larder share Achkeepster Estate owner Innes Miller said:

*"We needed quality storage and processing for our carcasses but didn't have sufficient volume to justify putting in new buildings and expensive refrigeration. This sharing of facilities with FLS helps both of us because we are taking deer off our open hill which would otherwise migrate into the FLS forest across our shared boundary and cause long term damage."*

### 'Fit and competent' status

As NatureScot works to modernise Scotland's wildlife management systems, they have developed a new online service for deer management in Scotland the first part of which was launched in mid-October 2023 with deer

controllers now able to apply for or renew fit and competent status online: <https://orlo.uk/XVCNz>

The move simplifies and streamlines the previous manual process, making it quicker and

easier for applicants and staff. The new digital service addresses the recommendations of the independent Deer Working Group and will be updated in line with any future changes to deer legislation.



Victor Clements

# In the atmosphere, in the trees, or in the ground?

**In the summer after the first COVID lockdown in 2020, a report was published on the interactions between carbon, trees and moorland in Scotland.**

You can see the report, conclusions and methodology at this link: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gcb.15229](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gcb.15229)

## Carbon, trees and soils

The report summarizes results from a number of long-term monitoring sites where native trees had been planted into fairly typical Scottish heathland soils, with the intention of seeing how the levels of carbon storage changed, both in the trees as they grew, but also in the soil.

## The results

It is important to say that these are all moorland, "carbon rich" soils, not mineral soils where the results would have been different, nor deep peatland soils.

The results basically showed that for downy birch in particular, whatever increased carbon was stored in the growing trees was countered by an equivalent or greater amount being lost from the soil itself, potentially up to 40 years. The effect with Scots Pine was much less pronounced.

What was happening was that carbon was being lost through respiration from the soils, with soil stocks being depleted by five percent per year. This was being driven by the tree cover.

## What does this mean?

What this means is that while there are lots of good reasons for planting trees, and birch is likely to be a key component of most native woodlands in the Highlands, carbon sequestration is not one of them, at least not until the trees are 40 years old or so.

It is also the case that our open ground habitats may be more effective at absorbing carbon than woodland sites.

## Is this right?

The experimental plots being monitored were well designed, and the science was thorough. No-one has been able to demonstrate a different outcome. The results were not marginal, but fairly decisive, making them pretty inconvenient for many of us who would like to see more trees growing in the Highlands.

## Key message

Ultimately, in terms of the balance between woodland and open ground habitats in the Highlands, where is it that we want our carbon to be? In the atmosphere, in the trees, or in the ground?

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has published a much longer article on this at the link below, if you would like to read more about what is actually a fundamentally important piece of land use research of the type that we actually do really well in Scotland.

[www.scottishgamekeepers.co.uk/latest-news/2023/2023-09-14-in-the-atmosphere-in-the-trees-or-in-the-ground.php](https://www.scottishgamekeepers.co.uk/latest-news/2023/2023-09-14-in-the-atmosphere-in-the-trees-or-in-the-ground.php)

*Victor Clements is a native woodland advisor working in Highland Perthshire. He advises a number of deer management groups and has participated in a number of woodland related research projects, albeit in a very small way.*



*On the young birch plots at Ballogie there was a significant loss of carbon overall.*



*Ballogie Estate plots were fenced off to protect them from grazing and planted with downy birch and Scots Pine.*

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**The Association of Deer Management Groups**, c/o Bidwells, Broxden House, Lamberkine Drive, Perth PH1 1RA  
Tel: 01738 630 666 | Email: [finlay.clark@bidwells.co.uk](mailto:finlay.clark@bidwells.co.uk) | [www.deer-management.co.uk](http://www.deer-management.co.uk) Printed on recycled paper