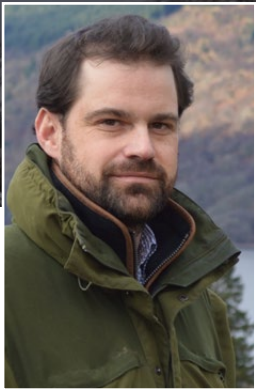




Deer management means being out in all weathers. Photo: Conor Gault



Tom Turnbull, Chair
Association of Deer Management Groups

DMNROs by any other name

Last month saw publication of the long-awaited Natural Environment Bill. We had held our breath up until its publication particularly over the issue of extra powers for NatureScot, and Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (or DMNROs for short) which had become a part of the vocabulary of everyone involved in the deer management sector. And whilst those five words don't actually feature in the Bill the equivalent does albeit thinly disguised.

What the Bill contains are new triggers for intervention for NatureScot to achieve "a relevant target, strategy, or plan relating to the environment, climate change, or biodiversity" and it is this new direction above all else that gives us major cause for concern, not least because of a lack of clarity around who might be the target of regulatory intervention and at what level, but also the subjective nature on which such intervention might be based.

ADMG's member Deer Management Groups cover three million hectares of the Highlands. Through voluntary collaborative working they deliver deer management at little cost to government. Change has been happening for some time, and deer management is considered in

the light of the climate and biodiversity crises as well as the public interest. The Natural Environment Bill, if these new powers are introduced, will undoubtedly challenge that system.

What's not in the Bill? There is precious little about how such new measures would apply to areas of fragmented ownership across the lowlands when there had been in the run up to the Bill a welcome acceptance that that should be where much effort was required. Where are the proposals for incentives - again an essential element that has taken up much time and discussion and a lever that the Strategic Deer Board recognises as being an essential part of the deer management equation? That's missing from the narrative too.

It should not be lost on NatureScot that they rely on DMGs to deliver and report culls in the Highlands, to produce deer management plans, population models and undertake habitat monitoring. Voluntary collaboration on a landscape scale is at risk of being threatened by increasingly heavy-handed regulation such as that proposed. Keep turning the screw on the upland deer sector and, like squeezing an orange, at some point it's going to burst.

Our membership has been working towards and the majority achieving a target of 10 deer per sq km or less (whilst recognising that such numbers aren't actually helpful), but what if those national targets change and become 5 deer, or 2? When does collaboration actually implode?

Historically we have seldom objected to the use of regulation by NatureScot but these new triggers in the Bill threaten to significantly change the socio-economics of deer management, they put the current system at risk, and fly in the face of 'just transition'. There comes a time when the structure as currently operating in the uplands will reach breaking point.

We think that Scottish Government and NatureScot should concentrate on support, incentives and facilitation of deer management, recognition of the tough work deer managers do at a landscape scale, and develop a buoyant venison sector, rather

than threatening new triggers for intervention that may endanger effective future collaboration and set all the good work to date into reverse. A recent James Hutton Institute report commissioned by the Scottish Government *Enabling landscape scale management in Scotland* highlighted the need to incentivise and support DMGs as relevant examples of collaborative working in the Highlands (see page 9). The importance of collaboration and the need for deer managers to work together is understood in the sector but the men and women tasked with delivering targets must be supported too.

As habitat improves and tree planting targets are achieved, we are going to need a motivated and inspired deer management sector. Scottish Government support for the next generation of deer managers and for remote rural communities is needed now to ensure that we have the resource and capacity to deliver deer management in the future.

We have over the last few months met with Government, with Ministers, with MSPs and their officials and given evidence to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee before the Bill was even published. Immediately following its publication we took the Minister Jim Fairlie and his officials onto the hill at Glenfalloch for a helpful and informative day to develop their understanding of how deer management on the ground operates.

And venison should also be supported. It should be on the menu in schools and hospitals. As a virtually organic, sustainable, low carbon and healthy protein it should be an easy sell, and we need to promote this exceptional product to a wider audience. Scottish Government must help the sector do this too.

It's my personal view that the measures in this Bill set us at a cliff edge. I hope it is not too late for steps to be taken that will allow us to pull back.



Andrew Gordon

Lea MacNally remembers: "It was with a great sense of sadness and shock when we heard of the sudden and untimely death of Andrew Gordon on 20 January.

"If Andrew ever had reason to write his CV, it would have read something like this: landowner, farmer, factor, pilot, farm diversification, hydro engineer. The list could continue but most importantly he was a family man and friend to many. This was evident at the turnout of several hundred at his funeral service at Lude on 30 January.

"Over the years Andrew and I were involved in many projects. He and the late Lord Burton were instrumental in setting up the Glenelg DMG, with Andrew as Secretary and Lord Burton as Chairman. A formidable pairing as anyone who attended the meetings will verify! We spent many days stalking on Glen Quoich. During the heady years one could stalk a party of stags in the knowledge that there would be a couple of shootable stags in the group. Latterly we spent a lot of time spying for a likely beast before we set off on a stalk. One particular day we set off to drive the Sanctuary with ghillies moving in from the top to two parties concealed strategically in ambush.

"All the stags came out on the side I was on and we bagged a fine switch. Unfortunately, nothing passed Andrew but as we started to drag our stag off we heard some shots from below and we came on Andrew who had sprinted from the other side of the Glen and onto our deer and killed two. He duly apologised to his guest for his misdemeanour but with a twinkle in his eye.

"Duncan, when he called me to tell of Andrew's passing, said: "you have known Dad longer than me Lea." That was a privilege I had enjoyed for 57 years. Andrew, RIP."

Richard Cooke writes: "Andrew was an ADMG colleague and a personal friend for over 30 years. He served as my ADMG Vice Chair from 2011 to 2014 and was a great support, particularly at Scone where he always had the necessary copper pipe or baler twine to ensure that our stand stayed upright; quite apart from his skill at dispensing hospitality to members. I also feel very fortunate to have been his guest and subsequently weekly tenant at both Glen Quoich and Lude; traditional stalking of the best kind.

"Universally liked and respected, Andrew will be very much missed across his very wide circle of deer people, aviators and country folk. As Lea has written, the attendance at his funeral said it all."



Ewen Macpherson

Ewen Macpherson of Attadale, Strathcarron, died in November 2024, just short of his 95th birthday. He was well-known in the local area and in deer management circles having taken over the running of Attadale from his father Ian in 1975. He was a keen supporter of local good causes and the Lochcarron Highland Games which are an annual event held on the estate.

A successful career in finance in London following Cambridge and service in the Rifle Brigade, saw him move north to spend as much time as he could on the estate, working from home, making the estate sustainable through for example investing in hydro, developing the gardens with his late wife Nicky and immersing himself in local life.

Helen Murchison, Chairwoman of Lochcarron Community Council, said: "He lived here and ran the estate properly and had time for everyone.

"He was very involved in the community and good to the community. We have lost a real friend with the passing of Ewen Macpherson."

Among many good causes he supported were the Howard Doris Care Centre and the local shinty club. He was an enthusiastic supporter of both ADMG and the River Carron Conservation Association.

Former ADMG Chair Richard Cooke said: "Ewen was one of the ADMG originals, going right back to the first Executive Committee in 1992. He was also the very longstanding Chair and guiding hand of the South Ross DMG with its five sub groups, and then of the Lochalsh DMG after the main Group divided.

"Even before the emergence of ADMG Ewen set up and chaired Highland Venison, a cooperative, which, for a number of years in the late 1980s, sowed the collaborative seeds for the venison industry as it is today. Ewen was a delightful man to work with and always wise. I particularly remember a wonderful evening with him and Joanna at Attadale in June 2022 while working on 'Deer People'. He was ever the inimitable Highland laird."



Drew Macfarlane Slack MBE

Everyone who knew him will have been saddened to learn of Drew's death in November. Deeply committed to the rural

sector, particularly in the Highlands, Drew's enthusiasm, focus and belief helped to shape not just the country of today, but also of tomorrow, valuing different voices and opinions and seeking to increase opportunities for women and younger people to be more involved.

He was instrumental in establishing the Land Management Conference for UHI students, also forging connections between the UHI and land managers and extending the reach of academic studies and research.

He chaired both the Monadhliaths and West Grampian Deer Management Groups, playing a pivotal role in resolving conflicts and fostering collaborating on landscape-scale projects, including peatland restoration.

Many will know Drew from his role as Scottish Land & Estates' Regional Manager for the Highlands from July 2007 to January 2018. He was also a key player in making SLE's Helping it Happen Awards happen, latterly himself being a recipient of an award.

He had served as a District and then Highland Regional Councillor with affordable housing a particular passion, playing a key role in the Highland Housing expo as well as the Communities Housing Trust. He also worked with communities and visitors to support landscapes, wildlife, local culture and economic health, promoting sustainable and community-led local development within the Cairngorms National Park.

Active within the Leader Local Action Groups he was a board member of the EU mountain lobby group Euromontana and chaired private and public sector boards of Lochaber Enterprise, the Highland Housing Alliance, Lochaber Citizen's Advice Bureau, the Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service, and the Applecross Forum. He moved in many circles, he was known to many and will be hugely missed.

The editor is grateful to Scottish Land & Estates for providing this information.



Winter stag: photo Steven Rennie

A first for Common Ground on deer management

A deer management group in Aberdeenshire has become the first in Scotland to sign the Common Ground Accord.

Against a background of growing polarisation in the debate on deer management in Scotland, the Accord was created by the Common Ground Forum, an award-winning initiative which brings together those involved in managing deer in upland Scotland. The Accord sets out a commitment to respect different land management objectives, engage with others both honestly and with an open mind and work together for mutually beneficial solutions.

The Upper Deeside and Donside Land Management Group has now become the first constituted deer management group to sign up to the Accord. The Group comprises seventeen land managers in the private, charitable and public sectors who work constructively together to manage wild deer and other common land-based interests in an area covering around a quarter of the Cairngorms National Park. Mark Nicolson of Group member Mar Estate explained: "There has been much heat in the last few years about whether there are too many deer or too few deer in some places, with socio-economic and environmental objectives sometimes being seen to clash.

"In the experience of our Group, the discussion often underplays the ability of people to work together. In the Upper Deeside and Donside area we have wide range of objectives both between and within estate members. The Group provides a place to understand deer populations and movements, identify conflicts and resolve them. These principles are exactly what the Common Ground Accord is about, exemplifying how collaboration can work."

The Common Ground Forum emerged in 2023 from a two year 'Finding the Common Ground' project in which civic mediators Centre for Good Relations worked with people from across the polarised upland deer management sector to start building trust and relationships. Project Manager for the Forum, Helen MacIntyre, said: "It is often the case that communication is the key to delivering results. That is particularly true with wild deer which don't recognise the boundaries we as humans create.

"The Forum takes this concept of communication and trust and seeks to find greater respect and collaboration throughout the upland deer management sector. Many deer management groups already do this, with success as can be seen in the Upper Deeside and Donside area. The Forum broadens this approach, bringing together individuals and organisations who perhaps have not always communicated well with each other to encourage respectful dialogue and collaboration to achieve better outcomes for everyone."

The Common Ground Forum is a network across Scotland's upland deer management sector of those who have committed to work together to look at how a more collaborative approach to deer management, based on mutual respect and consensus building, can contribute to a vision of a greener, healthier and economically vibrant future. Members of the Forum are committed to work in the spirit of the Our Common Ground Accord, a set of principles about how they will communicate with each other, in order to set a standard for respectful behaviour throughout the sector.

Scottish Outdoor Access Code celebrates 20 years this year

After two decades, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code remains at the heart of the public's everyday enjoyment of Scotland's great outdoors.

The advice the Code gives both the public and land managers allows people to enjoy the outdoors in a way that balances freedom of access and responsibility to look after the land. However, more can always be done to ensure that the benefits are spread evenly across society and to increase understanding and use of these rights among all communities.

Access rights have become a cornerstone of Scotland's identity, promoting access to the outdoors and nature while encouraging respect for those living and working on the land and caring for the environment. Having such open access to the outdoors connects all to the significant benefits it can bring to our health and well-being, as well as to the rural economy. NatureScot is celebrating the Code's anniversary throughout 2025 by sharing stories of people's enjoyment of access rights, and of managing land for access, as well as reminding everyone to remember the importance of enjoying the outdoors with care and respect.

NatureScot Chair, Professor Colin Galbraith said: "For two decades, Scotland's rights of responsible access have given people unparalleled opportunities to get outside and enjoy exploring our breath-taking landscapes, nature and local greenspaces. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code has guided the introduction and use of these rights, informing both the public and land managers of their responsibilities based on mutual respect, care and understanding.

"At NatureScot we are committed to working with partners, landowners and communities to ensure access rights continue to thrive, and that their use helps tackle the climate emergency by promoting a deeper connection to nature while encouraging everyone to care for Scotland's extraordinary outdoors."

Tom Turnbull, Chairman, ADMG, said: "This is a notable milestone and I'm in no doubt that we have all benefitted from the Code which is now well established and understood. Those in the deer management sector have had an important role to play as we go about our business and we have worked closely with NatureScot and other partners such as Mountaineering Scotland to ensure that the interests of those who access the outdoors whether for work or recreation are understood and respected."

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon said: "Scotland has world-class scenery, and we are blessed to have access to it. There is an abundance of research which points to the beneficial health effects of time spent in nature.

"Nearly 80% of Scottish adults report that they like to access the countryside each week because of its benefits to their health, or because it helps them to relax. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code has helped people get more enjoyment from our beautiful countryside and guided us all how to benefit from it while showing the proper respect and ensuring we do no harm."

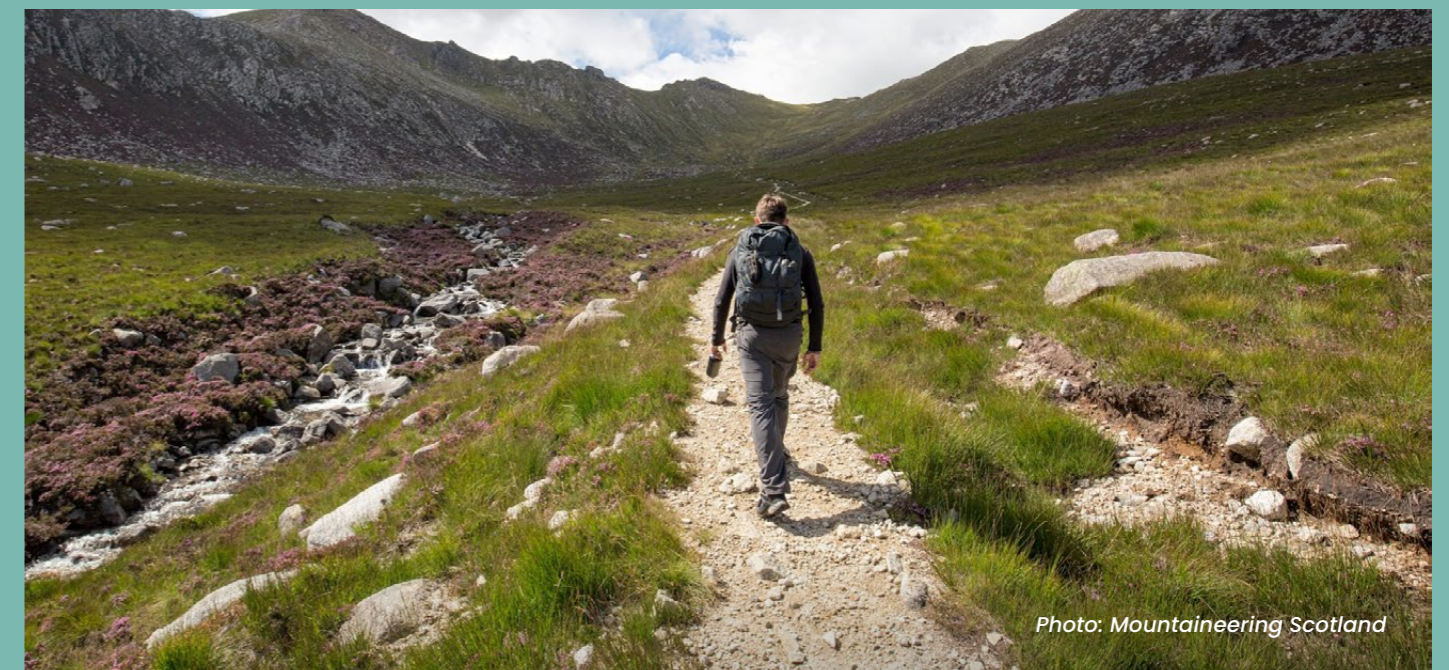


Photo: Mountaineering Scotland

New research supports conservation of fallow deer across Europe

New research published in 2024 has combined zooarchaeology and ancient and modern biomolecular datasets to reveal a new understanding of the history and projections of fallow deer.

For the last 10,000 years, humans have manipulated fallow deer populations with varying outcomes. Persian fallow deer (*Dama mesopotamica*) are now endangered, whilst European fallow deer (*Dama dama*) are globally widespread and are simultaneously considered wild, domestic, endangered and invasive.

Fallow deer populations

New research led by Durham University and the University of Exeter has combined DNA analyses with archaeological approaches, including isotope analyses in collaboration with BGS. This multi-proxy approach suggests that, after the last glacial maximum, there were two distinct European fallow deer populations. The analysis revealed that Persian fallow deer were more widespread than has previously been proposed, whilst European fallow deer were likely restricted to Anatolia and the Balkans, and two distinct populations existed on either side of the Bosphorus strait, Turkey.

Additionally, tracing their spread reveals that fallow deer were repeatedly sourced from the furthest available populations. The Neolithic deer on the Aegean island of Chios, and likely Rhodes, derived from the Balkans, rather than nearby Anatolia, whilst those on Majorca in Roman times were *D. mesopotamica* rather than the *D. dama*, which could have come from the Iberian peninsula. As well as this, the deer reintroduced to medieval Britain were brought from Anatolia instead of Iberia or Italy, as previously thought.

Re-establishing fallow deer

There are several active campaigns to re-establish fallow deer in the Balkans and preserve the last remaining wild herd in Dağji-Termessos National Park, Turkey. However, without knowledge of the species' deep-time biomolecular and phylogeographic history, deer are being sourced from the least appropriate populations. For instance, those being reintroduced

to the Balkans possess Anatolian ancestry. Furthermore, these Anatolian deer are being introduced to regions that have, for thousands of years, preserved deer with Balkan ancestry. Whilst Anatolia-derived deer are increasing in numbers around the world, the Dağji-Termessos herd is still under threat. The research suggests that north European deer of Anatolian ancestry could be introduced to the Dağji-Termessos park, while Iberian/Italian/Rhodes deer populations would be a better source for Balkan rewilding projects.

Future protection?

Ancient dispersals of people, ideas and animals are widely celebrated as cultural heritage. However, this study found that the more recent the animal migration, the more negative the attitude is towards them. Such perceptions can translate into animal management and policymaking.

The fallow deer of Rhodes were introduced during the Neolithic period and are viewed as a cultural asset, protected by Greek law and featured on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. The fallow deer of Barbuda are equally culturally significant as the island's national animal, yet they have no legal protection and are labelled as 'invasive' within the conservation literature. In truth, they are dismissed only because their introduction occurred too recently to have acquired a patina of age-based authenticity.

While many species may legitimately be labelled as invasive, this is not true of all translocated populations, and some do deserve protection. Preoccupation with native and wild species can come at the expense of often equally endangered translocated animals that are not only critically entangled with human history but also offer a conservation resource for replenishing diminished autochthonous or indigenous populations. This study suggests it might be time to rethink our attitudes towards animals with the planet's biodiversity crisis.

The full research is available here:

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2310051121>

Fallow buck: Photo Laurie Campbell





Norwegian moose. Prions have now been detected outside the central nervous system. Photo from Colourbox

Wild deer health: report from the Norwegian Veterinary Institute

Prions found throughout the body in moose and red deer with sporadic chronic wasting disease

New research published this year shows that in moose and red deer with sporadic CWD, small amounts of prions are present in muscle, nerve, and lymphatic tissue – something that has not been shown before – and have also demonstrated that these prions can experimentally transmit the disease to mice.

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a prion disease that destroys the brains of cervids, which are members of the deer family Cervidae. This disease group also includes scrapie in sheep and goats, mad cow disease (BSE) in cattle, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) in humans

Prions detected beyond the central nervous system

Previously, prions were not found by standard diagnostic tests outside the central nervous system in Norwegian red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and moose (*Alces alces*) with sporadic CWD. However, a new study challenges results from routine diagnostic methods.

Through a highly sensitive method known as protein misfolding cyclic amplification (PMCA), the researchers detected prions in tissues other than the brain and spinal cord.

This finding aligns with how other prion diseases behave, such as the contagious classical scrapie in sheep and goats and CWD in North American cervid species, and the sporadic prion diseases like Nor98/atypical scrapie in small ruminants and atypical mad cow disease (BSE) in cattle.

In managing prion disease amongst animals there is an important distinction between strains: Those classical contagious strains that spread between live animals and the sporadic ones that appear in a random individual, thought not to be contagious. Amongst animal prion diseases, only BSE in cattle has been shown to transmit to humans.

Muscle, nerve, and lymph node tissue examined

In the new study researchers examined muscle, nerve tissue, and lymph nodes from Norwegian reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), red deer, and moose. For contagious CWD, which affects Norwegian wild reindeer, prions were expected to be widespread throughout the body. However, in moose and red deer diagnosed with sporadic CWD based on brain tissue samples, prions had previously not been detected outside the central nervous system.

This study changes that understanding, showing that small amounts of prions are present in muscle, nerve, and lymphatic tissue.

Prions can be transmitted

Samples taken from moose were found to cause disease in laboratory mice when also material from tissues outside the brain was directly inoculated into their brains. Such rodent experiments, known as bioassays, are used to demonstrate infectivity and to distinguish different prion strains. This experiment demonstrates that the disease could be transmitted from tissues outside the central nervous system, despite the fact that the sporadic type is not likely to spread between living individuals.

No assessment of human transmission risk

The researchers emphasise that the study does not investigate the risk of transmission to humans. It therefore does not change previous assessments that CWD is an animal disease.

The only published study that examined Norwegian prion material using a human bioassay reported no transmission from moose or reindeer to a mouse model. This model included genetically modified mice expressing the human prion protein, PrP.

Potential exposure through consumption

“Our findings, including prion detection in muscle, might indicate potential exposure through consumption but do not provide insights into public health risks,” says Tram Thu Vuong, first author of the study and a researcher at the Norwegian Veterinary Institute.

“Further studies are needed to understand these new CWD strains discovered in the Nordic region,” she says. Jørn Våge, a researcher and CWD coordinator at the Norwegian Veterinary Institute, emphasises the importance of advancing scientific knowledge when new infectious

agents and diseases are discovered. He also highlights the need for proper wildlife management.

“This is a signal to wildlife management that samples should be collected from dead or culled wildlife, and that carcasses of animals with confirmed sporadic CWD should be removed from nature and destroyed,” he says.

References:

The study was funded by the Norwegian Veterinary Institute, the Research Council of Norway, and the Italian Ministry of Health.

Vuong et al. Prions in Muscles of Cervids with Chronic Wasting Disease, Norway, Emerging Infectious Diseases, vol. 31, 2025. DOI: 10.3201/eid3102.240903

Wadsworth et al. Humanized Transgenic Mice Are Resistant to Chronic Wasting Disease Prions From Norwegian Reindeer and Moose, Journal of Infectious Diseases, 2022. DOI: 10.1093/infdis/jiab033

For the full research see: https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/31/2/24-0903_article

Collaborative Landscape Management explored in latest report

Scottish Government commissioned research undertaken by The James Hutton Institute and published in September 2024 has highlighted the importance that Deer Management Groups (DMGs) have to play in helping to meet Government targets in relation to biodiversity loss and climate change.

The research investigated a number of models to see how a collaborative approach to enhance ecosystems via the efforts of multiple landowners or farmers might deliver enhanced ecosystems. Other collaborative approaches cited included the Tweed Forum, the Findhorn Watershed Initiative, and the gradual introduction of the farmer cluster model.

A range of support needs were broadly identified across all collaborative approaches. On DMGs specifically the report stated that: “They are helping to pool information about landscape-scale biodiversity and are encouraging collaboration by bringing people together to

work on a common issue (deer management). Groups are entirely different in composition but all work at landscape scale. Initially, this was primarily to manage a single resource (deer), but over the last ten years there has been a shift towards landscape planning in the public interest, including peatland restoration, woodlands and communities. These collaborative mechanisms have been well established but are currently facing a lack of funding for continuation of this work.”

Major impediments to collaboration highlighted by the research were perceived as poor facilitation and communication. There is also a perception among stakeholders that current agricultural support is not suitable for supporting collaborative landscape management. Specific to DMGs it was stated that “simply preparing an application is a major disincentive for farmers to engage in collaborative landscape management.”

In its conclusions, and particularly at this critical time for DMGs, the report stated that: “it is important to build on existing initiatives and avoid reinventing the wheel. Successful collaborations in Scotland provide examples for how to bring people together and build relationships across landscapes and could thus be supported to build on their existing work.”

It was felt also that Scotland lacked a collaborative culture among farmers and land managers and that “education and advocacy are considered necessary in order to highlight the benefits.”

The full report titled *Enabling Landscape Management in Scotland – the stakeholder view*, authored by Sam Poskitt, Rebecca Gray, Kerry Ann Waylen and Graham Begg, the James Hutton Institute is available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/5006>

Sophie Clark

Deer People Travel Award Report

My work placement in Wyoming

I arrived at Riverton airport, Wyoming, where one of the other wranglers Will was waiting to pick me up and take me to the ranch. After a 1.5 hour drive up a dirt track into the mountains through the Shoshone Reservation I had made it. The Diamond 4 Ranch is a family run dude ranch that sits at 9,200ft in the heart of the Wind River Mountain range which makes up part of the Great Continental Divide and is Wyoming's highest elevation dude ranch.

I was part of a team that was made up of 13 other wranglers, 10 of us who shared a bunkhouse. There were people from all over the States and a couple from New Zealand. Everyone was so welcoming and helpful which really helped me settle in.

The ranch has a herd of around 100 horses and mules that need tending daily. My work routine started at around 5.30am to feed the horses and get them caught, saddled and packed all before breakfast, depending on what trips were going out that day.

The first few weeks involved mainly guiding guests on two to four-hour horseback rides, and ranch maintenance. The reservation road, the only access to the ranch, is only open from June until the end of September which means all the maintenance gets done through the season.

When I wasn't with guests I was chopping firewood, replacing fence posts, oiling and fixing saddles, tending to the horses' cuts and scrapes, sweeping decks, fixing roofs and checking the water lines. Since the ranch is in the middle of the mountains, we had little electricity or service.

August came around fast, which is when things started to get busier, we had new guests arriving every three to four days for different reasons. This is when the long days in the saddle began. We would saddle and pack the horses with the guests' camping gear and equipment - they could be rock climbers, fly fishers, or just keen hill walkers - and drop off their equipment at the location they were hiking out to.

The most popular locations were on a trail that took us over the 'Bears Ears' which sat at around 12,000ft. We would set off before breakfast on horseback with a string of three horses carrying their equipment behind us.



The terrain was almost all pure rock, very steep in bits, but the horses were sure footed and knew exactly what their jobs were, which made the long days on the trail a pleasure.

Once we arrived at the location to drop off the equipment, we would unpack the horses, re-tighten saddles etc, and get back on the trail to head back to the ranch. The quick turnaround meant eating your lunch on the move and some days you'd be on horseback for 16 hours.

I remember one night on the trail heading back to the ranch after a long day and the darkness was upon us. I had a string of three horses behind me and we were riding through the woods. I remember looking up through the tops of the trees and seeing the stars - I have never seen stars like it, stars so bright they lit up the road home.

Some nights we weren't so lucky, and the guiding stars were covered by cloud, and it was so dark you couldn't see your horse's ears in front of you. This is when I had to learn to put full trust in my horse and let them take you home, listening behind me to make sure there was nothing wrong with the string of horses I was leading, and using my senses to duck and dodge branches as I was riding through tighter parts of the trails.

Not once did the horses fail in getting us back to the ranch safely in the dark; they truly are the experts of the mountains.

Not only did we drop off equipment, but we would also collect it too. This meant quite often as we were packing guests into the mountains there would be another group due to be packed out the following day. So, us wranglers would camp over night in the wild of the Wind River mountains with the horses; we had to pack very light, only a sleeping bag really.

The horses would get unsaddled, hobbled and bells put on and let go out to graze, while we would sleep under the stars in our sleeping bags, getting up every one or two hours to check to make sure the horses hadn't made their way back home.

I never really slept on these overnight trips as you were always listening to make sure you could hear the horses' bells, or I would hear rustling in the bushes wondering if it was an elk or bear. After a few hours' sleep, when the sun would start to rise, we would get up, catch the horses, re-saddle and pack out the group of guests.

Hunting season soon came around and we were starting to prepare for Archery Camp. A hunter who had come from Florida had finally pulled a tag for a Bull Elk in Wyoming after 15 years of waiting. Six of us set off on the trail, Jessie and Ian (the guides), the hunter and me and two other wranglers. Seven hours later we arrived at our

camp at Buffalo Head for the next seven days. We set up camp cooked some dinner and got an early night.

Each morning, we (the wranglers) would get up around 4am to start boiling water for coffee and start cooking breakfast for everyone, once that was done the hunters would head out looking for an elk.

On Day Six we got the call that they were successful, so we saddled the horses and met them. We followed the blood trail but could not locate the bull, so we then lined up and searched the trees in front, and on our third pass of the area we found it. We then quartered the elk and packed the meat onto the horses and headed for home.

I can't thank everyone who was involved in making this possible enough. Richard Cooke, Jess Johnstone, Jessie Allen and of course everyone who was involved in the Deer People Placement Scheme and the ADMG. This was truly a once in a lifetime experience which I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to enjoy.

I really urge others in the industry to apply; you'll widen your knowledge and skill set and make connections from all over the world!

For more information see deer-management.co.uk/general-info/tutorials

East Loch Lomond Community Venison Larder Project

Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority has just concluded a community consultation as part of a wider pilot project to establish a shared venison larder facility that will help support sustainable deer management in the East Loch Lomond area.

Developed in partnership with the East Loch Lomond Land Management Forum, and delivered by Native Woodland Advice, the consultation ran until 15 March and aims to explore the feasibility, level of interest, and potential benefits of enhanced larder and chiller facilities for local farmers and smaller estates in the area.

The project's primary goal is to determine whether access to better-equipped facilities can ease barriers to effective deer population management – an increasingly pressing issue in the region with deer numbers resulting in damage to farming and forestry crops and local ecosystems.

By providing a dedicated shared larder, the initiative aims to improve deer management efforts, reduce crop damage, and create better access to venison markets, potentially opening up new revenue

streams for local communities and land managers.

Victor Clements of Native Woodland Advice and lead consultant for the project says: *"The Park Authority recognises the challenges that farmers and managers face in managing the deer population, and we believe this pilot project offers a sustainable, practical solution – and that by providing a shared facility, we can help alleviate the logistical and financial constraints associated with deer management, benefiting both the environment and the local economy."*

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority is committed to delivering practical solutions that support sustainable land management, while preserving and enhancing the Park's unique habitats. This initiative forms part of the Authority's broader efforts to help local communities protect the area's natural landscape and biodiversity.

Simon Jones, Director of Environment and Visitor Services at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority, said: *"East Loch Lomond is one of eight Deer Management Groups we've supported across the National*

Park. The effective and sustainable management of deer populations, based on sound ecological and animal welfare principles, is crucial to protecting and restoring nature and landscapes. It also supports land managers in meeting their land management objectives and can open important revenue streams.

"This project is an exciting development of this work and, if successful, it could be replicated and shared with communities throughout the National Park and beyond."

Feedback from the consultation will help shape the project's design and implementation and suitability for the local community, subject to funding.

Further information on the project from:

Victor Clements
victor@nativewoods.co.uk

National Park Authority
Land Use Team
landmanagement@lochlomond-trossachs.org



East Loch Lomond hill edge farmland. Photo: Victor Clements



Argyll and Bute Council serves up wild venison school dinners

Argyll and Bute – renowned for its exceptional local produce, and now Argyll and Bute Council has introduced local wild venison to school menus on Islay and Jura.

The project is a collaboration between the council and Wild Jura, a new business founded by Cath and Andy McCallum. Recognising the high demand for local venison on the islands, they established Wild Jura to include commercial butchery and processing facilities, enabling local communities to enjoy the rich resource on their doorstep. The wild venison comes from Ardlussa, Barnhill, Tarbert and Ruantallain Estates.

Children from Small Isles Primary on Jura played a key role in product testing, with their favourite dishes (wild venison meatballs and burgers) now featured on the school menu. Venison is a healthy addition to school meals and the new menu items are available in Jura and Islay Primary Schools and Islay High School.

Councillor Ross Moreland, Argyll and Bute Council's Policy Lead for Finance and Commercial Services, said:

"We're thrilled to introduce wild venison to our school menus on Islay and Jura. It's a no-brainer to make the most from such high-quality, locally sourced produce. The demand for local wild venison has always been high, but without butchery facilities, it wasn't feasible until Wild Jura came along.

"Our pupils have been integral to this pilot, from learning about sustainable produce to testing dishes and deciding what to add to the menu. As we work towards creating a climate friendly Argyll and Bute,

this is a fantastic example of field-to-fork quality local food that eliminates air miles and is cost-effective."

Andy and Cath McCallum from Wild Jura added: *"We are delighted to be supplying Wild Jura venison to the six schools on Jura and Islay. This has been a fantastic and unwaveringly positive collaboration between the catering department of Argyll and Bute Council, the Soil Association Food for Life Project and us, with valuable help from the children and teachers at Small Isles Primary School and our own, very exacting, three-strong tasting panel at home.*

"As we all become more aware of the benefits of fewer and fresher ingredients in our foods, it is great to see the council offering our products in their school meals. Food miles are extremely low, processing is minimal and additional ingredients are organic or free range. We are grateful that these benefits are recognised and are now being enjoyed by local children, whom we have a collective responsibility to feed with care."

The council worked with the Soil Association's Food for Life project to develop recipes that comply with Scottish Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools and the *Food for Life Served Here* standards.

Looking ahead, the Council will monitor the project and is keen to explore further opportunities across Argyll and Bute and potentially expand this initiative to more schools.

For more information and a full case study of the project see <https://tinyurl.com/64b2u55a>



Sophie Gault, Assistant Stalker, Ben Alder Estate

We should all wake up to venison - a natural, sustainable resource that's on our doorstep

I'll never forget the day I cooked my first piece of venison. I was lucky enough to be given a hind carcass from my manager at the time, to work on my butchery skills. After breaking it down I found myself with a freezer full of venison and no clue how to cook any of it. I didn't grow up eating venison or any wild game, unless it was on a menu in a restaurant. Taking a part of the loin - a cut of meat from the back of the animal known to be extremely tender - I began to ponder what to do with it.

Recipe books, YouTube tutorials and tips from top chefs on websites were bombarding me with elaborate recipes for glazed, flambéed venison etc. Instead of overcomplicating it, I oiled a frying pan and brought it to a high heat, seasoned the loin with salt and fried it evenly until browned on all sides and cooked to what I hoped would be medium rare. I rested it for five minutes, eagerly and somewhat nervously waiting to try it. I cut the loin straight down the middle and, to my relief and utter excitement, it was a perfect pink medium rare. The taste was better than any steak I'd ever had, and I couldn't believe I had just cooked it!

Taking into consideration the low fat content of venison, it is easier to overcook compared with other red meats. It is also very easy to overcomplicate cooking venison, and you can simply use it as an alternative in many regular dishes at home. For example, meals including bolognese, curry and fajitas can all be made using venison with no difference in timings or process to your usual recipe. Locking in the moisture is key to keeping that flavour and tenderness that venison is known for. Sauces and marinades are always a welcome idea when it comes to venison, and I am certainly fond of a whisky sauce!



Stalking on Ben Alder. Photo Conor Gault

Venison is lean, high in protein, nutrient dense, and high in omega 3 fatty acids, and vitamin B6 and B12 that are vital for brain health and energy production plus very low in sodium. Research shows wild venison is higher in iron than any other red meat. Given the prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia in the UK, this makes it, in my eyes, the healthiest red meat option available to us.

Scottish wild deer are self-sustaining. Once shot, it takes minimal transportation and fuel emissions for the carcass to reach the game dealer for processing, or increasingly often is processed locally. Wild deer in Scotland aren't owned by anyone, they exist in our environment, need to be sustainably managed to maintain natural habitats at an appropriate density and therefore we should be developing ways to make every use of this exceptional asset, particularly in the light of the Natural Environment Bill.

Venison must become more mainstream, talked about in a more natural way, and not approached as a luxury or something to be wary of cooking. Thousands of children rely on meals every day through our education system, so picture this - multiple schools up and down the country, consistently supplied with the healthiest red meat Scotland

can provide, wild venison. No additives, no nasties just packed with protein and all the necessities for growing children. Not only does this make use of a key, natural, sustainable resource but also allows the education system to embrace much-needed reality about where our food comes from and the conservation efforts implemented daily by the dedicated practitioners that are so often overlooked. Wild venison, from wild Scotland.

This article was first printed in Holyrood Magazine 27 January 2025

Sophie Gault studied for a National Certificate in Gamekeeping and Wildlife Management at North Highland College, Thurso, also working as a placement student deer ghillie with NatureScot on nature reserves including Isle of Rum NNR and Creag Meagaidh NNR alongside her studies. She has worked as a seasonal ghillie in Glen Etive whilst also spending time as a ghillie on the River Etive. Employed as a seasonal deer ghillie at Ben Alder Estate, she became full time and has been working as an Assistant Deerstalker there for four and a half years.



Dick Playfair, Secretary, Scottish Venison

Scottish Venison Report

Much has been happening on the venison front in the last year, the headline being the progress made towards amalgamation of the quality mark Scottish Quality Wild Venison and the trade organisation representing venison producers and processors, wild and farmed, public and private sector, Scottish Venison.

It is expected that this merger will be completed by June and will streamline the organisation bringing representation of Scottish Venison and the quality mark under one banner. SAOS has again added extra capacity and support to all of what we do and we are grateful for that. Here is a brief resumé of activity

- We lobbied hard and successfully to have venison (wild and farmed) included in the Agriculture and Communities Bill.
- We've responded to the 'deer management for climate and nature' and 'good food nation plan' consultations.
- We have developed a new structure and funding streams and have brought new people onto our Executive Committee adding a new dynamism to the organisation.

- We had a presence far superior to anything we've had before at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair at Scone Palace through sponsorship of the Cookery Theatre and will be back again this year for the same activity, once again supported by Ardgay Game and Perthshire Game.
- We completed and delivered the carbon footprint report for the sector (wild deer and venison).
- We saw two new chills open under the local chills pilot project with development of a third now underway and held a knowledge transfer event at one of these.
- We have been in continual dialogue with NatureScot and Scottish Government, and responded to several written Parliamentary questions.
- We have worked with NatureScot, SAOS and LDNS in the setting up of a new pilot grant support scheme for chills and ladders for low ground venison.
- We've worked with NatureScot and SAOS on a major venison infrastructure mapping project.

- We've had some really good press coverage particularly for venison in schools and are now in conversation with a view to future activity with the Soil Association Food for Life project.
- We pushed hard for the venison subsidy, albeit that wasn't what has been delivered at the end of the day, but we continue to press for this type and level of support.
- We supported the first public staging of a two-day and one-day venison butchery course organised by the Findhorn Watershed Initiative and delivered by Craft Skills Scotland.
- We partnered an event before Christmas at the Scottish Parliament with SLE, ADMG and others.
- We have appointed a marketing specialist to undertake a complete overhaul of the Scottish Venison website to make it more consumer facing and used-friendly to be ready for launch this summer.
- We sponsored the Scottish Wholesaler Awards dinner in February and have given significant exposure to major wholesale buyers of the value of SQWV accreditation

We are grateful to ADMG and its membership for their valuable contribution to our core funding which is enabling Scottish Venison to continue to develop the venison sector for the benefit of all in the supply chain.

Venison Craft Butchery Courses

The first in what we hope will be a programme of craft butchery courses was held over three days in February. There were a total of 17 candidates for the courses staged at the Strathdearn Community Hub, Tomatin which were co-funded and organised by the Findhorn Watershed Deer Forum/ Findhorn Watershed Initiative.

The course focussed on carcass breakdown and adding value with all candidates achieving the required standard and the course drawing

plaudits from across the board. The butchery skills training was delivered by Craft Skills Scotland who have a dedicated venison module and have also undertaken training in venison butchery for staff members at Jahama Highland Estates which has its own retail outlet.



Joseph Owen, trainee keeper, displays his hard work.

Lead vs Non-Lead

There is considerable discussion right now about the transition from lead to non-lead ammunition among all who will be affected by this change with the most recent report from HSE published in December 2024 following a series of consultations.

Of relevance to the venison sector is a restriction on the sale and use of large-calibre rifle ammunition defined by HSE as .243 and above for live quarry shooting with a timeline of three years.

This change is no surprise. Scottish Venison has been advising for a number of years that it is coming and that producers should not just think of switching to non-lead alternatives but to physically testing

these, weighing them up in terms of cost, animal welfare, user and public safety, and carcass quality. The bottom line is that any lead in food, however small its trace, is unacceptable; no one wants to see 'may contain lead' on any packaging or labelling, and the major buyers and retail outlets are already insisting on guarantees of non-lead. Because there is no safe level of lead in food and with change coming SQWV introduced non-lead use into its producer standard over a year ago and has had very few complaints or withdrawals of membership on account of the change.

Through 2025 it is anticipated that there will be a number of events planned that will support producers to transition to non-lead.

There is time for deer managers to consider what works best for them and to try alternatives; there are also other measures that can be pressed for, for example in relation to increased ricochets and public and stalker safety, where future guidance would be beneficial.

HSE states in its most recent report that: *"There are no realistic ways to prevent lead from entering the environment from this continued use, or to control the risk to humans from the ingestion of ammunition-derived lead when lead bullets are used for live quarry shooting. The most effective risk management option therefore would be a prohibition on the placing on the market and use of all lead bullets for live quarry shooting."*

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Tel: **01738 630 666** | Email: **finlay.clark@bidwells.co.uk** | **www.deer-management.co.uk** Printed on recycled paper