

Wild deer

April 2024

Policy headlines

- We would like to see a lowering of deer densities to below five per km² for woodlands and below eight per km² for open habitats, in line with the Deer Working Group's recommendations, in order to meet global and national targets for 2030 and 2045 on nature and climate.
 - We are supportive of a collaborative, landscape-scale, ecosystem-based approach to deer management.
 - We are in favour of the use of statutory powers by NatureScot to enforce deer management where necessary for the purposes of nature restoration, and the wider benefits this delivers. We also want to see proper resourcing for NatureScot to allow them to successfully carry out their duties.
 - We believe that community involvement in deer management is key to the maintenance of sustainable deer populations and would advocate for government funded training and support to facilitate this.
 - On our reserves the Trust strives to keep deer at ecologically sustainable levels where resources allow and where it is achievable in a wider landscape scale context. We do so with the highest regard for public safety, animal welfare and environmental impact and aim to allow sustainable populations of native deer species to persist in the landscape.
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Context

Scotland's two native deer species – red (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) – are an important part of our cultural heritage and fill an important niche in our woodland, grassland and moorland ecosystems. There are also two introduced species of deer established in Scotland – fallow (*Dama dama*) and sika (*Cervus nippon*), and real potential for other non-native species present in England, namely Reeve's muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*) and Chinese water deer (*Hydropotes inermis*)^[ii], to eventually become established here also.

Deer numbers are unnaturally high in Scotland, with populations of all species combined now at nearly one million^[iii]. This is mainly due to a lack of large apex predators, and to the maintenance of high densities of red deer on sporting estates for the purposes of trophy hunting. At high densities, deer exert intense grazing pressure on the landscape, inhibiting natural woodland regeneration and damaging grasslands and peatlands^[iii].

Whilst Scottish Wildlife Trust acknowledges that light grazing by wild deer is generally beneficial to the natural heritage, we believe that uncontrolled and excessive grazing by deer is currently one of the most significant threats to the health, natural functioning, and connectivity of ecosystems in Scotland, and we are strongly in favour of the sustainable management of deer for the benefit of wider ecosystem health. Reducing numbers to ecologically sustainable levels also has benefits for public health and safety, by reducing road traffic accidents, and the risk of tick-borne infection in humansⁱⁱ.

We are supportive of an ecosystem-based approach^[iv] to deer management. We see ecosystem-based conservation as a means of delivering a coherent package of measures at multiple scales. At a microsite-scale this might include measures such as the planting and protection of an individual tree; at a landscape-scale it will include better spatial planning to maximise environmental, social and economic benefits at regional and national levels.

Deer management for biodiversity and climate

Scotland, as a signatory of the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework^[vi], and through the Scottish Government's draft Biodiversity Strategy^[vii], has committed to halting and reversing the decline of nature by 2030 and to having restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045. Scottish Government has also set legally binding carbon emissions reduction targets, aiming for net zero emissions by 2045^[viii]. It will not be possible to achieve these goals without bringing deer densities down to levels at which restoration is possible, indeed deer densities are consistently identified as a major barrier to achieving a wide range of conservation objectives.

The threshold densities at which negative impacts occur vary depending primarily on habitat type and deer species. For example, natural woodland regeneration has been found to be inhibited at densities of 25 deer km⁻² for roe deer and 4-5 deer km⁻² for red deer. On open moorland, heaths and grasslands the lowest red deer density at which damage has been recorded is 7-8 deer km⁻² ^[viii]. The Deer Working Group (DWG) set a general guideline that deer densities should be reduced to below five per square kilometre to allow natural woodland regeneration and below eight per square kilometre to prevent damage to peatlands and other open habitatⁱⁱ. The Trust is supportive of these guideline thresholds, but we also recognise that there are a number of secondary variables which will affect these, so it is important to locally monitor actual impacts to dictate the level of control needed^[ix], as in some cases even four deer km⁻² can be too many.

Legislation

The Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 (as amended)^[x] is the law that governs the conservation and management of deer in Scotland. The Act gives powers to NatureScot to enforce a range of deer management measures, and in doing so, has the potential to influence better deer management for nature and climate across Scotland. To date NatureScot has rarely used their enforcement powers and has instead relied on land managers to manage deer voluntarily. This approach has been unsuccessful in delivering ecologically sustainable deer densities. The Trust would like to see NatureScot being much more active in enforcing deer management where needed.

We would also like to see any new legislation prioritise biodiversity enhancement and climate change mitigation as reasons to enforce management measures, and a landscape-scale ecosystem-based approach taken to defining control areas. Crucially, NatureScot need to be sufficiently resourced in order for the full potential of any current or additional powers to be realised.

Monitoring

The Trust believes that, in order to be successful in reducing deer numbers to levels at which ecological restoration is possible, it will be essential to gain an accurate, detailed picture of populations across Scotland and to assess their

impacts locally. This will allow management efforts to be targeted in the places where they will have the biggest positive impact and ensure that sustainable populations of deer are allowed to remain in the landscape.

We believe that NatureScot, Deer Management Groups (DMGs) and local land managers and estate owners all have a responsibility to monitor deer populations within their zones of influence to properly inform deer management decisions and cull targets. We are supportive of NatureScot pursuing new technologies, such as using artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse satellite and aerial imagery to count deer and to assess habitat condition over large areas^[xi]. We also believe that NatureScot should fully utilise cull return data and population monitoring data obtained as part of the deer management planning process^[xii], ^[xiii]. We also think that deer population monitoring and / or deer impact surveys should be a requirement for all grants awarded under FGS and other rural grants and subsidies schemes, particularly for woodland creation and improvement and peatland restoration.

Upland, lowland, and urban deer

The landscape of deer management varies across Scotland, both due to differences in deer species present and the differing land use interests affected.

Upland

In the uplands the majority of the red deer hill range is covered by regional deer management groups (DMGs). The purpose of DMGs is to facilitate collaboration among groups of estates or other landholdings to manage a discrete population or herd of deer as a common resource^[xiv]. Upland DMGs are mostly comprised of land managers who have an interest in maintaining high populations of deer to be shot for sport - the capital value of a highland sporting estate can increase by as much as £50,000 for every stag shot over a five-year periodⁱⁱⁱ. The deer management priorities in the uplands have therefore historically been at odds with public and environmental interests.

The Trust believes that, in the face of the twin climate and biodiversity crises, it is no longer acceptable for the majority of the land area of our uplands to be managed with the primary aim of proliferating wild game species to be shot for sport, to the detriment of the wider environment. If we are to meet our 2030 and 2045 climate and biodiversity goals, large scale ecological restoration of the Scottish uplands will be necessary. Where deer are threatening efforts to achieve restoration in an area, and land managers are not voluntarily undertaking deer management aimed at reducing densities to levels at which restoration is possible, we believe that NatureScot should use their statutory powers to enforce the required management measures.

Lowland

In the lowlands the DMGs that exist are more focussed on roe deer and the two introduced species. These groups are composed of a variety of stakeholders with different land management interests. The main drivers of deer management in the lowlands are damage to agricultural crops and forage; damage to newly planted and existing woodland; danger to public safety through road-traffic accidents and tick-borne illnesses; and recreational shooting^[xv]. Although the potential motivations to reduce deer densities may be greater (and the potential disincentives may be less) in the lowlands than in the uplands, the expertise and resources available to achieve this are generally lacking in these areas. The Trust is supportive of the use of statutory powers to enforce deer management in the lowlands, but also believes that DMGs in these areas will require support and funding to improve the ability of their members to carry out deer management. We would advocate for whole farm plans to consider landscape-scale deer management and for woodland creation schemes to require deer management plans.

Urban

Lowland deer populations are increasingly spreading into urban and peri-urban areas. Deer are generally welcomed in the urban environment, however certain issues, particularly deer-vehicle collisions and deer welfare, are becoming more of a problem as populations increase^[xvii]. It is also likely that deer browsing will become an issue for Nature Networks and other urban greening initiatives. The Trust believes that local authorities should take the lead on urban and peri-urban deer management, with appropriate resource and support from NatureScot.

Fencing

Deer fencing is expensive, visually intrusive, blocks public access, harms wildlife and impedes habitat connectivity. Moreover, excluding deer from large areas of land increases their density and intensifies their impacts outside the fenced areas. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that when Scotland moves towards a more sustainable model of deer management, in which deer numbers are reduced to ecologically acceptable levels in a given area, the use of deer fencing will become unnecessary. Currently we accept that, in order to protect some natural heritage features, deer fencing may have to be used. If fencing is used, measures should be taken to mitigate the effects on the limitation of movement of other species. Currently, a large proportion of the grant money awarded for woodland creation under the Forestry Grant and Agri-Environment Climate Schemes is used for deer fencing^[xviii]. We would like to see a move away from using public money to fund deer fencing and instead see ecologically sustainable deer management become a requirement for all grants awarded under FGS and other rural grants and subsidies schemes.

Collaborative landscape-scale action

Crucial to the success of any effort to reduce deer densities in a way that can have a meaningful positive ecological impact at a landscape-scale, is cooperation among land managers. This is also true at the individual landholding level - efforts by a conscientious land manager to manage deer on their land to promote nature restoration may be futile if their neighbours are not also engaged in similar efforts. In some areas the way to achieve this will be through Scottish Government, local authority and NatureScot provided support and funding to DMGs, to facilitate coordination and monitoring; training and resourcing of skilled deer stalkers; provision of equipment; and to assist with land access issues. In areas where deer management resources are not so limited, and where DMGs are well established, it may be necessary for NatureScot to step in, at first to reach a voluntary agreement, or if necessary, to enforce specified management measures.

Community models of deer management

Common in many European Countries, community models of deer management can offer a sustainable solution to deer control with added social and economic benefits. The concept involves local people taking an active role in managing deer on publicly owned land, providing the community with access to locally sourced venison and reducing the public costs of deer management^[xix].

The community deer management model is currently being piloted on public land by NatureScot at Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve (NNR), with another scheme having been proposed for Ben Eighe NNR^[xx]. The Trust and partners have also undertaken similar work previously as part of the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscapes (CALL) Sustainable Deer Management Project which ran from 2017 to 2021^[xxi]. The Trust is very supportive of these initiatives and would like to see more like this rolled out across Scotland. For this to happen, however, barriers preventing recreational deer stalkers from accessing public land will need to be addressed.

There is no shortage of trained recreational deer stalkers in Scotland: around 6400 people are trained to level 1 and over 2100 individuals are qualified to level 2. However, despite the overabundance of deer, deer stalkers struggle to find opportunities to hunt locally and describe permissions to do so on public land as 'out of reach'^[xxii]. The Trust would like to see local authorities and land-owning statutory agencies adopting a consistent approach to policy on land access

for community deer management, making access for community deer stalking easily obtainable by qualified individuals, where safe to do so. We would also like to see more funding for DMGs to provide training and equipment (including community deer larders) to local people and to pay for coordination and monitoring.

Venison

Scottish wild venison is an ethical, sustainable and healthy source of protein. However, despite wild deer populations being at an all-time high, venison is still a small and under-developed segment of the UK's fresh meat and poultry market^[xxii]. This is partly due to it being considerably more expensive than other meats, and partly due to a prevailing negative public perception of game meats in general^[xxiii]. Although demand for venison is relatively low compared to other meats in Scotland and the rest of the UK, the supply of wild or farmed Scottish venison is not sufficient to meet the demand, and as a result, farmed venison is imported from as far away as New Zealand to make up the shortfall^[xxiv]. It is this issue of insufficient supply to meet demand which drives up the price of wild venison, which in turn keeps demand low.

The Trust would like to see wild Scottish venison become a much more affordable, mainstream meat in Scotland and the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government's Biodiversity Strategy priority action to substantially reduce deer densities by 2030, if delivered, should increase the availability of wild venison to the market, however this will be limited by the capacity of the supply chain, and more demand on butchers and processing facilities could drive prices up further. It will therefore be important to increase the infrastructure for storing and processing venison locally; to invest in, and promote interest in, training for local people in butchery skills; and to make the dealing of venison more accessible to smaller, local businesses, potentially by reviewing the Venison Dealers Licensing system. These will be important elements for the success of the community deer management model if it is rolled out more widely.

Predator reintroduction

The Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that there is an ecological imperative to reintroduce species lost from Scotland as a result of human actions, including apex predators, such as the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*; hereafter referred to as lynx).

Lynx primarily prey upon deer, particularly smaller species such as roe deer, so there is potential for lynx to contribute to the effort to reduce deer densities across Scotland^[xxv]. However, the magnitude of the deer problem in Scotland is such that lynx reintroduction cannot feasibly replace deer management by humans. The presence of lynx in the landscape may affect deer behaviour and locally relieve grazing pressure in some places.

We recognise that Scotland's landscape has changed dramatically since lynx existed here. We would therefore advocate for rigorous feasibility studies, planning and consultation prior to any reintroduction, and close adherence to [the IUCN's Guidelines for Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations](#) and the [Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations](#). Early and inclusive engagement with local communities to fully involve local people in the decision-making process would also be essential to the long-term success of any reintroduction programme.

Trust priorities for reserves and projects

Deer are present on the majority of the Trust's reserves, to varying degrees, in upland, lowland and urban settings. Public safety, deer welfare and environmental impact are top considerations for us when carrying out deer management. It is our policy that all deer stalkers stalking on our reserves must be [registered by NatureScot as 'Fit & Competent'](#) and we do not allow lead ammunition to be used on our reservesⁱ. We strive to keep deer densities at levels which minimise damage to the natural heritage, and which allow natural tree and shrub regeneration and maintenance of diverse herb communities. However, we do face barriers to achieving this across the board, and in some locations deer browsing is a serious issue.

The lived experience of our land management teams is that the most significant barrier to us achieving sustainable deer densities on our reserves is the lack of action by neighbouring landowners. Some reserves, mostly in the lowlands, are limited by a lack of availability of competent deer stalkers. Others, particularly in urban settings, can be inhibited by public perception of deer culling. Generally, many of the challenges faced on our reserves in relation to deer management, and nature restoration in the presence of deer, mirror the challenges faced at a national level, and we believe that many of these can be addressed with the suggested policy actions detailed in this document.

Related projects and policy positions

Scotland's deer problem affects many of the Trust's interests. Projects like Riverwoods, Saving Scotland's Rainforest and Coigach and Assynt and Cumbernauld Living Landscapes could all benefit from ecosystem-focussed regulatory support to compel neighbouring landowners to cooperate to reduce deer numbers. Currently, any initiative with a focus on terrestrial ecosystem restoration is limited by the level of voluntary deer control being carried out in the surrounding landscape.

Through our Strategy 2030, the Trust has set goals aimed at restoring nature, in line with the UN's Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Bringing deer numbers down to ecologically sustainable levels across Scotland will be essential to achieving large-scale ecosystem restoration.

The Trust has also contributed to and endorses the following Scottish Environment LINK papers on deer: ‘Managing deer for climate, communities and conservation’^{xviii} and ‘Saving Scotland’s Rainforest: managing the impact of deer’

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