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ADMG ASSOCIATION OF Deer Management Groups

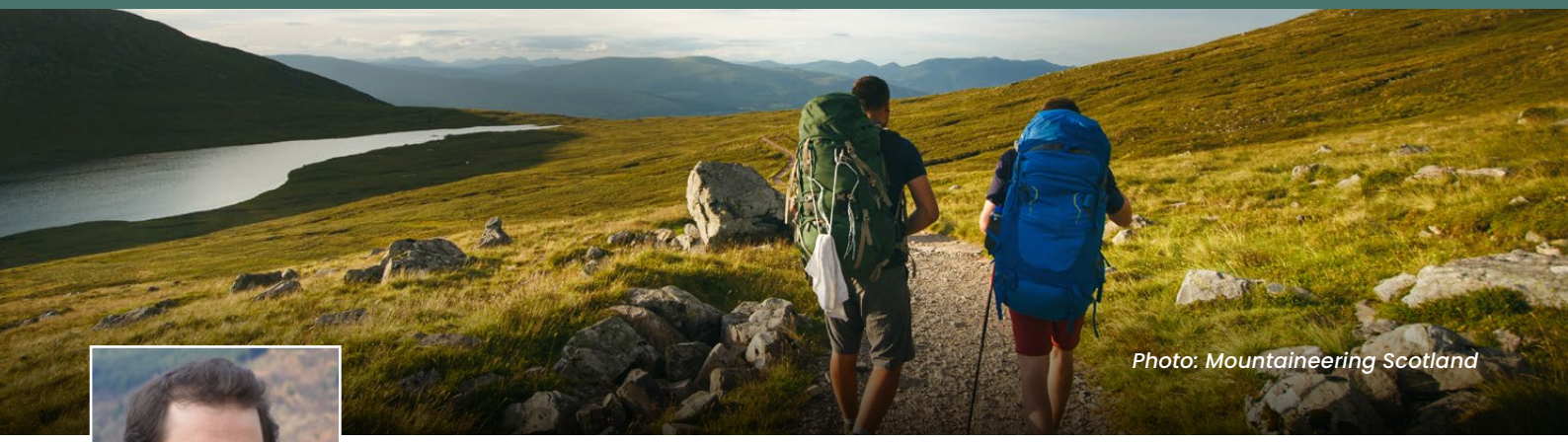

Photo: Mountaineering Scotland

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

DMNROs would threaten voluntary collaborative deer management, the very reason why DMGs exist - and that's why we say 'no'

The Managing Deer for Climate and Nature consultation which closed in March provided deer managers in the Highlands with yet another challenge. Having demonstrated over a number of years their ability to manage deer in the public interest, Scottish Government has seen fit to propose the implementation of an extra layer of regulation rather than recognise the progress we have made.

We were pleased to see so many of you attending our March AGM at which the frustration in the room was palpable. Yet again the goal posts have shifted for Deer Management Groups. The Scottish Government plainly just wants fewer deer and instead of working with DMGs seems determined to regulate rather than work with us to deliver their goals.

Why is it that we are singled out for more regulation? Time and time again DMGs have stepped up and delivered. We are told that the new DMNROs, if implemented, will likely be concentrated around the NatureScot priority areas, almost all of which sit within the DMG range. One would assume therefore that the problems are seen solely as being in in the Highlands. On the contrary, relatively little is known about culls, populations, damage or deer movements outside the DMG range and fractured landownership means that collaboration is more difficult.

Not only are DMNROs subjective, unclear, and seemingly require a low evidence threshold but they threaten voluntary collaborative deer management, the very reason that DMGs exist. When combined with the potential threat to remote rural incomes and jobs ADMG has decided to push back and is considering the legal implications as highlighted by Turcan Connell at our AGM. We have never been against regulation where required and have been supportive of NatureScot in the past when regulation has been used appropriately, but the proposed DMNROs will merely complicate things further, leading to resentment rather than progress.

The recently published Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, threatens deer management in the Highlands further. Reducing landholding size, requiring the creation of individual Land Management Plans and slowing the conveyancing process will make climate and biodiversity targets more difficult to achieve and collaboration problematic. Meanwhile Forestry Grant Scheme Funding and Peatland Action funding are cut, the very support that should help deliver biodiversity and climate gains. Surely this is madness?

After years of striving to work with Scottish Government we feel that the proposal for DMNROs goes too far. 80% of the cull is undertaken by the private sector and government should be working with us to deliver their targets. Currently however they seem hell bent on pushing us away.

Davie Black, *Access & Conservation Officer, Mountaineering Scotland*

Hillwalking and deer stalking

Generally, hillwalking and deer stalking co-exist without problems, but there can be times, for both parties, when different interests coincide.

The general advice to walkers, as advised by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, is to help to minimise disturbance by taking reasonable steps to find out where stalking is taking place, take account of reasonable advice on alternative routes and to avoid crossing land on which stalking is occurring. Mountaineering Scotland also provides information to members and other hill users via the Deer Stalking and Hillwalking page on our website, but to help avoid any potential conflicts of interest, there are a few key questions walkers need to be answered:

Firstly, how would a walker find out where stalking is taking place?

In principle, it is best for walkers to find out in advance if stalking is taking place, so that alternative routes or destinations can be planned. However, finding estate ownership or management contact details for a chosen route to a summit may not be readily available online.

Many estates, but not all, contribute information to the *Heading for the Scottish Hills* website. This lists Munro summits and gives information on access and stalking where estates have provided it. In many cases, checking this will be sufficient to give reassurance to walkers that their route won't cause a problem, or it will direct them to more specific information.

However, not every walker will want to take in a Munro summit, of which incidentally there are 282 in Scotland. There are a range of other categories of hill summits that are also popular with walkers too, including 222 Corbetts, 221 Grahams, 89 Donalds, and 1,216 Marilyns (the difference is due to relative summit height and prominence).

Estates may help walkers plan routes and alternatives by having contact details or stalking information online. A website or social media channel can be easily updated with current information to help provide this also. And it's worth noting that many walkers plan to be out on the hills between Thursdays and Sundays, so posting fresh information online midweek could be really useful.

Secondly, what are the "reasonable steps" to take? How much land should walkers avoid crossing to help limit disturbance to deer stalking?

Effective communication with access users is about conveying information on which people can base their own decisions, rather than directing a particular course of action, as everyone will have their own reasons for taking to the hills.

Irresponsible behaviour often results from a lack of knowledge, because information about preferred or alternative routes is not readily available or it doesn't match their aspirations.

There is still a need for signage, but it does need to be done well to be effective. Many hillwalkers will have travelled a distance to get to their chosen route and destination, and it may be that the first they find out about deer stalking is a sign on a gate once they have arrived.

The most effective signs will provide a request that is clear and is sympathetic to walkers' aspirations, one that provides information on specific days and the minimum area affected, maybe even with an alternative route that can be used. The National Access Forum has produced thoughtful guidance on this.

If all of the above information doesn't reach the walker, then simple principles for walking during the main stalking times needs to be promoted and understood by all hillwalkers:

- Use the main routes through the glen
- Follow ridges
- Avoiding crossing corries during the main cull seasons.

And if for safety reasons you need to descend quickly, then take the safest and most direct route down.

Inevitably, there is no one simple solution and a lot depends on the popularity of the summits and the lie of the land where the deer gather at different times. Successfully imparting the essential information that allows walkers to make the right choices is ultimately the key factor for undisturbed deer stalking, while having a great day out on the hill.

Photo: Mountaineering Scotland

Deer and beavers

A study by the University of Stirling has shed new light on how beavers reintroduced to Scotland indirectly interact with deer – and the implications for the woodlands they share.

Researchers found that almost two thirds of trees felled by beavers produced new shoots, which were more abundant and concentrated closer to the ground than on other trees.

This could diversify woodland structure into a mix of short and tall tree stems, which ought to boost biodiversity, according to researchers in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Stirling.

The research, which also involved researchers at NatureScot and the James Hutton Institute, was carried out in eastern Scotland in established beaver territories and involved studying almost 800 trees.

Scientists compared the number of shoots on beaver-felled trees to standing trees and collected 156 shoots with four different combinations of beaver and deer browsing to compare their nutrient levels and physical characteristics.

Beavers were hunted to extinction in Scotland about four centuries ago. A formal multi-agency programme of reintroduction involving experts at the University of Stirling and the study partners – the first of its kind for a mammal species anywhere in Britain – began in 2009 in Argyll.

Scotland's Beaver Strategy 2022 - 2045 sets out the benefits and challenges of reintroduction, including environmental and economic opportunities and the need for management when necessary.

Dr Kelsey Wilson, who led the new study as part of her PhD research at the University of Stirling, said:

"Beavers have gradually returned, sometimes after long absences, into riverside or riparian woodlands often shared with large populations of browsing deer.

"Beavers use their sharp teeth to cut down riverside trees of different sizes and species. Their most favoured trees, such as willows, usually respond by vigorously sprouting a crown of new shoots - similar to what happens with traditional tree coppicing.

"We found that almost two thirds of trees produced new shoots after being felled by beavers. These shoots were more abundant, nutritious, and concentrated closer to the ground than on other trees, making them an easily accessible food source for foraging deer."

Biodiversity boost

As beaver populations rise, interactions with deer are expected to become more common in riparian woodlands, which are valued for their role in reducing pollution to rivers, shading them from rising temperatures, buffering flood impacts and as a source of food for aquatic life.

Having a deeper understanding of beaver-deer interactions can help direct conservation efforts and habitat management strategies to meet national woodland creation goals in the areas where these two species overlap.

University of Stirling Professor Nigel Willby, co-author of the study, said:

"The way in which a woodland is structured greatly affects its biodiversity and conservation value. Our research shows that tree-felling by beavers could diversify woodland structure into a mix of short and tall tree stems, which ought to boost biodiversity overall.

"However, if more deer are attracted into riparian woodlands by the offer of a rich, accessible food source that beavers stimulate through their felling behaviour, it could suppress tree growth. This might simplify woodland structure, and future woodland regeneration efforts could be hindered."

This research, which also involved Professor Alison Hester, senior scientist at the James Hutton Institute, was jointly funded by the University of Stirling, NatureScot and the Hutton as part of a four-year PhD project (2018 - 2023).

The paper *Tree Felling by Beaver Promotes Regeneration in Riparian Woodlands Whilst Increasing Resource Availability for Deer* was published in the journal Forest Ecology & Management.

Re-sprouting beaver felled trees by the River Teith. Photo: Nigel Willby

Red deer populations in Europe are more influenced by humans than by wolves and other predators

Photo: Rainer Simonis

A recent international study published in February 2024 shows that human hunting and land use have a decisive influence on red deer density in Europe. Red deer density is only reduced when wolves, lynx and bears co-occur at the same site. Research findings shed new light on the wolf's return to Central Europe.

Alongside the occasional bison and elk, red deer are Europe's largest native wild animal. An international study led by wildlife ecologists from the University of Freiburg has now investigated the factors that affect the red deer population in a particular area. The researchers were able to show that the population density of the animals in Europe is primarily influenced by human hunting and land use and not by large predators such as wolves, lynx and brown bears.

"While large carnivores are often considered key factors in controlling prey populations in undisturbed ecosystems, this is less visible in human-dominated landscapes. Our study illustrates that these interactions are context-dependent," says Dr Suzanne T S van Beeck Calkoen, former PhD student at the Chair of Wildlife Ecology and Management at the University of Freiburg and first author of the new study.

The researchers collected data on the population density of red deer at over 492 study sites in 28 European countries and analysed the influence of various factors such as habitat productivity, the presence of large carnivores, human activities, climatic variables and the protection status of the area. The evaluation of the data showed that human hunting reduced red deer density more than the presence of all large carnivores.

Human land use, on the other hand, led to an increase in red deer density. In most cases, the presence of large carnivores had no statistically significant effect on the red deer population. Only when the three predators wolf, lynx and bear occurred together in one area did the number of red deer decrease. However, the study which is published in the Journal of Applied Ecology did not investigate how the presence of predators affects the behaviour of red deer.

The return of the wolf

The study also sheds new light on the ongoing debate about the return of the wolf to Central Europe, notes Dr Marco Heurich, Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Biology at the Faculty of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Freiburg and initiator of the study. He says:

"Our research shows that the return of a large carnivore such as the wolf alone does not have a major impact on the occurrence of red deer. This is because in Central Europe, human influences predominate both indirectly through interventions in the red deer's habitat and directly through the killing of the animals."

In addition, the mortality rate of wolves in Central European landscapes is very high, mainly due to road traffic, which further limits their influence on prey populations.

"However, we also found a high variability in red deer densities, which indicates that there may be specific situations in which large carnivores do have an impact. Investigating this will be the task of future studies," states Heurich.

- Original publication: Suzanne T S van Beeck Calkoen, Dries P J Kuijper, Marco Apollonio, Lena Blondel, Carsten F Dormann, Ilse Storch, Marco Heurich: "Numerical top-down effects on red deer (Cervus elaphus) are mainly shaped by humans rather than large carnivores across Europe." The Journal of Applied Ecology (2023). DOI: 10.1111/1365-2664.14526
- Prof Dr Marco Heurich is Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Biology at the University of Freiburg
- Dr Suzanne T S van Beeck Calkoen completed her doctorate at the Chair of Wildlife Ecology and Management at the University of Freiburg. She is a research associate at the University of Göttingen and the Technical University of Dresden

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Ben Mardall, *Estate Manager, Reay Forest Estate*

Reay Forest's Sustainable Deer Management Plan - Finding the Balance

Reay Forest extends to 96,000 acres of stunning wilderness including the peaks of Arkle, Ben Stack and the southern slopes of Foinaven. It is a wild paradise, and this corner of northwest Scotland has few equals. The estate is run in a traditional Highland fashion and the highly knowledgeable and personable team operate to the very highest standards and work hard to constantly exceed expectations.

The Estate Strategy provides the direction for the estate to deliver on its ambitions, contributing to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of our local communities by preserving, restoring and enhancing the local environment, improving financial sustainability, investing in people, supporting our local communities and co-operating with a broad range of stakeholders. Within the strategy the estate identified the need for a science and data-led review of overall deer numbers to support a clear set of outcomes targeting measurable improvements in biodiversity and habitat whilst also ensuring that the estate's ability to deliver its core sporting and amenity objectives were not compromised and that its team, communities and stakeholders were positively engaged with.

Over the past 15 years habitat surveys have been carried out across the estate. In 2018 Alistair Headley was commissioned to carry out herbivore impact assessment across the estate to understand what available forage there was for the deer and, if regeneration was desired, how much forage could be taken, what was then left for the deer and what would herd size then look like.

In the past, the wild deer have been winter fed, on the understanding that this held deer to certain areas and allowed stalkers to monitor health and potential number of shoot-able stags for the coming season. However, current knowledge indicates that supplementary feeding impacts the gut culture, making the animal less able to convert the natural forage into suitable sustenance and thus more reliant on the supplementary feed, of which there will never be sufficient to sustain the whole wild herd. In addition, the trampling of the area around the food site, increased risk of disease and costs far outweigh any benefit.

Reay Forest has eight stalking beats, two of which are accessed by boat, and it offers some of the finest stalking in Scotland amid spectacular rugged scenery. The estate stalkers are masters of their craft and a day in their company is an education in the art of deer management and in the landscape that they call their office. Reay Forest uses Highland ponies on some of the stalking beats and Argocats on others and ultimately the terrain determines the method of extraction.

Armed with the new herbivore impact assessment and on the back of the helicopter count in March 2022, which showed higher than expected numbers, a carefully managed and science-led reduction was planned.

Working closely with the stalkers, to talk them through the data and the implications beat by beat a two-year reduction cull was developed. In 2022 3,600 red deer were counted. In the knowledge that herbivore impacts were too high in some areas, we explored what the carrying capacity might be for each of the beats, all the while seeking a balanced approach led by data, a process that if carefully thought out would benefit both the deer and the habitat. Key questions in this approach were as follows.

1. Estimate the area of each habitat for each stalking beat.
2. Estimate the amount of available forage (tonnes palatable forage) for each stalking beat.
3. Calculate the amount of forage required by stags and hinds at different densities.
4. Set the density at a proportion of the available forage by the numbers of deer taking into account the ratio of stags to hinds.

The report commissioned by the estate prescribed there would be enough forage for 2,200 animals. This would require a 40% increase in the current cull targets to bring the numbers into line. The deer were then culled within the traditional red deer open seasons over the two years.

Across the estate there is a very variable landscape, however the reduction brought the numbers down from a holistic 10 deer/sq km to 5.7 deer/sq km.

The reduction cull was carried out over two years, but why not extend that period? A longer period would have added more stress to the herd, the deer become aware during a protracted deer reduction making it a more difficult task long term and there is also the likelihood of the deer bunching up into large groups, rather than being well dispersed across the whole estate, as is now the case.

What about the impact on the team? We have worked closely with the team and kept them informed of progress. We have listened to and supported them. It was essential for the management team to support the stalkers through this period to enable this important strategic objective.

In March 2024 a check count was carried out, with the support of NatureScot. The weather was kind and over the two days, two helicopters counted Reay Forest and one of our neighbours.

Regarding neighbours, as ever with deer management neighbour relations can be fraught with conflicting strategic objectives and different financial requirements. However, with early engagement and good communications, options can be considered, and solutions found. The key is dialogue, openness and transparency. Our hope is that we have managed to keep our neighbours informed and been fair with them; we have made compromises in some areas but that's what it's about, a balance. Deer are integral to Reay Forest, they are part of the estate's DNA and will continue to be so.

As the estate moves forward with its biodiversity plans and as the habitat improves across areas of the estate, ensuring the deer numbers remain in balance with those objectives will be critical. The requirement for highly skilled stalkers is not diminishing but increasing. Their skills base will widen to include more in-depth habitat monitoring, but the skills of the traditional highland stalker will be essential too.

Deer Management Success in the Cairngorms

Land managers who are part of the Group in the Cairngorms which manages their local deer population have released details of their 2024 deer count which demonstrates how working with each other has paid dividends.

The Upper Deeside and Donside Land Management Group, a voluntary collaboration of land managers covering around a quarter of the Cairngorms National Park, has a core aim of sustainably managing the wild deer population in their area.

The Group wanted to work together to meet various objectives including providing a healthy deer population for sporting stalking for guests from around the world whilst also controlling numbers in certain locations to protect areas managed for conservation reasons.

The figures released today show the red deer population across the area covered by the Group, some 999 km2 dropped from 8,411 deer in 1996 to 4,054 in 2024. This has resulted in improvements to native woodlands including natural regeneration whilst at the same time facilitating moorland management.

The chairman of the Group, Angus McNicol of Invercauld Estate, said

Photo: Steven Rennie

"This reduction in the wild deer from over eight deer to just over four deer per square kilometre shows how working together in deer management can be successful. By each member of the Group understanding the objectives of their neighbours, we have been able to deliver for each other."

He continued *"Deer move throughout the Group's area and today's results show that, with collaboration, multiple different land uses delivering various objectives can take place within the same deer range."*

The Group covers 17 land management units across a range of private, public and charitable owners managing land for a wide varieties of uses including farming, grouse shooting and deer stalking, timber production and conservation for biodiversity.

The results come as the Scottish Government has just completed a consultation exercise which included proposals which could force land managers to manage deer for restorative objectives without any need to demonstrate damage to habitats.

The Group's secretary, deer specialist Dr Linzi Seivwright, said *"Where there is controversy from time to time in deer management, the Upper Deeside and Donside Land Management Group's success shows how collaboration can be an effective means of resolving this. We would encourage the Scottish Government to consider ways in which this model of co-operative working can be facilitated rather than seeking to use heavy-handed regulatory approaches."*

upperdeesidedonsidedmg.deer-management.co.uk

Photo: Grosvenor Estates

Rural estate open days attract hundreds of visitors

Open days at Grosvenor's Reay Forest Estate, Sutherland, saw almost 300 school children and members of the public visit in April 2024 to learn more about the conservation of its precious environments and works to improve properties and places in the local communities.

In partnership with Countryside Learning, the estate hosted two free events, one of which was focused on pupils from nearby primary and secondary schools in Kinlochbervie, Gairloch, Ullapool, Durness, Scourie, Farr and Golspie and a separate public day was also held on Saturday 20 April.

Ben Mardall, Estate Manager, Grosvenor's Reay Forest Estate, said:

"We're passionate about informing and educating our local communities about our activities and how we're delivering a lasting commercial, social and environmental benefit.

"Despite the weather, this year's open days were a huge success giving visitors the chance to meet our expert teams and to enable us to showcase the wide-ranging works which take place here on the estate. We've had some fantastic feedback from the schools as well as from visitors to the public open day.

"Everyone did an amazing job and it was great to come together as an estate and with our partner organisations to deliver such inspiring events. My thanks to all those involved."

A series of information stands were developed featuring the different types of activities which take place on the estate including conservation of its many designated habitats – such as a landscape scale, ecosystem-wide, conservation project in partnership with the Atlantic Salmon Trust with the goal of restoring wild Atlantic salmon and sea trout populations in the River Laxford – deer management, sustainable forestry activities, hospitality as well as careers and philanthropy through the Westminster Foundation.

Partner organisations and those in the local communities who support the estate also attended the events including Wildlife Estates Scotland, West Sutherland Fisheries Trust, Atlantic Salmon Trust, Assynt Mountain Rescue, St Andrew's First Aid, Mikeysline and Venture North.

More than £700 was raised through the events for the estate's employee adopted charity High Life Highland, which develops and promotes opportunities in culture, learning, sport, leisure, health and wellbeing throughout the Highlands, for the benefit of both residents and visitors.

Youngsters enjoy day out at Findynate Estate learning about the countryside

In April the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and Royal Highland Education Trust Perth and Kinross (RHET) held a rural education day at Findynate Estate, Strathtay, Perthshire.

The day was sponsored by CR Smith, RHET and BASC Scotland with significant input and support also from Findynate.

The event was attended by around 70 pupils from the Primary 5 and 6 class years from five local Perthshire schools. At a number of stations around the estate pupils heard short talks and saw demonstrations about the importance of woodland and forestry, moorland management and deer management, the gamekeeper's job, game cookery, farming for sheep and cattle, and the importance and delivery of conservation in the countryside.

Iona Laing, GWCT's events and education officer in Scotland said:

"It was clear to see how much the youngsters enjoyed their time on the beautiful Findynate estate - and hopefully learned a little about our countryside in the process. Events like this are vital in fostering an interest and understanding among the younger generation about what happens in rural Scotland and why - and might even encourage some to think about a future career in the rural sector.

"We are grateful to the sponsors of the event, CR Smith, RHET and BASC Scotland, to RHET Perth and Kinross, and to our hosts Findynate Estate for all their input and support and, of course, the schools and youngsters who took part."

Gerard Eadie CBE, CR Smith's Chairman, said:

"I have always strongly backed education and training for young people in all sectors as it is important that they understand there are different types of employment and not just inside an office.

"There are a lot of young people that don't necessarily think about jobs until later in life. However, it is essential for them to get an awareness that there are jobs everywhere, doing many different things.

"The day at Findynate Estate will have inspired the children, providing a real insight into what it takes to manage the countryside around them and maybe a possible career they might pursue."

Peter Clark, Director, BASC Scotland, said:

"We aim to further educate people on the different opportunities that are out there, whilst promoting shooting and conservation and we have a jam-packed calendar of 'Estates That Educate' events ahead to deliver exactly that."

Photo: Dick Playfair

Photo: Laurie Campbell

Holly Marriott Webb, *Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*

Fallow Travellers

Some would say my village has a deer problem. Like almost everywhere in the South, pint-sized muntjac have carved its back gardens and tastiest rose bushes into buck and doe territories, layering their own animal map of private property and rights-of-way over our human one, a map that rules the village lanes when darkness descends. That doesn't really bother this place, where the passion for gardening that can drive ordinary middle-class people into a homicidal war against nature is happily less prevalent than in some similar villages. People do have a lot of opinions about the massive herd of fallow deer, though.

This herd doesn't actually live in the village, but on the other side of a six-lane motorway. So, until they decide to brave a motorway bridge, they're not getting any closer, and they seem to lack the taste for invasion that originally brought their kind to this spot.

A thousand years ago, Norman knights brought their pretty spotted fallow deer over to England alongside their legal systems and their aristocratic hunting traditions and began fencing off woodland areas as deer parks (1). Over the years, wars, protests, maintenance costs and the impressively vertiginous cervine jump took their collective toll on these enclosures, and the deer escaped to become established as thriving wild populations in the countryside.

Back in the present day, a family farm serves as the bewildered but kindly host of this new kind of deer park. Around 500 fallow deer have chosen to live here, in too magnificent and beautiful a throng for the farmers to countenance their violent removal. They roam those green fields like herds of wildebeest crossing the African savannah, like a pre-colonial bison migration, and no-one can quite decide if they are spectacular, worrying, or a bit of both.

Two million deer?

Some would say that the whole of England has a deer problem. (Scotland is a whole other kettle of wriggling historical and regulatory eels, for a future article). A wide array of interests seem to agree: there are too many deer, this is causing all sorts of problems, and something needs to be done about it. Various estimates of out-of-control deer populations circulate the journalistic ecosystem. In the 2010s, writers tended to go with one and a half million, while the 2020s have seen most plump for two million (2). But where do these figures come from? And why is it a problem if there are, indeed, two million deer in England?

Disappointingly, it turns out that there isn't an animal accountancy wing of Defra or the Environment Agency that goes around England patiently making a census of deer each year. The figures usually featured in news articles about deer are estimates, and wild ones at that. They seem to originate from a four-page advisory 'POSTnote' issued in 2009 by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to brief decision-makers on the state of scientific research (3). This claimed that there were over 350,000 red deer, over 800,000 roe deer, 150,000–200,000 fallow deer, over 150,000 muntjac, around 35,000 sika and round 10,000 Chinese water deer skipping about the UK in 2009. Adding those numbers gives a total of around 1.5 million. The report also suggests that all these populations were growing at between 0.3 and 8.2 percent per year, which probably explains why the total deer population figure given by journalists crept up to two million by about 2019.

These estimates are based on very little evidence, and a whole lot of supposition. The source the POSTnote gives for the population figures just reads 'Deer Initiative, personal communication'. Back in 2019, as a budding academic snooper trying to trace the origins of the 'two million deer' population estimate, I got in touch with the Deer Initiative – a partnership between state and private land management organisations set up to "ensure the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales" – to ask where the figure came from (4). It appeared on their website, though with the disclaimer that 'accurate assessment of deer numbers is very difficult'. (5) In response, they reminded me it was 'only an estimate' and promptly referred me back to the POSTnote.

When I pointed out that the estimates in the POSTnote had come from them and asked about the evidence on which they were based, answer came there none (6).

The Deer Initiative was dissolved in 2021, so it's unlikely the smoking email will surface any time soon. It seems, however, that their estimates were essentially guesses. (This excludes the red deer figure, which seems to have been based on actual counts in Scotland, though still with wide confidence limits) (7). The authors of the POSTnote did emphasise that the population and growth figures they gave were both 'approximate and contentious'. However, it might have been better not to provide any figures at all, rather than to give ones without firm scientific foundation. This is the approach followed by the British Deer Society (BDS), which mentions no overall population figures on its website. Instead, it conducts 'Deer Distribution Surveys', using its members to report deer sightings which enable it to keep track of the range and distribution of the different species. (8)

Populations and ranges

The population growth rates given in the POSTnote initially appear more solid than the population estimates, since these come from a published, peer-reviewed scientific paper written by population ecologist Alastair Ward (9). However, the POSTnote completely misrepresents the conclusions of the paper. It claims that the rates of increase given in the article for each deer species are 'annual population growth rates', when they are in fact rates of range expansion (based on BDS data). Now, rates of population growth and range expansion may well be correlated, but they are unlikely to be identical. There are other reasons why the range of a particular deer species might expand: escapes from deer parks and species reintroductions are two such reasons suggested by Ward.

Species-specific reasons for range expansion do not always correlate closely with population increase. Muntjac, for example, are solitary and territorial – each deer needs a good amount of space, which encourages range expansion after every successful breeding. This might be part of the explanation for their very high 8.2 percent annual rate of range increase between 1972 and 2002. If this figure is misinterpreted as an annual increase in population, it gives a totally different picture of what was happening with the muntjac population in these years. Fallow deer, meanwhile, are much happier bunching into large herds, as seen in my village. They are also capable of remaining healthy and relatively parasite-free in high densities, which is part of what made them such a good deer park species. The low rate of range expansion for fallow given by the Ward paper – 1.8 percent – might thus mask a far higher rate of population growth for these deer.

Photo: Laurie Campbell

Fallow Travellers

Continued...

Inaccuracies in the parliamentary POSTnote advising decision-makers about wild deer matter not just because they are bad science, which is always irksome, but because they've contributed to an atmosphere where flourishing deer populations are always and everywhere seen as a problem requiring remedial action, rather than as something to be celebrated. Two million deer sounds like a lot – there's a magic to millions, and large numbers scramble our senses. A pandemic-era Guardian headline is typical of this worried attitude: 'Wild deer set to wreak havoc in UK woodlands as venison demand plunges', it reads, as if a temporary lull in shooting for the restaurant trade was going to result in Armageddon (10). The second paragraph mentions that all-important "two-million-strong wild herd" to bolster this narrative. Even if growing deer populations do present some land management and conservation challenges, this doesn't make them an out-of-control horde. Good policy is rarely made from a place of fear.

Deer, roads, snarge

Despite their healthy numbers, most people don't often encounter deer. They tend to avoid human settlements in daytime, especially big cities, and their particular aversion to dogs keeps them far away from a good proportion of walkers, even in the countryside. Depressingly, perhaps the most frequent contact zone between deer and people in England today is the road network. Deer warning triangles line country lanes, and everyone has a story about the terrifying time they hit, or nearly hit, one.

Mine was when I was first learning to drive (11). It was an early, misty winter morning and I was 17 years old, hands ten-til-two death-gripping the wheel, the responsibility of ferrying my little sister safely to school on time weighing heavily on my mind. Leaving one of the trickier villages and its narrow lanes full of parked cars and daringly exposed wing-mirrors behind, I was accelerating up the hill to easier terrain when a deer dashed across the road in front of me. It was a safe distance ahead – maybe a hundred metres – so I carried on driving. My dad, already somewhat exasperated, let out a strangled bellow before managing to articulate that I should 'Slow down now, there's always more than one!'. Sure enough, as I stabbed on the brakes, another deer followed the first, clearing the road in three graceful bounds. Heart racing, I crawled the rest of the way to top of the hill in second gear, desperately, painfully relieved that I hadn't hit that deer.

According to the ecologist Jochen Langbein, there are somewhere between 42,000 and 74,000 deer-vehicle collisions every year in the UK (12). At the upper bounds, that's 197 a day, or one every seven or so minutes. That's a lot of deer killed or injured each year, and a fair few lightly traumatised 17-year-olds. Often this is then linked back to 'excess' deer populations, the suggestion being that fewer deer would mean fewer accidents. This is a rather brutal way of reasoning about an animal welfare issue. Essentially, the proposal is to kill more of them in a nice way, with a rifle, so fewer of them die in a nasty way, off the bonnet of a Range Rover. While some might be happy with this moral reckoning, I think we might try for something a little better (13).

Photo: Laurie Campbell

There's another way to think about the problem of deer being killed on the roads, and it's pointed to in an essay by the historian Gary Kroll called, simply, 'Snarge'. (14) Snarge is an American word coined by pilots to describe what comes out of plane engines after a bird strike. More generally, snarge is the mess of blood, bone, fur and feather created by the crunching of animal bodies through the transport networks of globalised capitalism. The whole system is arranged in such a way as to trade off a certain number of human and animal lives for speed. We call them accidents, but they're an inevitable outcome of our need to be in different places fast. As Kroll puts it, roadkill 'rarely registers on our moral radar, probably because the agent of killing – mass acceleration – is structurally baked into almost everything modern humans do. This is a peculiar malady of the Anthropocene; by participating in an accelerated mode of life, we have involuntarily become thoughtless killers of wildlife.'

The acceptance of deer deaths on the road as just part of life is what makes people propose solutions like reducing their overall population, rather than think of ways to change the transport system to make it less dangerous to wildlife of all stripes. There are small adjustments that could be made. Kroll mentions several technological fixes that could be introduced to help animals cross roads safely. Really, though, the best solution might be to just slow down.

But that would require a kind of compromise with the natural world that we are ill-used to making – a compromise where we actually have to give something up, rather than scrabbling after the win-win. To put a lower speed limit on the roads would be to put a speed limit on life – to say no to the possibility of driving across the country in a day to see friends or family, to that last-minute extra dash to the supermarket, to the feasibility, for many, of living in the countryside when a suitable job always seems to be a forty-minute drive away.

Slowing down would be a big decision. Still, we owe it to the myriad humans and animals killed on the roads every year to give it some thought. Could we build a transport system that doesn't require blood sacrifice – one that doesn't come with a daily dose of snarge? It's a worthy question – a more inspiring one, anyway, than 'how many deer do we need to kill to make the problem go away?'

Trees, farming, carbon

Aside from the issue of deer-vehicle collisions, the problem most frequently associated with 'too many' deer is the impact they can have on forestry and agriculture. All those deer need to eat, and some of their tastes overlap with our own. They can damage crops by eating or trampling them, and they have a troublesome preference for the fresh green shoots of saplings. In an established forest, this generally isn't a problem – trees vastly overproduce seeds and saplings to account for herbivory, and deer play their part in the cycle of nutrients that feeds the forest floor. The odd sapling makes it past the stage at which a deer can damage it, and the forest continues. When trying to plant forested areas from scratch, however, a high resident deer population can make things difficult.

Since the late nineteenth century, the six-foot, wood-and-wire deer fence has wrought something of a compromise between the forestry industry and Britain's deer populations. Fences excluded them while saplings were at a delicate stage, and when the fences came down at the end of their roughly twenty-year lifespan, deer could enjoy the shelter and foraging opportunities provided by woodland. There were always drawbacks to fencing – expense over large areas, aesthetic impact, blocking of access to people and animals – but they worked for twentieth century environmental priorities. Today, however, the forestry industry is on the move. It's no longer only interested in planting large stands of fast-growing species for paper products, but also about creating new areas of native broadleaf woodlands and sequestering carbon and raking in government subsidies for doing so. Tree planting is a key part of the government's strategy for both nature recovery and achieving 'net zero', and in the push to speed the expansion of England's forests, deer fences appear to be losing favour as a management tool.

In 2022, spurred by the consultation on the government's England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024, Defra launched a consultation on the topic of reforming deer management in England to give greater protection to forestry. The questions it asked and the way it was framed suggest that England's deer might be in for a bit of a crackdown. Policies proposed included the introduction of 'targeted incentives' to encourage landowners to kill more deer in areas where they are preventing new trees from growing, and the removal of the close season for all male deer, so they can be shot at any time of year. There was also the suggestion to allow more night-shooting, and to financially support the development of the wild venison market to incentivise hunters to kill more deer (15).

A clearer picture of how all this will affect deer should emerge when Defra publish the results of the consultation, and states what policies it intends to take forward. However, while there is some validity to the government trying to encourage and facilitate temporary reductions in deer numbers in areas where new trees are growing, there's a problem in the way the issue is framed. The consultation document starts off with the familiar claim that England has a 'too many deer' problem: 'We need to do more to sustainably manage deer. The UK deer population is estimated to have increased from 450,000 in the 1970s to two million today.'

Fallow Travellers

Continued...

With this supposedly established, it essentially states that it is a government priority to reduce the deer population to what it considers to be an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable level – one 'in balance' with its ecosystem. This rests on the idea that there actually is a right number of deer for the country, a 'sustainable' figure at which the population should be maintained.

But that's not really how ecosystems work. Animal populations fluctuate, and herbivores are particularly famous for their cycles of boom and bust. Deer numbers might be growing now, but that trajectory won't continue forever. Some areas will have more deer than others; some species will be more prolific than others. Trying to hold everything constant is like trying to stop rivers from flooding – you can dam and weir and concrete and channel, but really, you're probably best off letting the water have its cycle, and not building on the wetlands.

Too many for what?

Lurking behind much of deer management discourse is the presumption that humans can regulate deer numbers better than nature. As shown above though, it's not even clear how many deer there are, let alone how many there 'should' be. Beyond participating in the ecosystem as predator, I'm not sure we should be attempting to tailor everything to our own requirements. If deer numbers need to be reduced in a certain area in order to grow trees, so be it. But attempting to decide how many of every sort of animal or plant is allowed, like a latter-day Noah policing England's Ark, is madness.

In the end, every land management decision is a choice. There's no such thing as 'too many' deer, and there certainly isn't any scientific reason to suppose that two million is a problematic figure in and of itself, even if it were found to be accurate. Policymakers and land managers need to think more clearly, locally, and specifically about the problems deer can bring, to be ready to compromise on some human interests to allow them space, and to do all of this while bearing in mind that a flourishing wild deer population is actually something of which we can be proud. We can see it, eat it, appreciate its place in ecosystems, and marvel at its beauty.

Ultimately, we should be thinking creatively about how to live alongside abundant animal and bug life – about a world where the wild is always present in daily life, rather than confined to demarcated zones where we've decided it can rule. If conservation goals start to be actually achieved, there is going to be a preponderance of life buzzing, crawling, flapping, soaring, oozing and bounding over the land that hasn't been seen in living memory. We would do well to work out how to embrace it.

Dr Holly Marriott Webb is an anthropologist and historian interested in exploring past animal lives and human-animal relationships, as well as investigating how these histories can guide us in making better and more just conservation decisions in the present. Her specialism is in the red deer, deer stalkers, and hunting landscapes of the Scottish Highlands. Recently finishing a year as Teaching Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, she is now employed as a Research Fellow in Geography at Trinity College Dublin. Holly has a PhD in history and anthropology from Aarhus University, Denmark, an MA in Global Environmental History from Uppsala University, Sweden, and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford, UK.

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13. This leaves aside the issue of whether deer population reduction would actually decrease deer-vehicle collisions. There are reasons to believe it might be a bit more complicated than that.
14. Kroll, G. 2018 'Snarge' Aeon
15. DEFRA 2022 Consultation on the proposed deer management strategy.

Photo: Laurie Campbell

ADMG Deer People Training and Education Fund's first placement to Namibia

Jamie Renwick comes from a well-known Ullapool farming family. After undertaking the NC gamekeeping course at Thurso College in 2018 he gained a full-time position as beat keeper/stalker on Invermark Estate. As well as being top student at Thurso he was also SGA Young Keeper of the year in 2022. He left Invermark to travel in 2023 and applied for the first year of ADMG 'Deer People' placements in 2024 going to work with Alex Oelofse for Jan Oelofse Hunting Safaris on the Okonjati Game Reserve in Namibia in March and April. On his return he took up a new position as keeper/ stalker on the Glenshee beat at Invercauld Estate. He writes below about his Namibia experience.

As the first person sent on one of these funded placements, this is a huge honour to me.

When I landed in Namibia, my transport to Mount Etjo safari lodge was a lorry, delivering 27 tonnes of alfalfa hay to the game reserve from South Africa. The hay is given to the animals to help them through the winter. From warthogs, to elephants and rhinos, and everything in between. A severe lack of rain meant the grass had failed to grow much. Lack of rain is something we don't have an issue with in Scotland. I'm not going to complain; the people of Namibia would give anything to get a fraction of the rain we get.

At Mount Etjo, the hunting season hadn't kicked off, so I joined in on the tourist safaris. The guides had unbelievable knowledge of the game and knew where to find everything to give the guests the best experience. On my first ever safari, we had a big bull elephant false charge us; I was told elephants are bad for that!

After a week of helping with the game drives, the hunting guests arrived, mostly from North America. Every day started early, and finished late, and there's no better way to experience Africa. Every day the temperature was over 30 degrees C, with clear skies most of the time. Namibian sunsets are a spectacle I hope to see again, and the 360 degree lightning storms that happened in the evening on my first week.

I worked first with a PH (Professional Hunter) called Naftali, whose tracking skills are something you have to witness to appreciate, hunting springbuck, impala, gemsbuck, red hartebeest, blue wildebeest, giraffe, warthog, baboon, jackal, hyena, kudu and zebra.

I received strange looks when I asked if I could *'gralloch'* a kudu one morning. Not the terminology they are used to. However, it was exactly the same as gralloching a stag.

There was a very memorable event that happened, one morning we were hunting red hartebeest on a neighbouring farm with a guest. We were successful in getting one, we delivered the carcass to the farmer, but we took the head. He was delighted, as it was the first meat he, his five workers and their families had eaten in two months. It really made me appreciate what I have.

I was also fortunate to be involved in capturing some rhino, sedating them, loading them on to trailers and relocating them. The reserve was constantly being patrolled day and night by armed anti rhino poaching teams. I also joined Alex on a ride in his helicopter around the reserve one morning, to observe the wildlife from above.

One of the best things about being in Namibia was the food. It is the best food I have eaten, and possibly will ever eat. Every night we ate some sort of African game. The most common meat we ate was giraffe, which is excellent.

I had a sleepless night one night, when a pride of lions circled the house, winding the dogs up. I came to Africa thinking lions would be the biggest threat, but I learnt that elephants, black rhinos and leopards pose the biggest risk, not to mention the numerous black mambas - and a big part of what made the trip so interesting was that a lot of the animals were dangerous. Even the gemsbuck and sable, both a type of antelope, have horns that could do serious damage. While heading back to the lodge one evening, we were driving along slowly in the Land Cruiser when suddenly a black rhino came crashing through the bush, snorting and at full charge, coming to within about 20 feet of us.

It was great to see how a large-scale hunting operation is run, alongside tourist safaris on the same ground. I didn't quite know what to expect in terms of carcass handling, but I can honestly say that the carcass handling and facilities were 'five star', and nothing goes to waste. They even had a full-time skinner who prepared the trophies to be shipped, and a whole butchery team, so all the meat we ate was hunted on the property.

Alex allowed me to join PH Steve while out hunting springbuck for meat. We selected two bucks that were mature, but not trophy grade. I was lucky for Steve to give me the rifle to shoot both springbuck, which I'm grateful for.

I will never forget, on my last night, we were sitting watching the sun go down by the pool with guests, when a herd of elephants approached the pool and drank from it, not even 10 metres from us, we watched in awe until they left, about 20 minutes after they arrived.

I would like to thank everyone who was involved in the 'Deer People' Placement Scheme, the ADMG, Alex and Annette Oelofse and their lovely, welcoming family and their team, Byron Pace and especially Richard Cooke. I would urge any young person working in the industry to apply as it may be the best thing you will ever do. You will learn so many valuable skills, some of which you could take back and apply to your work in Scotland.

mount-etjo.com

Applications are now being taken for 2025 with placements in Africa and the USA and interviews will be held shortly. Information and the application form are available here: **deer-management.co.uk/links**

Dick Playfair, *Secretary, Scottish Venison*

Scottish Venison and SQWV to merge

Plans are now well underway for Scottish Venison, the trade association that represents the interests of venison producers and processors in Scotland, and SQWV, the company that owns the quality standard Scottish Quality Wild Venison, to merge.

This would mean effectively a one stop shop for both the representation and marketing of Scottish Venison and the Quality Assurance scheme which now has in the region of 140 producer members and covers 180 separate premises, a significant proportion of the wild venison sector. It would mean also with Scottish Venison effectively becoming an incorporated business with audited accounts that it will be in a far better position to draw down available grant funding which previously as an unincorporated trade association it had only been able to do at arm's length, for example through SAOS, Scotland Food and Drink or NatureScot.

The merger is being supported by SAOS and will require a new Board for the new organisation. Separately Scottish Venison has also switched its core financing operations so that from April 2024 it is in receipt of an annual block grant from ADMG rather than the 2p/kg levy that was previously collected through two of the major processors. Future income will be supplemented by contributions based on 30p/carcase from processors who wish to participate, with a number already pledging to support this new arrangement.

Activity on the venison front has been intense over recent months. The prospect of a venison subsidy to bridge the gap between what it costs for a carcase to go into the larder (including any guest fees) and what the processor pays for the carcase, has come a major step closer. It is understood that there will be three pilot projects, one in Cairngorms National Park, another in relation specifically to sika, and a third covering low ground red and roe. The argument has been that if deer numbers are to be reduced as urged by Government to support national targets for the environment, biodiversity recovery and to combat climate change, then the burden for this - in delivering public benefit - should not fall entirely onto the private sector deer manager.

Following the reappraisal of climate change targets in April this year Mairi McAllan, Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy, announced in the supporting documentation:

"We will build on the current Cairngorms Deer Pilot to develop a national scheme which incentivises increased management and investment in the venison supply chain."

Work through the Common Ground Forum by ADMG, Scottish Venison and Scottish Environment LINK has pressed for a national scheme and this announcement would appear to support that proposition.

In addition, an amendment to the Agriculture and Communities (Scotland) Bill tabled by Beatrice Wishart MSP at Committee stage (stage 2) and supported by the Scottish Government now sees venison included in the relevant schedule on the face of the Bill for the first time. This is a major step forward and a reassurance that venison, both wild and farmed, can be included in future support schemes with two further amendments supporting venison and deer management proposed by Ariane Burgess MSP also agreed at Stage 3.

Feedback from the market for wild venison is positive although there remains concern that ground is being lost to production and supply chain development in England, for example measures were deployed earlier this year to support small larders (at up to 60% of cost) through Defra's Farm Enterprise Technology Fund. Support for infrastructure for venison in Scotland remains a hot topic with capacity at processor level likely to be challenged and support required at scale there, whilst in tandem developing new local supply chains to enable more product sourced and processed locally to be available for local markets and further afield.

A number of new projects are in the pipeline and, if the right support at the right level can be put in place, then this aspect of the venison sector is ripe, ready and waiting for development.

Scottish Venison in partnership with Ardgay Game and Perthshire Game is presenting The Cookery Theatre at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair from 5 to 7 July in the grounds of Scone Palace. Among those sharing their expertise in the cookery theatre is Keith Greig, Edinburgh based chef with a passion for wild game and outdoor cooking. The recipe for his Orange Venison and Broccoli is on the Scottish Venison website.

Tom Kirsop
Photo: Dick Playfair

Dick Playfair, *Secretary, Scottish Venison*

Focus on Argyll Game

Argyll Game has been running since May 2021. I went through to visit on a beautiful sunny day in early May to meet Tom Kirsop who runs the enterprise with his wife Katie. Tom was formerly - and for more than 15 years - head stalker on Argyll Estates but has now branched out into the processing business too (as well as still doing the Duke's stalking).

Argyll Game is a facility with loads of potential and the opportunity for growth when the time is right. Holding capacity is currently around 200 - 220 red, which is what comes off the estate but at quieter times Tom also does his own processing.

Their venison processing and butchery business has a local market including the George Hotel Inveraray and other local restaurants. He also has a loyal customer base buying Argyll Game's own processed burgers and sausages. *"There's lots of room for expansion," he says, "and we have just become SQWV accredited for Argyll Game too, which has been relatively simple although costly."*

He also thinks that if Government wants the cull to increase then they need to make support available for processing.

"We could do a lot more with more people" he says. *"We have the space, and the capacity, but we don't have the manpower. The family does it all right now.*

"The sector is currently on the cusp, it could go either way, but if Government want us to shoot more deer then we have to be able to put that protein into the food chain and make a living out of doing that. Given the costs involved that isn't easy so support would certainly be welcome given that this whole process, from hill to plate, is delivering on the environment and biodiversity too."

Tom also runs West Highland Wildlife Tours and given that he knows the estate like the back of his hand is perfectly equipped to do this. He is also actively engaged with the local school bringing youngsters onto the estate to see the wildlife and the deer, to learn a little about deer management and, of course, encouraging them to try venison.

For Argyll Game and West Highland Wildlife Tours contact Tom on:

E: **kirsop950@hotmail.com**

T: **07795 598067**

A review by **Victor Clements**

British Deer and their Management - A Personal Reflection by Rory Putman

I was very pleased to have been given the opportunity to review this book by Rory Putman, who many will know either as an advisor, a deer researcher/scientist or as recent ex-Chairman of the British Deer Society.

The book, beautifully illustrated throughout by Rory's late wife Catherine, is set in the context of a rapidly evolving world in which the management of our natural resources has become hugely important, and the role of deer is recognised as a key part of that. Knowledge of our deer species is not always well understood or informed, and much of the debate we see reflects this poor understanding. The risk in this is that we then get poor outcomes, not just for the deer themselves, but for the countryside and for us too.

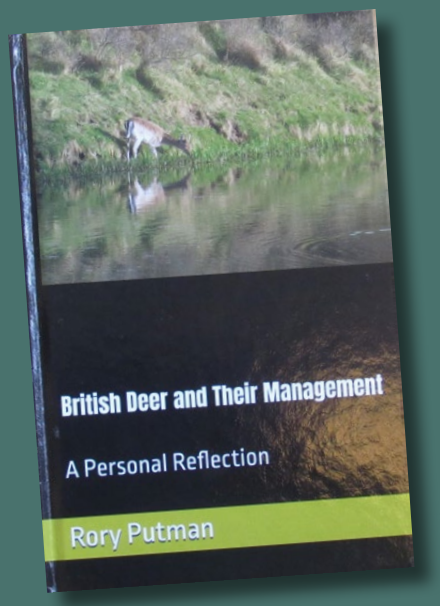
Rory sets out to give us a basic understanding of the six species of deer found in the British Isles, their origins, their social organisation, their habitats, diet and general biology - and a book labelled "A Personal Reflection" should give you a sense of the author, where he is coming from, and what he thinks. We see this in two ways. Rory Putman is very obviously a man with a critical and enquiring mind, and a fellow naturalist once said that *"the critical mind is never free from doubt."* We see this in the text, which sets out what we know with some degree of certainty, what we think we know but are not entirely sure about, and which aspects of the life of deer still retain some element of mystery that we can still strive to try and understand in the future.

Science is never finished. Elements that can be applied to one part of the country or habitat may not transfer to a different set of circumstances somewhere else, and we do not always understand the reasons why. This critical analysis of what we know and what we don't is evident throughout, and the reader is invited always to keep a critical mind as well.

But that does not mean that we cannot have an opinion, and Rory sets out very well how we can apply knowledge to practical management, and what he thinks we should be doing or thinking about in different circumstances. It is in its interpretation of the science that the book gives us an insight that we would not get elsewhere. The interaction of different deer species and how they affect one another was an area that stood out for me. The author's knowledge of red deer and sika and how they hybridise or not in different situations is well worth reading. Here we see the science and its interpretation coming through very strongly. What do we know, and what do we not know, but maybe think we do? The section on impacts on agriculture, woodlands and the wider conservation value of the countryside is interesting. Rory maintains that most deer impacts are low to moderate in most areas, and that it is a combination of density and site-specific factors that sometimes causes problems, not simply deer density itself. As another scientist once said, if he spent 90 percent of his time understanding the problem, then he only needed 10 percent of his time to find the solution. So, understanding your site and circumstances is hugely important, and if you can do that successfully, then you will be better able to manage whatever deer you have there.

Ultimately, deer are versatile animals able to adapt to different circumstances, and this is what we should try to understand - through observation and discussion with others. You do not have to be a scientist to do this. Knowledge and understanding from all sources are important. The book reflects and encourages this, but it does give you a firm steer on where the balance of argument actually lies. If you want to know about deer in Scotland or the British Isles more generally, then this book arguably does that better than any other, not just in what it sets out in itself, but where it might signpost you to (and its extensive list of references), and what it might encourage you yourself to find out about your own particular area through patience, observation and ultimately, better understanding.

Victor Clements is a native woodland advisor working in Highland Perthshire. He advises a number of deer management groups across the Highlands



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