



## Mearns Deer Management Plan (DMP): Background

This DMP should be used as a supporting appendix for the Mearns Land Management Plan (LMP) and should also be used in conjunction with the FLS Deer Management Strategy.

### National & Local objectives:

- **National:**
  - Contributing to [Scottish Forestry - Forestry Strategy](#) (also includes Climate Change)
  - Deer Management Strategy [Deer management strategy - Forestry and Land Scotland](#)
  - Scottish Biodiversity Strategy [Biodiversity strategy: consultation - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- **Local:**
  - Contributing to neighbouring deer management
  - Reducing impacts on agricultural land

### The Mearns LMP

The Areas within the LMP consist of Fetteresso, Glenfarquhar and Drumtochty forests with a combined area of 6,666 ha.

Most of the long term owned FLS forest consists of Sitka Spruce, Larch, and Scots Pine with small areas of broadleaves and other conifers.

### What are we going to protect?

- To allow the establishment of a wider diverse range of tree species
- To achieve less than 10% damage to leaders on all commercial restocks
- Protection of areas of peat restoration
- High value quality timber crops
- Protection of water courses and improve water quality

### Deer Species (and other herbivores)

- Both red and roe deer are found throughout the forest



- There has been a traditional long-standing large-scale movement of the deer herds that are resident across the wider deer range, this is most prominent along the northern boundary of the forest where a large population of red deer are extremely transient. This movement, which can be up to 150 deer at a time, poses a significant challenge in both setting culls and crop/habitat protection.
- At present there is a very low population of rabbits, historically the rabbits were considered a bigger barrier for crop establishment than deer and may well return in significant numbers
- There is also a small population of mountain hares

## What have we done to date?

Year	Red deer	Roe deer	Total
2020	179	185	364
2021	288	303	591
2022	222	258	480
2023	262	270	517
2024	193	171	353

Table 1: Deer culls from Fetteresso and South Drumtochty

- The culls have been achieved using FLS ranger staff along with a deer management contract culling team (see Table 1Table 1)
- Accurate cull setting based on population modeling cull data evidence in the Mearns area areas has proved challenging. With such a considerable movement of deer during certain times of the year and certain weather conditions means the deer population within the forest can vary enormously.
- **Impacts:** the 2022 - 2023 Nearest Neighbour survey was carried out over 6 coupes and the results ranged from 64% to 14% damage attributed to deer. Sites within the forest vary with some being more susceptible to damage by deer than others.
- **Fencing:** there is no fence along the northern boundary of Fetteresso, with a stock fence around the southern and eastern boundary
- South Drumtochty has a perimeter stock fence along the south and east and west boundaries

## Geography

- The terrain within the Mearns LMP area is primarily an upland forest with open heather hill areas along the northern section. The Deer Management Unit (DMU) ranges in



altitude from 100 to 448 metres above sea-level. The landscape is one of rolling hills which lead into steeper ground.

- An extensive network of roads, ATV routes and well used paths leading through to neighboring glens can be found

## Have an evidence based approach

- Cull setting within this LMP is extremely challenging, due in principle to the substantial transient deer population. There are huge variances in the number of deer utilising the FLS land with regular movements of large numbers of red deer.
- Regular deer surveys will be carried out by FLS staff utilising a drone to provide regular count data which will help with planning future cull targets

## Link to Deer Dashboard

- Some of the data used to create this DMP can be found in the FLS Deer Dashboard

## Population Modeling and Future Culls

FLS use an information-based decision-making process to set its deer management operations with the data received from various internal and external reports which can include:

- Thermal drone counts
- Herbivore dung counts
- Historical cull data
- Sighting data
- Ranger daily/monthly reports
- Deer Management Contractor daily/monthly reports
- Helicopter counts
- Strath Caulaidh Survey data independently obtained – i.e. Deer density figure, impacts – Nearest Neighbour (NN) / Herbivore Impact Assessment (HIA), Stocking Density Assessment (SDA), etc...
- Browsing impact levels
- All data obtained is then used in conjunction with a population model to set future deer culls

The 2025-26 cull figure of 350 red deer and 250 roe deer is challenging and will require a lot of effort for it to be delivered. This figure will likely remain high for the coming years to work towards reducing the background deer population and target the migratory red deer population which is having a negative impact on the development of the forest and unacceptable browsing damage.



## Protection Options – cull/fence/tubes

The full spectrum of protection options available will be used within this LMP:

- Culling across the site to continue to reduce the background deer population and target sensitive areas
- We have engaged with and currently have in place cross boundary, third party culling agreements with five farms, this enables deer to be culled which are coming out of the forest onto farmland
- Small fenced enclosures to protect clusters of trees for seed source and riverbank stabilisation
- Protection of palatable species, primarily broadleaves within fenced enclosures
- Tubes for isolated pockets of native hardwoods where they are best suited

## How will objectives be met?

- The Mearns LMP area will be managed by using both Wildlife Ranger staff and Deer Management Contract staff
- All controllers are qualified to Deer Stalking Certificate levels 1 & 2. In addition, all carry out an annual firearms skills test, ensuring the highest levels of safety and competency when undertaking their duties.
- Deer management contractors are a vital resource in FLS's deer management toolbox which are selected after satisfying FLS of their competence via a competitive tender. All Deer Management Contractors must meet the FLS standards of health and safety, compliance and be trained to the level of deer management like that of the FLS wildlife staff.
- Out of season shooting is an essential tool in the protection of vulnerable tree crops and natural habitats. This is conducted either under the General License issued by NatureScot for enclosed woodland or by 5(6) authorisations on application to NatureScot for un-enclosed woodland. Male deer of all species will be culled year-round on FLS land following permission, the shooting of females out of season will be limited to the periods 1st of September to 20th October and from the 16th of February to the 31st of March. When early out of season shooting of females is carried out any dependent young will be culled first.
- Night shooting is permitted by the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011 (WANE Act), under section 18(2) authorisations granted by NatureScot. All operations will conform to current Best Practice Guidance and a copy of the guides will be issued to Wildlife Rangers and Contractors, as required. Night shooting is a valuable tool in areas of high deer management pressure where the population has become wise to deer management practices.



## Roads/ATV tracks/glades/larders/equipment

- Infrastructure and access within the LMP area is well planned but proves challenging to maintain and keep clear due to a combination of windblow and considerable regen
- Effective deer control requires open areas, well planned along with a network of open corridors, ATV routes and forest roads kept clear of regen
- New infrastructure is planned and installed at the restock stage and foresters consult with the wildlife team to decide the best location for access tracks
- Open areas, riparian zones have been left to grow over with regen in recent years which has led to less open areas to shoot deer. This has been mainly due to the lack of resource (in particular the availability of hand cutters). However, the future plans for this LMP area will require a more robust focus to ensure an infrastructure maintenance program is in place and delivered, and ongoing which will restore open areas and create shooting opportunities. It is vital that at the restock phase the wildlife team is involved in discussions and planning so that open areas can be retained where possible and where they will benefit deer control.
- Flailing of the road's edge can also increase visibility of deer and vegetation clearance that coincides with Civils Road maintenance programs will be explored
- All FLS Wildlife Rangers have the following kit as standard:
  - 4 x 4 vehicle with either a winch or loading crane attached to the back to aid in loading carcasses safely
  - Capstan which and rope to aid in extraction when far away from roads
  - 4 x 4 ATV with winch
  - Trailer to transport ATV
  - Sledge/hill trailer to aid in extraction using the ATV
  - .270 caliber rifle with high magnification scope. Some rangers have smart scopes where applicable.
  - Binoculars
  - Handheld thermal imager to increase herbivore detection
  - Various knives, saws and PPE
  - Access to thermal drone and pilot

The Main Deer larder is situated at the Durris forest office, this has a hanging capacity of 40 carcasses and is in excellent condition and maintained to an extremely high standard.

## Collaborative Working

- Cross boundary agreement in place with Five farms

## DMG present

- There is no DMG currently in operation in this area



## Venison

- FLS subscribe to the Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) scheme. This sets the standards for our larders and actions of our staff and contractors to ensure we provide a safe food item to market.
- All venison is quality assured and sold to Highland Game where it is further processed
- All waste from the larders is removed by a licensed waste disposal contractor
- All animal by-products are sold to Highland Game along with the venison