

Davy McCracken



Nature calls on us to get out of deer-damage rut

Deer are back in the headlines with the news they are putting severe pressure on more than 300 sites across Scotland.

These have been designated because of their biodiversity value.

Figures highlighted by a freelance journalist using NatureScot data reinforce what has been known for decades – that managing deer sustainably across Scotland is both ecologically complex and socially challenging.

High deer densities continue to cause damage to some of Scotland's most important habitats, from native woodlands and peatlands to upland heaths.

When their browsing exceeds sustainable levels, natural regeneration slows or stops, woodland structure becomes simplified, and sensitive plant and animal species lose the habitats they depend on.

However, addressing these challenges is not as straightforward as simply reducing deer numbers.

Deer populations range freely across vast and often fragmented landscapes, ignoring farm or croft boundaries.

Effective management, therefore, requires a coordinated approach to build local partnerships and base management decisions on solid ecological evidence.

Deer are an integral part of Scotland's natural and cultural heritage.

But the Scottish Government's biodiversity and climate targets – including woodland expansion, peatland restoration and nature recovery – will not be

achievable unless deer impacts are brought to sustainable levels.

This means investing in robust monitoring programmes that track habitat condition over time, encouraging greater coordination between neighbouring landholdings and ensuring local deer management groups have access to the data, expertise and resources they need to deliver meaningful change.

Such initiatives must help local land managers and public bodies understand where grazing pressures are highest, what factors drive habitat change and how adaptive management can reduce impacts, while also supporting wider biodiversity and climate objectives.

Environmental policy developments in Scotland have encouraged a greater focus on sustainable deer management in recent years. In particular, the government aims to reduce deer numbers by about half – from their present level of around one million – by 2030.

To help achieve this, the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, which passed its first stage of scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament this autumn, has a major focus on deer management reforms.

Part of what is proposed aims for a 25% to 30% increase in annual culls over five to 10 years, in order to provide long-term benefits like habitat recovery and economic savings for businesses and the public sector.

The introduction of legally binding habitat restoration targets should help put even greater



SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE: High deer densities are damaging some of Scotland's most important habitats, from native woodlands and peatlands to upland heaths.

emphasis on the government achieving this.

A deer management strategic board has also been established to help prioritise sustainable approaches, facilitate stakeholder engagement, strengthen the venison market and increase community involvement in deer management.

Scotland's Rural College is actively involved in supporting the transition towards evidence-based, landscape-scale deer management.

We are long-standing members of Breadalbane Deer Management Group, and are also working with Loch Lomond and the

Trossachs National Park to develop herbivore management plans within its Future Nature programme of large-scale nature restoration activities.

In addition, we are signatories to the Common Ground Accord drawn up by the Common Ground Forum. This is a network of people from across Scotland's upland deer management sector.

They are all committed to working together on a more collaborative approach to deer management.

The accord sets a standard for considerate behaviour, based on mutual

respect and consensus building, for members of the network.

As indicated in previous columns, we are in the process of harvesting and restocking some existing woodland as well as creating some new woodlands on the lower part of the farms.

Ensuring effective management of deer will continue to be at the forefront of our minds over the coming years.

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Timing crucial in liver fluke fight

Good timing and testing are crucial to prevent the spread of liver fluke in livestock, experts say.

A recent review of field reports from industry groups Scop (Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep) and Cows (Control of Worms Sustainably) supports forecasts the liver fluke season will be late again in 2025-26.

According to Scop and Cows, this underlines the importance of tests in deciding if and when to treat livestock.

Rebecca Mearns, of the Animal and Plant Health Agency, said: "Farmers who are sticking with traditional treatment windows in the autumn, for example ewes around tupping, are often giving treatments too early, leaving livestock susceptible to disease."

"There is no such thing as an insurance policy when it comes to liver fluke treatment."

The earliest line of attack are tests that identify antibodies on blood – either an Elisa (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) test from a blood sample or LFT (lateral flow test) on ear or nose pricks.

These tests can detect antibodies very soon after infection, but they are only suitable for use in first season grazing lambs or calves.

Older animals are likely to have had previous exposure to fluke and antibodies can be detected for a long time. They are often used as "sentinels" to identify if liver fluke is present in different management groups and/or parts of the farm.

Scop and Cows are urging farmers to discuss testing with vets or animal health advisers.

Liver fluke poses a significant threat to cattle and sheep. Infections are estimated to cost the UK agricultural industry around £300 million annually.