

Mountain Hares and the Cairngorms National Park

Description

[This post has been updated since publication to correct two erroneous claims, that not all of Balmoral is included in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership and that Delnadamph, owned by Prince Charles, was not a member of the partnership. See below].

The news that mountain hare numbers have collapsed in Scotland ([see here for excellent analysis](#)) should be cause for the Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Cairngorms National Park Authority to re-think why we still allow sporting estates and foresters to slaughter this species.

Unfortunately, along with the data they have supplied to the European Union SNH has also stated that no action is required:

a) Threat
A01 - Conversion into agricultural land (excluding drainage and burning)
A05 - Removal of small landscape features for agricultural land parcel consolidation (hedges, stone walls, rushes, open ditches, spring etc.)
A08 - Mowing or cutting of grasslands
B01 - Conversion to forest from other land uses, or afforestation (excluding drainage)
G07 - Hunting
G08 - Management of fishing stocks and game
H08 - Other human intrusions and disturbance not mentioned above
I02 - Other invasive alien species (other than species of Union concern)
8.2 Sources of information
8.3 Additional information
9. Conservation measures
9.1a Status of measures - Are measures needed?
9.1b Status of measures - Indicate the status of measures
9.2 Main purpose of the measures taken
9.3 Location of the measures taken
9.4 Response to the measures
9.5 List of main conservation measures
9.6 Additional information

Extract taken from Hugh Webster's blog

The Scottish Government will no doubt use that as an excuse not to amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act which allows mountain hares to be killed without a license from the beginning of August to the end of February.

Our National Parks, however, have an independent statutory duty to conserve wildlife and have powers to do so. Parkswatch has now, for some time, been arguing that our National Parks could and should use their byelaw making powers to protect wildlife within their boundaries. Taking immediate action to protect the mountain hare in the Cairngorms, where historically there has been a high population of mountain hares and where much of the current slaughter takes place, would be a popular move. The general public expect wildlife to be better protected in our National Parks than elsewhere.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority avoided tackling the issue of how to better protect mountain hares in its Nature Action Plan (2019-24) which came into effect earlier this year. Although the plan identified the mountain hare as a priority species (along with its most important predator, apart from humans, the golden eagle) and that it was in decline, it put off taking any action to protect them until counting methodologies had improved and better data was available on their conservation status:

Mountain hare	Counting, reporting and collating of population data across ownership boundaries within the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership area	D3	S1	ECMP, CNPA, SNH, SLE, DMGs
	Develop collaborative population management plans to sustainably manage at a landscape scale			
	Encourage all estates within National Park to engage with national monitoring scheme			CNPA, SNH, GWCT, Moorland Forum, SLE

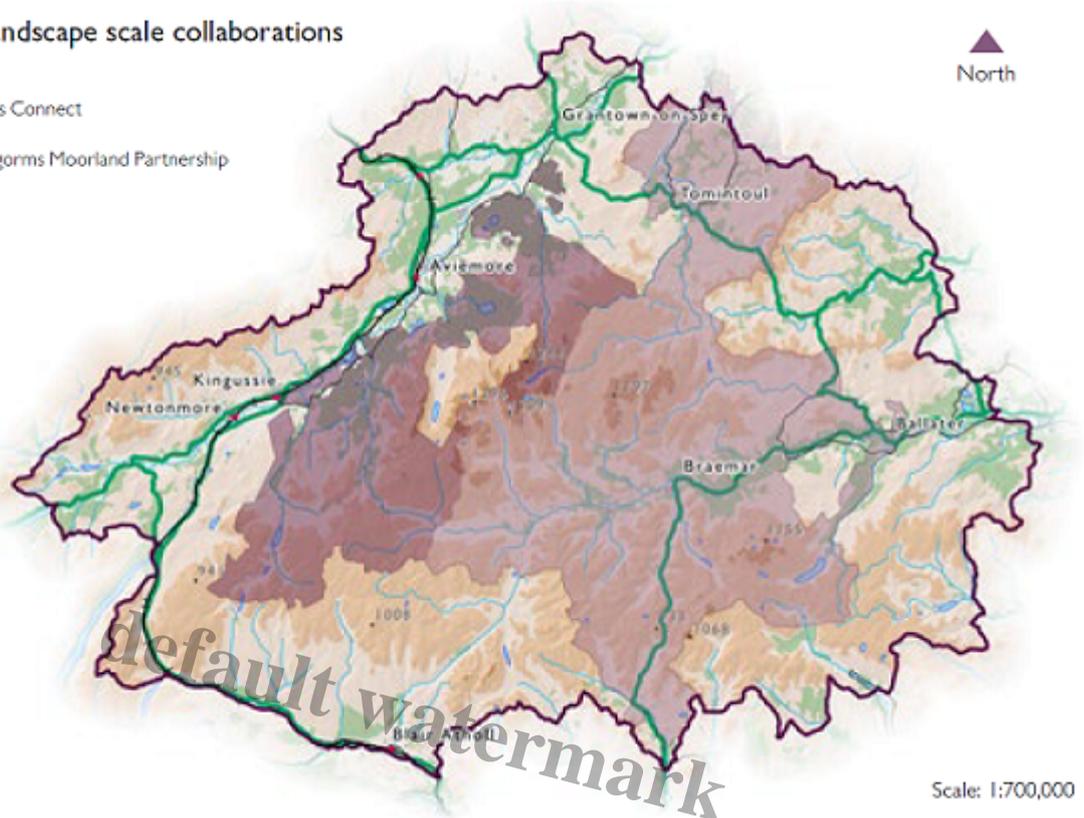
The first column shows the species current conservation status. D = diagnosis or research and D3 means that "research is providing strong indications of cause of decline". The second column shows the target and S1 (Sustainable 1) means that population targets "none set! " are being "met with minimal conservation intervention". ECMP = East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership

With the European Union now having published data showing that mountain hare numbers have collapsed, one might have hoped the CNPA would now have all the data they need to take action.

Perhaps, however, the number of hares within the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership, which is the CNPA's preferred mechanism to try and improve the way moorland in the National Park is managed, has bucked the national trend?

Figure 3: Landscape scale collaborations

-  Cairngorms Connect
-  East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership



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NB the first version of this post suggested that the hole in the ECMP area right of Braemar represented part of Balmoral – it in fact shows the Abergeldie estate owned by John Gordon. The map, taken from the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan is in fact wrong as it fails to show Delnadamph as being a member of the ECMP (the unshaded chunk of land west of the A939 between Ballater and Tomintoul). The CNPA has now said they will correct this.

The East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership was set up as a voluntary collaboration between six named estates, Mar, Mar Lodge, Balmoral, Invercauld, Glen Avon and Glen Livet. (It also included Delnadamph, which is owned by Prince Charles, although this was not listed separately according to the CNPA as it is under the same management as Balmoral). Under the National Park Partnership Plan (2017-22) it was tasked with improving moorland management in the National Park (more mountain hares, more golden eagle and hen harriers, less muirburn etc). It covers a vast area and given its size, if hares numbers had been increasing within the area, one could reasonably have expect this to affect the national data. An exception perhaps to the rest of Scotland?

While I am not aware of the CNPA having published data on hare numbers from the ECMP estates – and I am pretty certain that the National Trust for Scotland at Mar Lodge will at least be trying to fulfil their commitment to count hares – information obtained by the Greens under FOI on licenses issued by SNH to kill mountain and brown hares out of season ([see here](#)) includes data from two of the estates:

Location	Purpose	Number causing issue - 2018	If no info how many issue o
Ferguson's Roses Sands Rose Nurseries	Preventing serious damage to livestock foodstuff for livestock crops vegetables fruit growing timber fisheries or inland water		4
RAF Lossiemouth RAF Kinloss Inverness Airport	Preserving public health or public safety	as many as needed	
A 200m buffer around Woodland Enclosures and within the Woodland enclosures Garbole Woodland Tomatin	Preventing serious damage to livestock foodstuff for livestock crops vegetables fruit growing timber fisheries or inland water	400	
Deer/rabbit proof fenced areas on Glenavon Estate owned land Morayshire	Preventing serious damage to livestock foodstuff for livestock crops vegetables fruit growing timber fisheries or inland water		500
Creag Clunie Invercauld Estate.	Preventing serious damage to livestock foodstuff for livestock crops vegetables fruit growing timber fisheries or inland water		25

The bottom two rows in this extract cover Invercauld and Glen Avon estates in 2018 - there are some

What the data from the Greens shows is that Invercauld Estate killed 157 mountain hares OUT OF SEASON in 2018. If they killed that number in the close season, how many more were killed in the open season? It seems fairly safe to conclude from this that much of the ECMP area is not bucking the national trends and that hare numbers are collapsing there too. That should be a prompt to the CNPA to take action.

Both estates justified these new licenses on the grounds they were needed to protect new woodland - on conservation grounds if you like. There is no doubt that if you plant new woodland in a moorland desert, the number of herbivores - whether deer or hares - will explode locally as a result of the new food source. Indeed on the other side of the National Park, an area of new woodland was responsible for the greatest single hare cull out of season in Scotland ([see here](#)). The problem is increased many times over because our moorland areas have been turned into predator free grouse moors - on Invercauld the regular disappearance of raptors, which would help limit these local population explosions, is well documented ([see here for example](#)).

The answer to these issues does not lie in tinkering around the edges with the way grouse moors are managed as is happening in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership. Under the present grouse moor regimes, increasing the proportion of woodland - as the CNPA wants - will inevitably result in yet more wildlife slaughter, a contributory factor to the further decline in mountain hare rather than their protection.

Instead of trying to micro-manage land, what the Cairngorms National Park Authority should be doing is creating large areas where natural processes are allowed to follow their own course. Part of that means protecting mountain hares but also all the species that predate on them – including mammals such as foxes, stoats and weasels which are systematically persecuted through most of the National Park (the Cairngorms Connect Area being the exception). Its interesting, isn't it, that in the areas where native woodland is generating most successfully, there is no mass culling of mountain hares?

What the CNPA needs to do

In order to fulfil its legal obligations to conserve wildlife, the CNPA should publish as soon as possible all the data that it has collected to date from the East Cairngorm Moorland Partnership, including that on the number of mountain hares. It should also publish how many other estates across the National Park are now co-operating with the national mountain hare monitoring scheme (see Nature Action Plan above). Unless it can show that the population of protected and half-protected species such as mountain hare have increased across all estates – and that includes Balmoral – within the ECMP area over the last two years, it should abandon the voluntary approach and initiate a consultation on how it can use its byelaw making powers to protect mountain hare and other wildlife across the National Park.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. National Parks

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Scottish Government
4. scottish natural heritage

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