

Why we need to re-frame the terms of the debate on the welfare of red deer

Description



There is another side to the hullabaloo that the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) raised three weeks ago about a pregnant red deer hind that had been shot out of season on Skye ([see here](#)).



Last week ([see here](#)), on the edge of the Fannichs, I saw and smelled more dead red deer than I have done for many a year.

Just round the corner from where we were camping, at an altitude of c.300m, there were eight red deer corpses at the bottom of a sheltered bank above the Dundonnell River. It appears they had taken shelter during the snow that closed the road last winter and either starved or frozen to death.



While there is good grazing along the river in summer, the red deer had nowhere left to go in winter, with much of the lower ground around Dundonnell fenced off and new native woodland plantations restricting their traditional grazing grounds still further.

So, which is worse, shooting a heavily pregnant deer or allowing the red deer population to rise to such levels that other hinds, some also no doubt pregnant, died like this? A false question which would disappear if Scotland had predators like wolves. There would then be no closed season and any deer not in prime condition would provide an easy meal.

It seems to me, however, that the Scottish Gamekeeper's Association, in focusing attention on the hind that was shot on Skye, was distracting people from the wider issues.



Just over the hill from the Dundonnell River, walking along one of the two tracks that now grace the north shore of Loch Bhroan, we were met every few hundred metres with the stench from a decaying red deer corpse.



Never, in forty years of visiting the Highlands, have I felt less inclined to drink water from the local burns.

I encountered a similar stench along the road between Dundonnell and Corriehallie.

By all accounts there was a lot of snow in the north west this winter and the weather last year may have resulted in less grass surviving into the winter than usual. Both will have contributed to the death toll. But I saw plenty of other evidence to show that the red deer population in Fisherfield and the Fannichs is far too high and this is having a severe impact on biodiversity in the area.



A fine old birch wood in its final death throes under Creag a Chadha Chrìste on the northern slopes of Creag Raineach. Note how the trees on the slope opposite are flourishing in the deep gully. The pale patch on the left has been caused by muirburn.



It was the same in the beautiful alder wood pasture on the flood plain below, a favoured place for people to camp. The only re-generation we saw was in the small areas protected by gorse. Hardly a flower survived.



Where alder was regenerating along the banks of Abhainn Gleann na Muice south of Larachantivore
â?? the only example we saw in the whole of Fisherfield â?? it was being destroyed by red deer.



A dozen or so miles to the east, red deer had been allowed into the native woodland plantation on the northern slopes of Beinn Liath Mhor at Ghuibhais Li, destroying almost all the native broadleaved trees that had been planted there.

While claiming to be non-political, the SGA used the incident on Skye to argue that the Scottish Government should not extend the hind shooting season as recommended by the deer working group (to the start of April, not May). In doing so, they are playing the card of the landowners, who have consistently resisted any reduction in the numbers of red deer (not least because their estates are valued by the number of deer) and used welfare reasons (that it's cruel to shoot deer at particular times of year) to help justify this.

Unfortunately NatureScot and Scotland's two National Park Authorities, all of which should be dedicated to reducing red deer numbers in the interests of conservation, generally appear too feart to expose the hypocrisy of the SGA or their landowning paymasters when it comes to their arguments about the welfare of red deer. Hence, in part, the sad evidence I saw on my trip to the north west and the reason for this blog.

Category

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Tags

1. conservation
2. Deer
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