

Red deer and the natural environment – could a National Park make a difference? Glen Strathfarrar.

Description



Deer grazing on the river flats – note the multiple tracks that have been created across the hillside behind

The Scottish Government's request for ideas about a new National Park in Scotland ([see here](#)) closes today. So far, 93 ideas have been registered ([see here](#)) among which I can find almost no mention of the destructive impacts of overgrazing by red deer on the natural environment. Yet if the Scottish Government wants National Parks to help restore nature and turn the land into a net store for carbon, they just need to do two simple things: reduce deer numbers (probably to c2 per square kilometre) and end intensive grouse moor management (which is registered as an idea on the consultation page). This post considers the deer issue in the light of a recent visit to Glen Strathfarrar.

I had last visited the glen in August 2011 and one of my memories was of a single very tame red deer grazing in front of a house. This May â?? a different time of year of course and before the main flush of vegetation on the hill â?? red deer were everywhere.



Red deer stags shedding their winter coats and with antlers in velvet. Note the tree planted within its own protective fence behind. Photo credit Louise Brimelow

Indeed, there cannot be a better place in Scotland to observe the physiological changes that deer go through at this time of year. My partner decided to see how close she could get, only for an estate worker to shout from their vehicle that these were wild red deer and if she wanted to photograph them she should go to a deer farm. We were already in one!



Remains of winter feed uphill on field clearance cairn by Allt aâ?? Mhuillidh with another cairn behind
The lush grass sward to the right was the product of hard labour!

All along the glen we had seen the remains of heaps of straw put out to help the large numbers of deer survive the winter. Down near the confluence of the All Mhuillidh and the River Farrar I counted six, a dozen metres apart. This feeding is not a casual operation but systematic.



It is little wonder the red deer are so tame. They perceive humans as a source of food rather than as a predator, farmers not hunters.

But unlike farm animals when the time has come they still do have a chance to escape. No doubt they have learned the best means of survival at different times of year.



View down Strathfarrar from Beinn na Muice (pig mountain)

Glen Strathfarrar is quite unusual in combining elements of wild glen and more fertile strath, its geography encapsulated in its name. There are significant areas of grassland by the river, once used to graze sheep and cattle, but which are now without the competition very attractive to red deer (and campers!). Maybe because of its topography and ecology, Glen Strathfarrar is capable of supporting higher numbers of red deer than elsewhere?

The evidence on the ground



Looking back down the road, with a fragment of Caledonian forest above the river which is just to the right

Cycling up Glen Strathfarrar one could not help be struck by the magnificence of the woodlandâ!â!â!.



...and individual old trees.

But on closer look, except where fragments are protected by deer fencing, almost all of what was once a forest is dying



No sign of these old pines being able to regenerate

There were some exceptions:



Prostrate birch saplings with lousewort and chickweed wintergreen (white flower).

â?â?â?â?..opposite some very overgrazed alder and multiple deer tracks:



Grazed alder on left, there was a lot more of it both downstream and upstream. Note the multiple tracks coming down the hillside to the burn and the isolated birch on a small crag above.

This I find easier to explain. Being adjacent to a large area of grassland and feeding area, no deer will bother to stop to graze the birch as long as other food is available so close by. But when times are tougher, after it has snowed for example, this changes. As soon as the birch, like the alder, emerges from above the surrounding vegetation or snow its likely to get browsed. Hence the state of the hillside above.

Along much of Glen Strathfarrar there are isolated birch trees, a source of seed, but when you look more closely most are growing out of crags or other inaccessible places.



Caledonian Pine Forest fragment within fenced enclosure on far side of River Strathfarrar with isolated alder in foreground

That feeding doesn't stop the browsing pressure is illustrated by this photo. There was no regeneration around the alder, which had been browsed to head height, and the old pine trees behind would be similarly isolated if it was not for the deer fence.

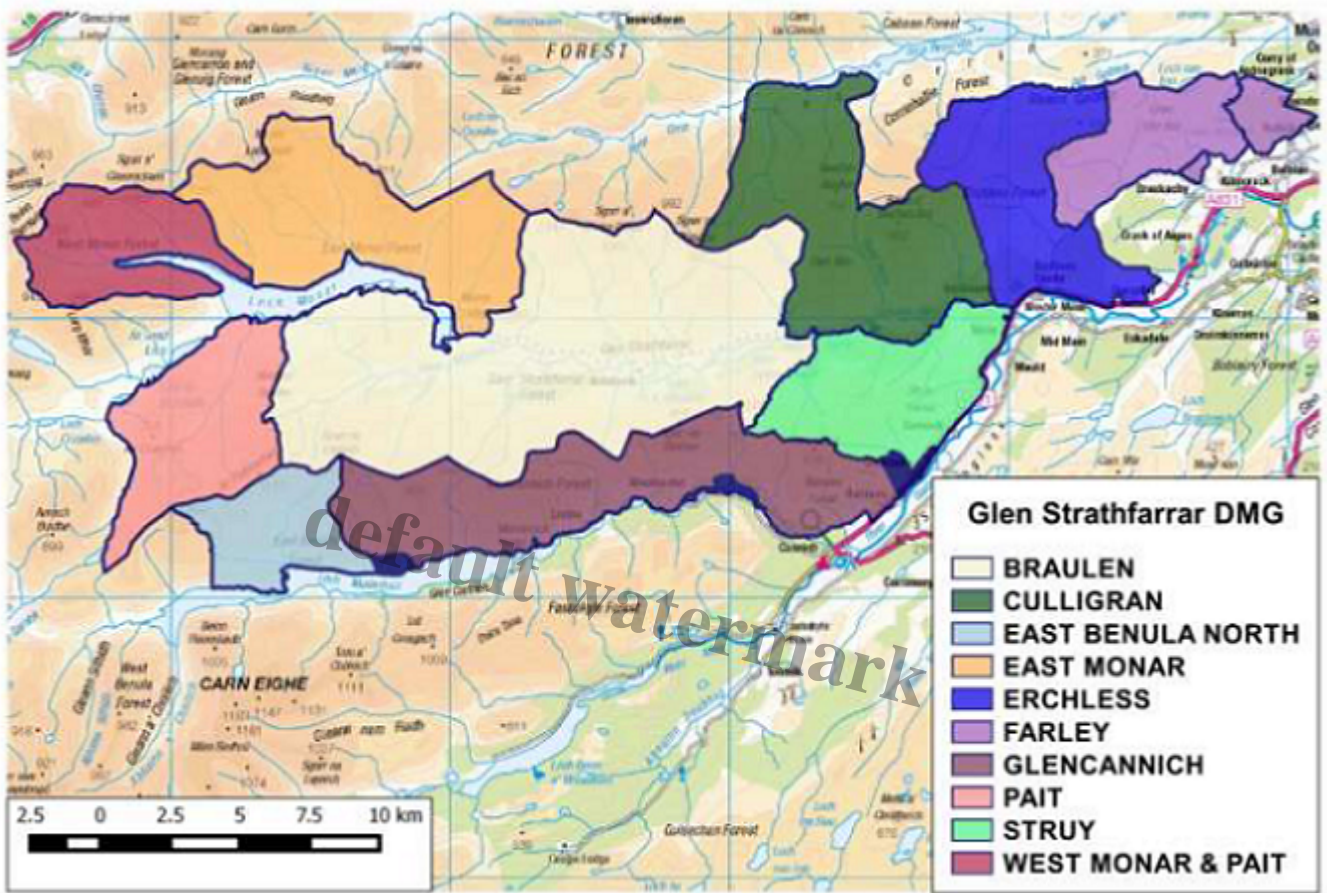


The Braulen Estate, which covers most of the land featured in these photos, understands all this of course, hence why all the way along the road it has planted trees in their own enclosures.

Deer management and nature conservation in Glen Strathfarrar

After my visit, I compared what I had seen to the written information available on the Glen Strathfarrar Deer Management Group (DMG) ([see here](#)) and NatureScot sitelink websites.

Figure 2: Deer Management Units



Data produced by Scottish Natural Heritage. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right [2015]

Reading the last Deer Management Plan (2016-21) for Glen Strathfarrar ([see here](#)) there was a commitment that the:

â??Final Plan and Minutes of Meetings will be made publically available and published on DMG Websiteâ??.

The last information I could find was for the 2019 AGM, but that is not unusual. After an initial burst of transparency, how deer are being mis-managed is more secretive than ever.

Table 1: Helicopter Counts

(Hind, stag and calf figures for 2016 have been estimated using population models)

Helicopter Census	Year	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Density
Heli 2003	2003	2596	3682	1243	7521	17.33
Heli 2006	2006	2300	3105	939	6344	14.62
Heli 2009	2009	2488	3519	925	6932	15.97
Heli 2012	2012	2260	3291	936	6487	14.95
Predicted Pop 2016	2016	2304	2695	661	5659	13.00

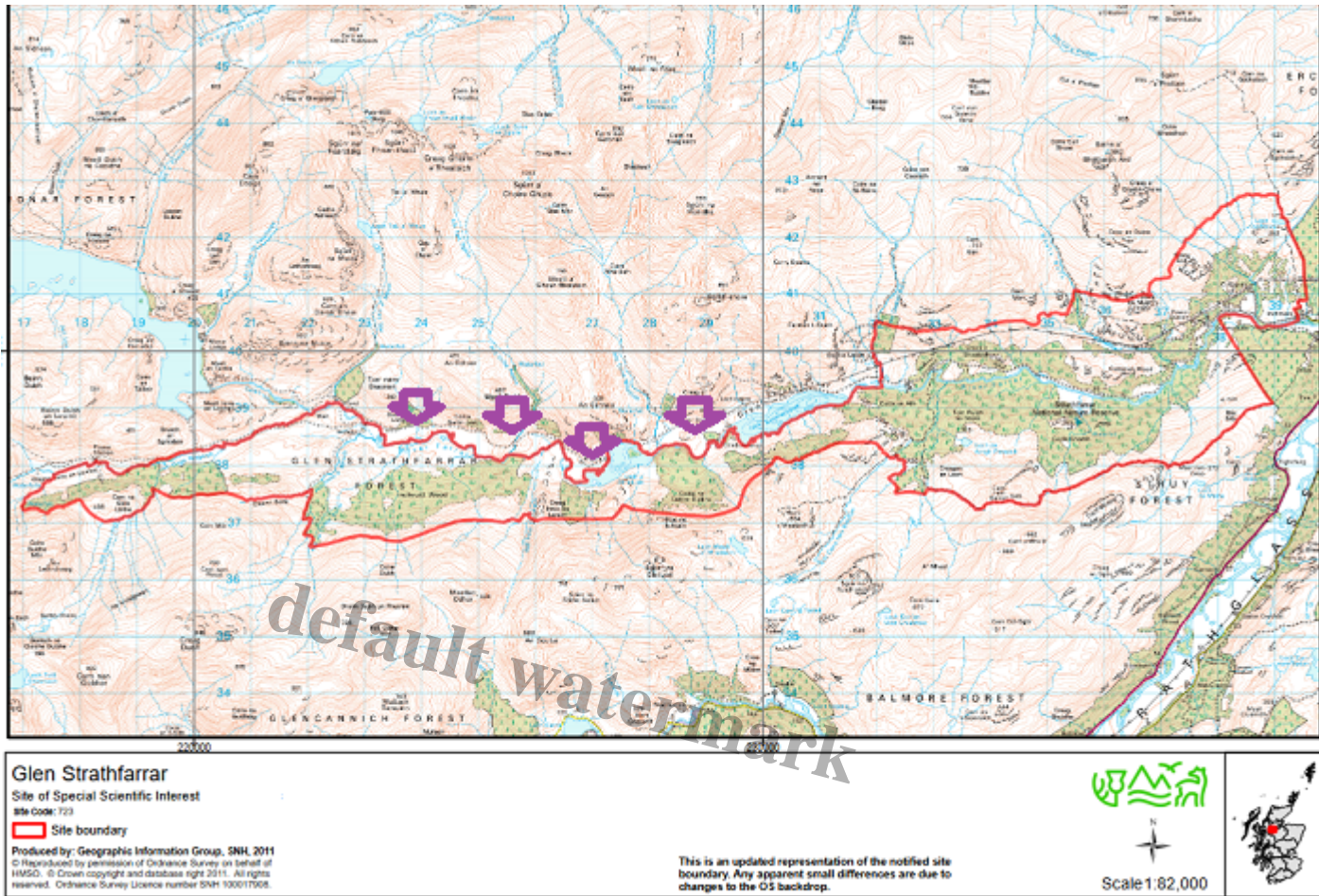
Extract from Deer Management Plan 2016-21. Stalking estates love population models, it excuses them from tackling the issues

This is what the plan says about the deer population:

Using a combination of known cull data since 2012, population modelling predicts a current population of around 5659 deer (13.0 deer per km²). A number of properties have agreed to meeting specific target densities for hinds for conservation purposes. Incorporating these densities in to the figures (the desired population of hinds of 3267 and an overall density of 14.4 deer km²), gives a figure which is higher than current predicted densities meaning that the population is broadly currently in keeping with all current conservation requirements.

Simply put, this means that actual density of red deer of 13 per square kilometre was, in 2016, less than the target agreed for conservation purposes (14.4 deer per square kilometre). No need to do anything therefore. It appears unlikely that that will have changed significantly.

The important point here is that the Deer Working Group in their report to the Scottish Government ([see here](#)) recommended a maximum deer density of ten per square kilometre. In fact we know from evidence at Glen Feshie and Mar Lodge that native woodland generally does not regenerate until deer are reduced to 2 per square kilometre ([see here](#)) so ten would still be far too high to enable the Caledonian Forest fragments in Glen Strathfarrar to recover without fencing.



Glen Strathfarrar SSSI. The area outlined is also a Special Area of Conservation supposedly our strongest nature conservation designation. The purple arrows point to the grassland by the River Farrar where much of the deer feeding on the Braulen Estate takes place.

The shocking thing is these targets for deer numbers have been agreed by NatureScot, the body that oversees deer management in Scotland and is also responsible for the condition of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the Special Area of Conservation.

The first objective of the Site Management Statement for the SSSI (last reviewed in 2011, another scandal) states ([see here](#)):

1. To maintain the extent and improve the condition of the pinewood and important upland habitats by, for example:

• managing the herbivore impacts (mainly deer)

• sensitive use of ATVs to avoid damage to ground vegetation

It also states:

the native pinewood habitat was considered to be in unfavourable condition due to the scarcity of tree regeneration and imbalanced age structure, particularly towards the west of the site. Browsing by herbivores is suppressing regeneration outside exclosures and, with trampling, is also affecting the condition of wet and dry heaths.

The Site Management Statement refers to diversionary feeding – the idea that if you try and treat red deer like farm animals they will leave the trees alone:

There has also been some diversionary feeding of deer to influence the time deer spend in the woodland and hence the level of browsing on tree regeneration.

There is no mention of how the success of this might be judged but from the evidence of what I saw, absolutely nothing has improved since 2011.



Isolated old pines before larger Caledonian Forest fragment on hillside behind (left). Now how alder readily regenerates along river bank if given half a chance.

No doubt the rich grass swards in Glen Strathfarrar combined with feeding could in theory help keep red deer away from woodland some of the time, if numbers were low enough. But instead the diversionary feeding appears to be being used to maintain red deer numbers at artificially high levels with dire consequences for both woodland and the welfare of red deer: the 2019 DMG AGM minutes – *noted that there were a lot of hinds without calves*, a common consequence of poor nutrition.

Could a National Park make a difference?

There is a long history of conservation failures in Glen Strathfarrar. The key points are:

- the lower part of the glen was once a National Nature Reserve, a place where nature was supposed to come first, but de-designated in 2006 like many other NNRs on sporting estates because of a failure to persuade the private landowners to agree voluntarily to conservation objectives; and
- statutory conservation measures have been similarly ineffective, with NatureScot being unwilling to use its statutory powers to control deer numbers even to protect designated sites in the glen and sanctioning artificial feeding that has boosted deer numbers just outside the SSSI.

None of this, of course, means that had NatureScot been prepared to stand up to sporting estates and use the powers available to it their failure to do this is not the fault of frontline staff the current state of the natural environment in Glen Strathfarrar might not be far better than it is.

But the current system, with specific areas designated to protect what survives rather than what could be and individual private landowners with different interests (the 2019 AGM minutes reveal that the four estates covering the SSSI couldn't even agree to apply for a £10k grant to look at the state of the woodland within it!) clearly isn't working.

We need to think much bigger if we are going to tackle the climate and nature emergencies and protect what should be some of our finest landscapes. And that is where a National Park could come in, it could offer a new vision and a new means of tackling the issues:

- a park that covered the whole of the area from Glen Shiel in the south to Strath Carron and Strath Bran in the north and would include Glen Affric, Glen Cannich and Strathfarrar;
- a park that was focussed on the protection of nature and whose primary mission was to keep deer numbers at 2 per kilometre or less to meet that end;
- a park that had the power to force private landowners to co-operate or to buy their land in the public interest;
- a park that enabled Trees for Life to realise their admirable vision of a restored forest around Glen Affric, but without any need to plant trees and protect them with fences;
- a park that secured what is arguably the most important area of wild land in Scotland;
- a park that unlike our existing National Parks would exclude settlements but guaranteed jobs and housing to the estate staff living within it.

In my first post on the Scottish Government's National Parks consultation I referred to Ron Greer's idea of a Monadhliath wildlife refugium ([see here](#)). Arguably, the main disadvantage with that proposal was that the Monadhliath inspires and is probably capable of inspiring relatively few people. By contrast Glen Affric is widely regarded as one of Scotland's finest landscapes and with a bit more protection, other glens in the area like Strathfarrar could be too. Why not build on that and create Scotland's first National Park dedicated to conservation, to reversing the decline in nature and freeing up its potential to capture carbon?

Such a National Park would not prevent the Scottish Government creating national parks for other purposes but it would form a declaration of intent when it comes to tackling the unnaturally high

numbers of red deer maintained by many sporting estates.

Category

1. National Parks

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