Deer fencing and the decimation of capercaillie in the Cairngorms

Description

Recent post on Capercaillie Project Facebook page

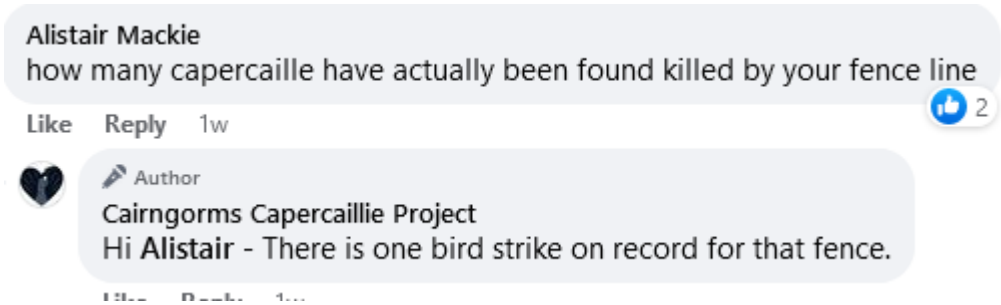
Having highlighted the issue of forest fences being covered in plastic to prevent bird collisions a year ago (see here), it is very good to see that the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has been doing more work with the Seafield estate to remove the orange netting. Unfortunately, rather than removing the fences completely, they have been using volunteer time to replace the plastic with wooden markers. This post takes a further look (see here) at the role that deer fencing has been playing in the decline of the capercaillie, from 20,000 in the 1970s to 542 now (the latest figure according to the Capercaillie Project).

Why deer fences are a problem for capercaillie

Capercaillie feature very prominently in the politics of the Cairngorms National Park. The Scottish Government has committed to save the capercaillie and significant sums of public money have been thrown at trying to achieve this over the last twenty years. The lack of success has triggered controversial debates about the role of outdoor recreation and predators in the decline of the species. I will consider in further posts how the Cairngorms National Park Authority has responded to those two debates, following a paper it considered in June (see here), and what I consider the much more important issue, the lack of suitable habitat. The key point to note here, however, is that while the evidence for the impacts that outdoor recreation and predators have on capercaillie survival is mixed, the evidence for the impact of deer fences is very clear. They kill, not just capercaillie but other birds and in large numbers.

Research from the 1990s, cited in Adam Watson and Robert Mossâ?? excellent book â??Grouseâ?• estimated that 20,000 capercaillie a year died in Norway through flying into forest fences and that fences were one of the main causes of capercaillie mortality in Scotland. Hence the plastic netting. Further research by Baines and Andrew (see here) then showed that capercaillie collided with deer fences in the areas they studied at a rate of 0.9 collisions per kilometre per year but that marking reduced capercaillie collisions by 64% (more than for other birds). That, however, still means a very large number of capercaillie are dying through collisions with fences each year.

Scavengers and predators are remarkably efficient at removing evidence of kills and the wind does the rest, whatever the cause of death. It is likely therefore that the numbers of death by collision that are recorded are a considerable underestimate:



Question and response to the Capercaillie Project facebook post above

There is a great photo in â??Grouseâ?• (Fig 88 on page 152) of a garotted male capercaillie entangled in the lower section of a deer fence below orange plastic marker netting which illustrates the problem:

Photo Credit Kenny Kortland, an ecologist who works for Forest and Land Scotland, from Grouse, New Naturalist, Collins 2008..

It is well known that capercaillie avoid dense forest plantations, partly because they cannot fly through narrow spaces between trees. Leaving the lower half of fences unmarked, therefore, or using widely spaced batons will create what looks like gaps to a capercaillie, particularly if travelling at speed. As the caption to the photo remarks:

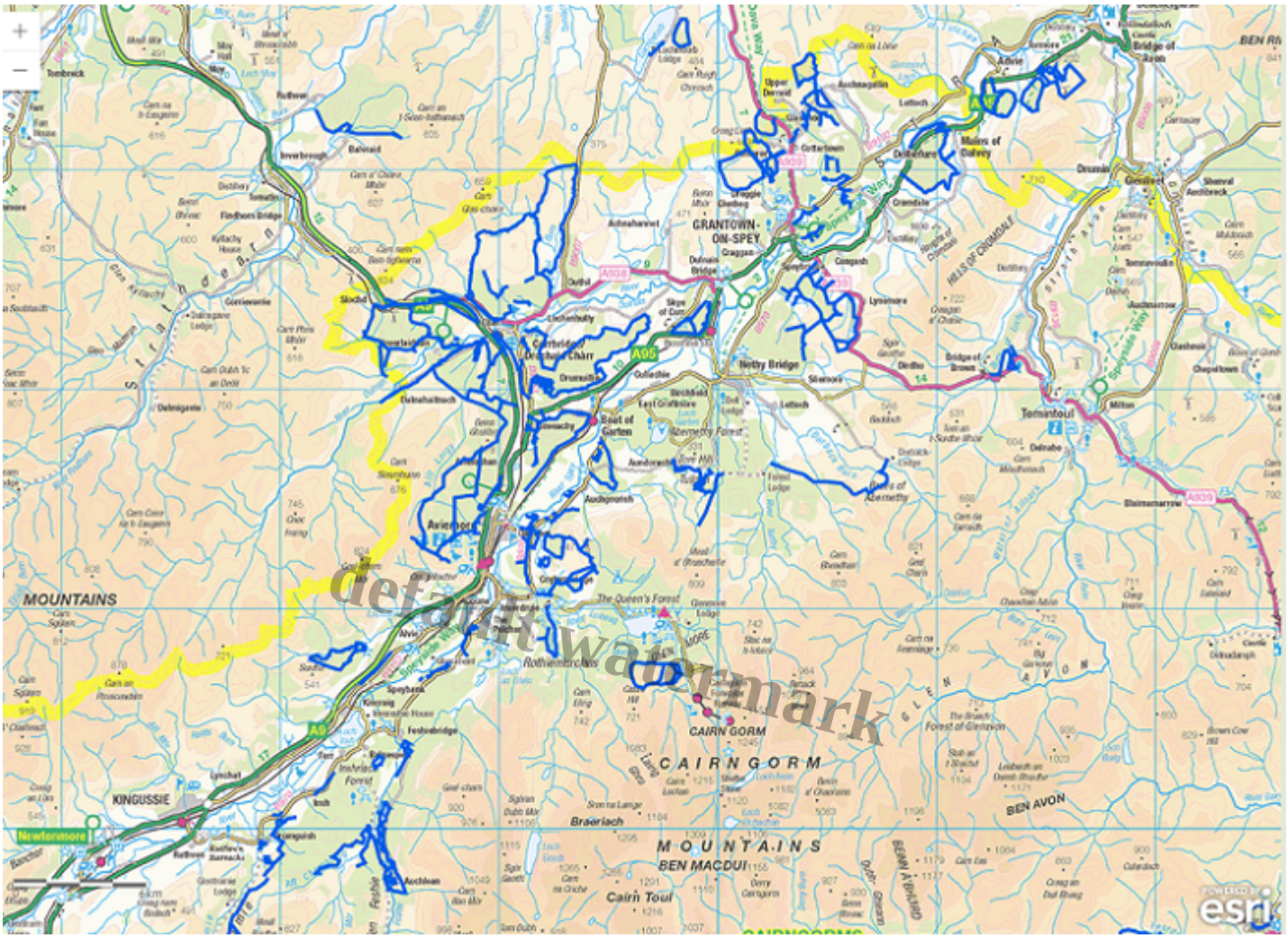
â??it seems like the capercaillie tried to fly under it [the netting] as if under a branch. Marking should make the entire fence look like an obstacle to flightâ?•.

There have been very few fences marked in the way Adam Watson and Robert Moss advised, partly because of cost but also because the more the marking, whether wood or plastic, the more the fence catches the wind and the more likely it is to blow over.

New marked and unmarked fencing October 2018 along the A9 dual carriageway between Aviemore Kingussie. The wooden batons in the photo are close together and extend onto the bottom half of the which should help reduce but not eliminate birds collisions

The final element in understanding why deer fencing has been such a disaster for capercaillie lies in their movements. In â??Grouseâ?• further research is cited which shows while capercaillie cocks donâ??t tend to travel far from leks, hens disperse on average about 12km as they reach adulthood. This means that to stop the annual decimation of capercaillie by fences, there need to large fence free areas around leks. On the northern part of Speyside, where the greatest concentration of capercaillie are still found, that means everywhere.

Fences, the Capercaillie Project and the Cairngorms National Park Authority



The most important piece of work that the Capercaillie Project has done in my view is to map the deer fencing in the Cairngorms and around Inverness (see here). They clearly appreciate the problem. Choose a wood where you have heard there might be capercaillie, draw a line to another wood 12k away and then count how many fences the hen capercaillie have to get past!

There are two challenges to fence removal, most importantly the number of red deer. In the absence of any effective action by NatureScot or the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) to bring down deer numbers on estates managed primarily for sporting purposes, fences are required to save trees â?? even around fragments of Caledonian Pine forest. This may save the forest but spells death to one of its finest inhabitants.

The Seafield Estate (top photo and below) provides a good example of the problem: deer sweep down from the higher parts of the Monadliath in winter to find shelter and food at Kinveachy.

Netting is being replaced by batons at Kinveachy â?? the wooden palisade on the left is even better â?? but that still leaves lots of fences for capercaillie to negotiate. Photo November 2022.

The second issue is money. Estates may agree in principle to remove fencing but many of these appear not prepared to pay for the work. The Forest Grant Scheme, operated by Scottish Forestry, pays for landowners to remove or mark fences within 1km of a lek, not nearly far enough. At their Board Meeting in June the CNPA agreed to lobby Scottish Forestry with NatureScot so that when the current scheme is next reviewed, in 2024, funding is made available to remove or mark fences where-ever capercaillie might fly into them. The CNPA Board were also told that as a short term solution, until its funding ends in July 2023, â??The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project continues to provide grants to mark and remove fencing over 1km from an active lek siteâ?•.

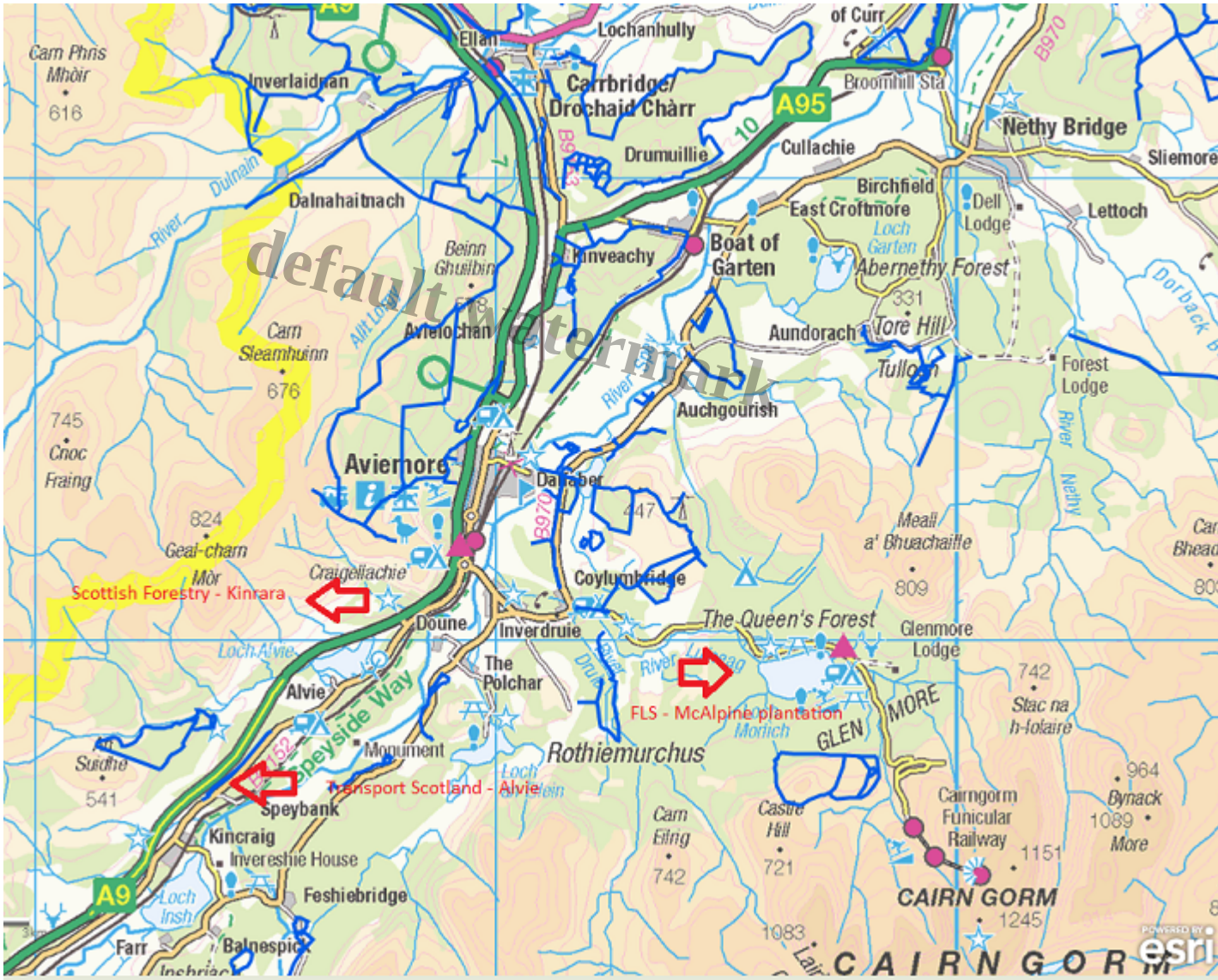
Both these actions are focussed on the right issue, even if it is still too little (fences need to be removed, not marked) and probably too late. It also rather sticks in the craw that having funded landowners to erect fences, the public is now expected to fund their removal.

It is important to note here that Seafield, featured in the photos above, is one of the few estates to contribute to the Capercaillie Project and invests far more than any other: Â£217,347 this year (compared to Â£11,500 from King Charles at Balmoral) (see here). There are also conservation estates like Wildland Ltd, who are not part of the Capercaillie Project, but have funded their own

extensive fence removal.

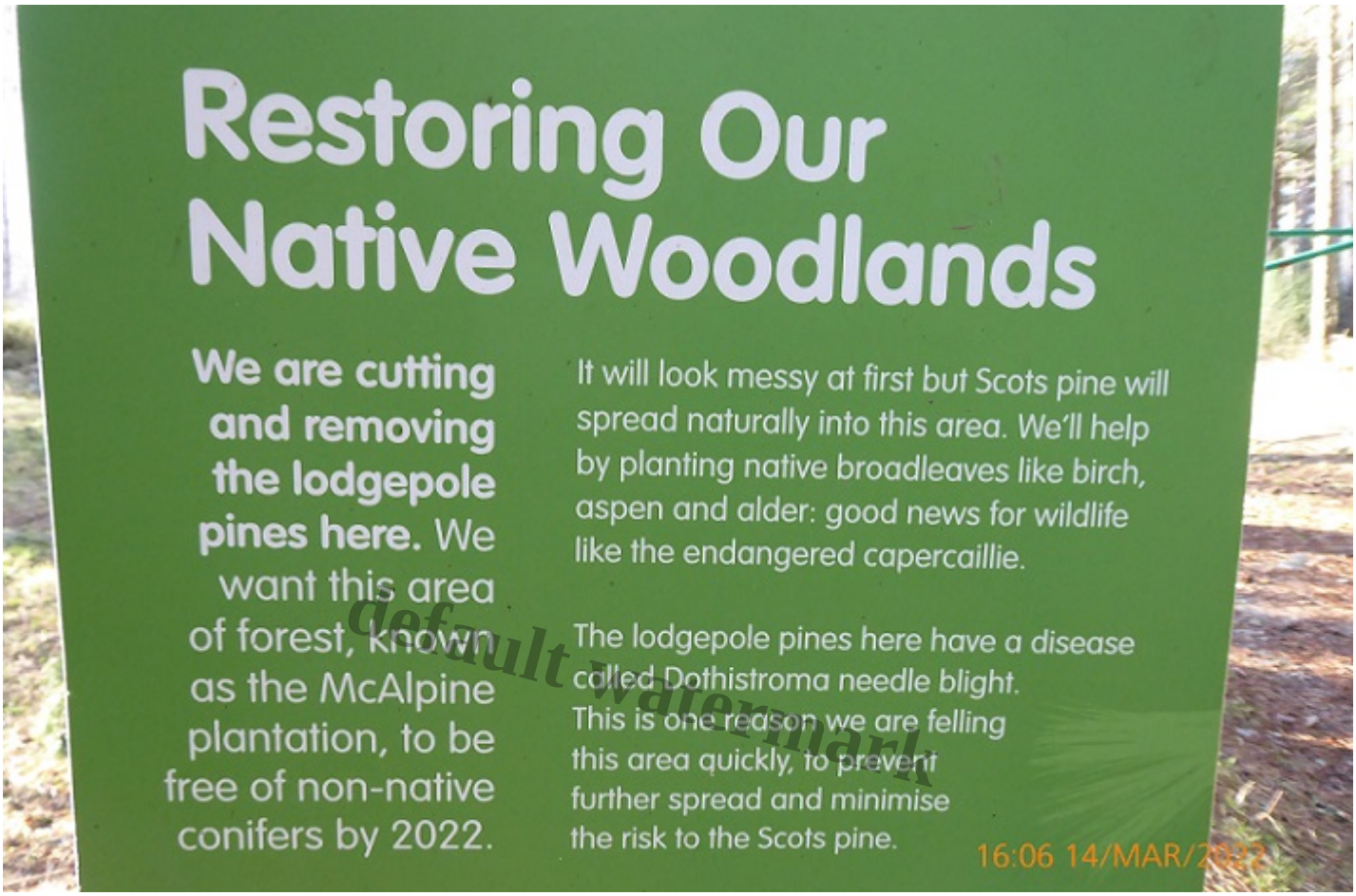
The public agencies failing capercaillie

What the paper to the CNPA Board in June strangely failed to mention was that new deer fences are continuing to be erected in the heart of capercaillie country and surrounding areas which they must recolonise if they are to survive.



The map shows the locations of the three examples I consider below.

I have returned to the McAlpine Plantation by Loch Morlich at the centre of the Glenmore Forest twice since writing about it in March (see here). On the second occasion staff from the harvesting arm of Forestry and Land Scotland, who own the site, were present. They were kind enough to explain a bit more about what was going on, including that the harvesting of the lodgepole pine had been halted during the breeding season to protect capercaillie. This seemed slightly over-precautious to me because the lodgepole pine had been so densely planted that they were unlikely to provide habitat for capercaillie â?? something I confirmed with an expert afterwards.



If one branch of FLS was concerned enough about capercaillie at the McAlpine plantation to halt harvesting, why had another under the guise of restoring native woodland erected new deer fences?

Enclosure within the McAlpine plantation with dense forest behind. It is questionable whether the wooden batons are close enough and long enough to prrevent capercaillie flying into the fence.

Given the plight of capercaillie and the fact that Glen More is one of their last refuges, erecting deer fences right in the middle of the forest in what was almost a fence free zone is folly.

FLS are also members of Cairngorms Connect which claims to be the largest conservation project in the UK. While Wildland Ltd at Glen Feshie and RSPB at Abernethy have showed the way in removing deer fences, FLS appears to have moved in the opposite direction. One wonders whether FLSâ?? management has ever seen their ecologist Kenny Kortlandâ??s photo of the garrotted capercaillie? But then if they can afford to ignore the local community and outsource the Glenmore campsite (see here), it is unlikely anyone else can influence them when it comes to their mis-management of Glen More.

View from old A9 to new A9 near Alvie

Along the old A9, to the south of Aviemore, there is a significant length of unmarked deer fencing some of which, at least, appears to have been erected by Transport Scotland to keep deer off the new dual carriageway.

My understanding is that one of the conditions of the A9 dualling, which was put in place following representations by the CNPA, was that Transport Scotland should ensure all deer fencing should be marked. That condition unfortunately appears never to have been enforced and lengths of fence remain unmarked. The journey for any hen capercaillie that tries to disperse along the woodland corridor by the A9 has been made fraught with danger by a second government agency.

The erection of new deer fences on BrewDogâ??s estate at Kinrara. Photo September 2022.

The third government agency is Scottish Forestry which has awarded over Â£1m to BrewDog (see here) to plant trees behind fences in an area which is also well within the dispersal range of hen capercaillie. â??Capercaillie killer IPAâ?•, has a certain punk ring to it, but to be fair BrewDog probably know little about capercaillie, follow the advice of their forestry consultants and take whatâ??s offered by Scottish Forestry without considering the impact.

If the CNPA has objected to Scottish Forestry about their funding of BrewDog, they donâ??t appear to have said so publicly. If they really want to save the capercaillie, as they claim, the CNPAâ??s top priority has to be to stop Scottish Forestry funding any new fences now, rather than lobbying for money to be made available to remove existing fences from sometime in 2024.

Back to the plastic â?? a sad history of failure

Are the batons that have replaced the netting close enough for capercaillie to decide there is no way through? The challenge with this location â?? which is another reason the netting has been removed â?? is that it is exposed to the wind and if there is too much marking on the fence it risks blowing over. Photo November 2022.

A week or so ago the orange plastic netting that had been removed at Seafield was neatly rolled up by a forest track ready for collection. I am fairly confident that the estate will remove it.

There is, however, similar plastic netting on the Cawdor Estate which has been left on the groundâ?¦..


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Photo November 2022.

â?¦â?¦â?¦..since 2015! The Cairngorms Local Access Forum meeting on 12th May 2015 (see here) considered a paper on the capercaillie framework which noted that work was being done to remove both deer fencing and plastic netting that year. It also reported that:

â??The top priority fence identified for removal at Cawdor Estate (in Carrbridge) due to a number of known deaths from strikes, has been taken out through CNPA funding.â?•

Good stuff! Since then, however, despite the abandoned fencing and netting being reported to the CNPA by local residents on several occasions nothing has been done.

Maybe that is symptomatic of the wider problem. If it is too difficult to dispose of fencing that has been taken down, what hope for the removal of the many deer fences are still in place across Speyside or for the fences that are still being erected? What hope for the capercaillie if Scotland cannot address what is the single best evidenced cause of their decline?

Following on from NatureScotâ??s consultation on National Parks which I consider in my last post (see here), perhaps the single most important question it failed to ask was â??what powers and resources would National Parks need to reduce deer numbers to levels where deer fencing could be abolished and the rest of nature allowed to flourish?â?•

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. fencing
5. Forest and Land Scotland
6. forestry
7. landed estates
8. scottish forestry

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