

Deer density in the Cairngorms (5) – King Charles and the management of red deer at Balmoral

Description



Red Deer near outflow of Loch Muick 5th May. Without the fence and tree tubes the trees that have been planted (right foreground) would have no chance of survival. Note too the fringe of native woodland along the bank of the far side of Loch Muick (also fenced) and the muirburn immediately above

I had always intended to include the Royal Sporting Estate at Balmoral in my series on Deer Density in the Cairngorms ([see here](#)) after a walk round the upper part of Glen Muick in May. However, I followed that up with a further Freedom of Information request on current deer numbers at Caenlochan ([see here](#)). While NatureScot responded in early July, providing lots of information which should have been in the public realm, I have not found time to write about that or my visit until now.

Deer density on the main part of Balmoral

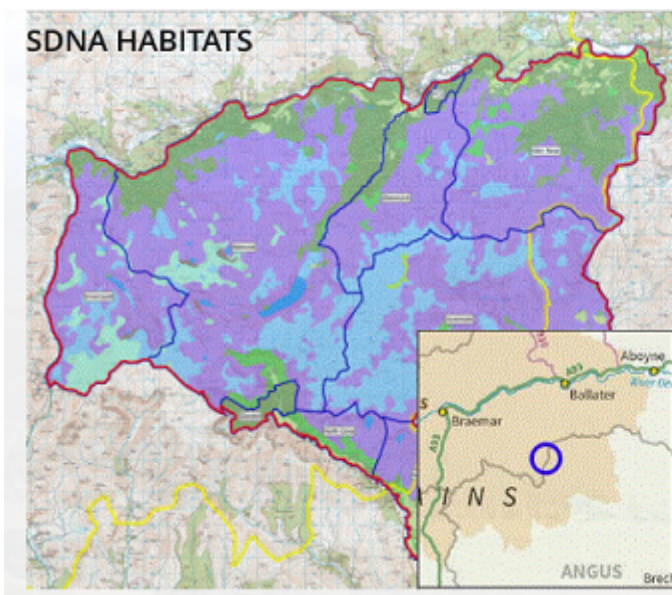
Heading for Loch Muick from the Spittal of Glen Muick car park it did not take us long to spot a small herd of red deer grazing on the flats (see above). On our return in the afternoon there was a larger

herd grazing the best ground just a couple of hundred metres from the car park:



View from the “tourist” path to Lochnagar with the burnt hillside of An t-Sron beyond

That the deer were not bothered by human presence – there were lots of other people around – suggests that Balmoral may not have taken advantage of the change in the law last year which now allows stags to be shot year round. While the herds I saw were much smaller than those I saw on the Quoich flats near Mar Lodge that same week, it is difficult to assess their significance because of the lack of information that is publicly available on deer numbers for the main part of Balmoral.



WELCOME

The SDNADMG is situated in the north east of Scotland and extends to approximately 70,360 hectares or 173,859 acres. There are 11 deer management units within the group, comprising of private and public land (see table below).

Estate	Area (hectares)
Abergeldie	4,703
Balmoral	18,396
Forestry Commission Scotland	923
Glen Tanar	10,117
Glenmuick	5,255
Inchmarnoch	1,386
Invercauld (Glen Callater)	6,814
Invermark	17,598
North Clova	1,608
Rottal	3,314
SNH	182

Map from welcome page of the SDNADMG showing the various landholdings. Balmoral is the second estate from the left. The map is out of date as it includes Bachnagairn which is now part of the South Grampian DMG but at the time Balmoral leased the sporting rights from Abergeldie and was responsible for deer numbers there.

The main part of Balmoral is part of the South Deeside and North Angus Deer Management (SDNADMG) but Bachnagairn, which was subject to the Section 7 Agreement designed to reduce the very high numbers of deer numbers at Caenlochan, is now part of the South Grampian Deer Management Group (SGDMG).

Unlike the SGDMG website, which contains up-to-date information on deer management for the area it covers, the last minutes of a meeting from the SDNADMG website ([see here](#)) dates from April 2017 while the Deer Management Plan 2016-20 appears never to have been updated. There are no dates on the SDNADMG Action Plan, 2016-20 and it is unclear when it was last updated but, whenever that was, many of the agreed actions had not been started:

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Action No.	DMP Action Item	Description of Action	Person responsible	St
1	Develop Mechanisms to Manage Deer	AP 4.1.1 – All members to sign off on deer management plan by summer 2016	All members	
		AP 4.1.2 – Reassessment of Group against the Public Interest Objectives and Benchmark periodically	Ch/Sec/SNH	
		AP 4.1.3 – Monitor the progress of the Working Plan and update annually as appropriate	Ch/Sec/All	
2	Delivery of designated features into Favourable Condition	AP 4.2.1 – Group and/or estates to work with SNH to help bring sites into favourable condition as appropriate	Ch/Sec/All	
3	Manage deer to retain existing native woodland and improve condition	AP 4.3.1 – Group to discuss any risk to partially fenced and unfenced native woodlands and identify management strategies to mitigate negative impacts where feasible	Ch/Sec/All	
		AP 4.3.2 – Monitor progress of native woodlands at Group level periodically in relation to forest planning cycles	Ch/Sec/All	
4	Demonstrate DMG contribution to woodland expansion targets	AP 4.4.1 Discuss woodland expansion targets at Group level periodically in relation to forest planning cycles	Ch/Sec/All	
5	Monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider	AP 4.5.1 – Group to agree methodology required to assess impact targets for broad habitat types including	Ch/Sec/All/SNH	

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SOUTH DEESIDE & NORTH ANGUS DMG ACTION LOG FD_230616

	countryside	levels of grazing and trampling including deer density		
		AP 4.5.2 – Group to agree level of basic monitoring to be carried out and aspire to further monitoring	Ch/Sec/All	
		AP 4.5.3 – Herbivore Impact Assessments (HIA) to be carried out where feasible and appropriate	All	

Extract from Action Plan. Some of the actions further down the list, which mainly concerned administ = “complete”. Yellow = part complete, red = not started. If the figure in the page header, represents and the current position the lack of progress would be truly shocking

As the owner of the largest single landholding in the SDNADMG, King Charles bears a high degree of

responsibility for this failure by the Deer Management Group to report what is or is not going on. Indeed, according to the Deer Management Plan and accompanying Action Plan (point 5), the various landholdings appear not even have been able to agree a target for deer density. That is despite deer density having been reported for Balmoral in the past. In 2010 the Deer Commission did a helicopter count and reported ([see here](#)) red deer numbers at Balmoral as follows:

East Grampian : Sub Area 2

Property	Planar Area (Ha)	Stags	Unclassified	Total	Deer (Deer)
Abergeldie	4737	540	348	888	1
Balmoral	14516	695	727	1422	1
Balmoral (Bachnagairn)	3411	231	790	1021	3

While in 2010 deer numbers for the main part of Balmoral, which includes lots of fenced woodland, met NatureScot's current and far too high target of 10 deer per square kilometre, three years later the factor at Balmoral, Richard Gledson, was reported by the Press and Journal ([see here](#)) to have said deer numbers were "12 – 14 per square kilometre as opposed to 20" twenty five years previously.

Red Deer of course are notoriously difficult to count but it says something that neither NatureScot nor the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) appear to have done anything to force the Royal Family to report publicly on deer numbers and culls on the main part of Balmoral. (Further FOI requests to follow).

The impact of deer on the south side of Glen Muick



The view over the flats to the south side of Glen Muick

In considering the impact of red deer in Glen Muick, it is important to emphasise that the Royal Family is managing the land for BOTH grouse and deer. This can be seen as one is driving up the glen to the Spittal of Glen Muick. These “sporting objectives” contrast with Delnadamph, on Donside, where King Charles has eliminated deer almost entirely in favour of grouse ([see here](#)) and most of the grouse moors in South Angus which have done the same.

While the burning of heather promotes grass growth initially, potentially providing better browsing for deer for a time, it also destroys plants, including trees, that do not tolerate fire. That considerably complicates questions about the impact of deer in the open parts of the glen: whether deer density is 2 or 20 if much of the land is burned the consequences for plants vulnerable to browsing or fire will be the same.



Heading along the south shore of Loch Muick towards Broad Cairn and Carn Bannoch with muirburn area in foreground. Trees are visible on the craggy areas above the path and in the middle distance along the shore

Given the steep sided slopes and well drained ground, woodland would naturally regenerate along most of the south shore of Loch Muick if it wasn't for burning and browsing.



Browsed birch at side of track

Indeed, a little further on where the burning stopped the heather was profuse and we started to see saplings everywhere despite an absence of fencing. The explanation probably lies in the natural instinct of red deer to avoid areas where they might become trapped, such as between this steep slided slope and the loch, unless driven by hunger. If deer numbers have halved on this part of Balmoral, as Richard Gledson has claimed, that would explain why trees are now naturally regenerating on the more accessible ground below the crags.



Looking back down Glen Muick from just before the Black Burn. Note the deer fence below the track

The fenced enclosure near the Black Burn provided evidence to support that interpretation of what has happened. When deer numbers were higher a fence was necessary to protect trees but now the population has reduced somewhat there is natural regeneration on both sides of the (unmarked) fence making it effectively redundant.



Muirburn visible to left and right of track

Where the track started to rise up to the plateau above there was profuse natural regeneration of trees but that soon came to a halt because of muirburn. Were the burning to stop much of the steep sided glen by the Black Burn – an extension of the “deer trap” – might now be evolving into woodland.



View across to Lochnagar. The slopes above Loch Muick to the right of woodland around the lodge at Glas Allt Shiel have been heavily burned unlike those to the left. Note the vegetation in the foreground which is relatively profuse and, if grazing were reduced further, might support montane scrub

Where the track emerged onto the plateau, almost opposite Glas-allt-Shiel, appeared to mark the boundary of the area burned for grouse. From here, over the plateau to Broad Cairn and Carn Bannoch and then back down to Loch Muick, the royal influence on the vegetation has been driven by wanting to maintain high numbers of deer, rather than high numbers of grouse, for sporting purposes.



Area of extensively eroded peat

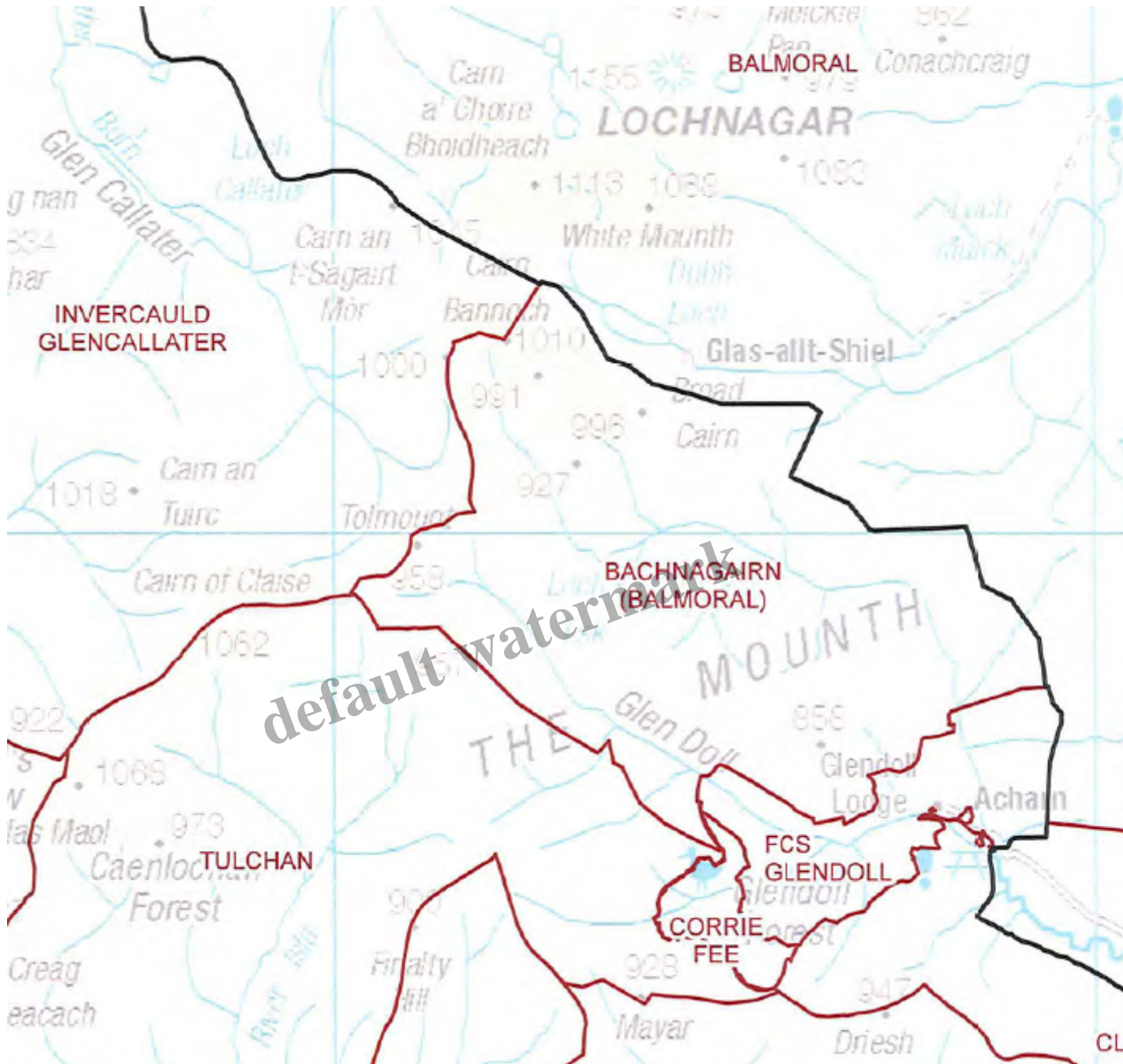
Unfortunately, once on the plateau storm clouds started to gather and we decided not to go over to look at the bare peat to check the extent to which deer trampling might have been responsible for eroding it. From a distance, however, the erosion of this bog appeared far greater than could be accounted for those other agents of peatland erosion, gravity and water.

Bachnagairn



The pony shed on the col between Sandy Hillock and Broad Cairn which sits by the boundary of Bachnagairn. Most of the track to Broad Cairn is very high quality.

Unpublished habitat assessment reports, released by NatureScot in response to my two information requests on Caenlochan, contain extensive evidence about the impact of high deer numbers on the Caenlochan Special Area of Conservation part of which falls within the royal land at Bachnagairn. However, at the end of winter and before the first flush of new spring vegetation on the higher ground, it was difficult to tell whether Bachnagairn was any more grazed than much of the rest of Balmoral or many other parts of upland Scotland.



The black line shows how the boundary between the SGDMP and the SDNADMG separates Bachna to the Caenloch Section 7 Agreement, from the rest of Balmoral

There were, however, landscape scale signs of trampling and grazing pressure such as the paucity of plant species, including a general absence of cladonia lichens which have resurged in Glen Feshie and on the conservation half of Mar Lodge since deer density has been reduced to less than two per square kilometre.



Broad Cairn from the east

What should be obvious at the end of winter, however, is that this high ground is unlikely to offer very much for large herbivores to eat even at the height of summer:



Looking back to Broad Cairn from the north western edge of the Bachnagairn boundary.

The availability of food is further limited by the presence of rocky ground over significant parts of Bachnagairn, including around the summit of Broad Cairn and where the boundary slopes down to the Allt an Dubh Loch (middle left).

Yet, according to NatureScot's response to my FOI request, just two year previously the deer density at Bachnagairn had been no less than 23 deer per square kilometre:

Annex 3: Deer census report March 2022, South Grampian Count Area

Property	Planar Area (ha)	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Total	Density (deer/km ²)
Section 7 properties						
ALRICK	1545	258	0	0	258	17
AUCHAVAN	810	30	48	11	89	11
BACHNAGAIRN (BALMORAL)	3401	354	336	91	781	23
CLOVA (south)	1627	62	262	43	367	23
FCS GLENDOLL	702	4	30	8	42	6
GLEN PROSEN	3533	27	246	50	323	9
GLENCALLY (FERGUS & GLENMARKIE)	2075	46	49	16	111	5
GLENHEAD/GLEN DAMFF	2820	67	244	49	360	13
GLENISLA HOUSE	1544	413	409	77	899	58
INVERCAULD (GLENSHEE)	4062	643	258	50	951	23
INVERCAULD GLENCALLATER	6973	376	277	80	733	11
SNH CORRIE FEE NNR	166	8	0	0	8	5
TULCHAN OF GLENISLA	4926	87	716	124	927	19
Total	34184	2375	2875	599	5849	17.1

That figure suggests is that in the 21 years since the initial creation of the Section 7 Agreement at Caenlochan and two years after the scathing report of the Deer Working Group ([see here](#)) the Royal Family had done nothing to reduce deer numbers on Bachnagairn. Indeed deer density in 2022 was higher than it had been in 2019:

Other						
BALMORAL (PART)	N/A	6	32	7	45	N/A
Overall Count Total	43737	3420	3461	999	7880	18.0

Extract from NatureScot's response to my first FOI request on Caenlochan which included a deer count conducted in August 2019

Despite this evidence, Balmoral appears to have been in denial about the number of deer on Bachnagairn and was even opposed to the renewal of the Section 7 agreement, which NatureScot had allowed to lapse in June 2020 ([see here](#)) but which had been called for by other landowners in the area:

*“Balmoral – DS presented on behalf of Richard Gledson [the factor who gave his apologies for the meeting] stating that **Balmoral had felt frustrated and disappointed to still be in this position, and being expected to be part of the Section 7 area. Balmoral had accepted that it was most likely that they would sign the Section 7 Agreement, but that was against a backdrop where the Estate can demonstrate both a deer density of around 8 to 8.5 deer per km² across the whole Estate, and also HIA data, showing an improving quality in habitat.** CW [from Bachnagairn] added that significant public access continues to displace deer concentrating their grazing patterns. He stressed that some particular habitats and flora are thriving and in very good condition. His concerns surrounded displacement of deer due to the public, and also the significant storm damage to woodlands. (Extract from Minutes of SGDMG meeting with Nature Scot about the new Section 7 agreement 21st October 2022 – from the SGDMG website)*

It should come as no surprise that the Royal Family don't want to be subject to the same rules, not even when it concerns minimal measures to reduce the destruction of the natural environment, as everyone else. IF Balmoral have reduced deer to 8-8.5 per km on average across the whole of the estate (which would fit with the natural regeneration I saw along Loch Muick) why have they not made this information publicly available, as happens in other Deer Management Groups? They could have easily made this happen if they supported the SDNADMG website but instead appear to have been happy to allow it to fall into disuse.

As explained in my post on what deer density means in practice ([see here](#)), in averaging out deer numbers for the whole estate Mr Gledson has ignored the fact that deer are excluded from large areas by fencing, while amount of feed available elsewhere is limited by muirburn. The result is that average deer density on the open hill for much of Balmoral will be well over 10 per square km, NatureScot's upper limit for the uplands, as is evidenced by the counts for Bachnagairn.

In attempting to blame visitors for the presence of large numbers of deer in sensitive areas, CW failed to explain why herds of deer graze so close to the Spittal of Glen Muick car park, the most popular access point for walkers to Balmoral. In my view that claim was an ineffective attempt to deflect responsibility away from the estate.

The South Grampian DMG website ([see here](#)), in contrast to the SDNADMG website, has been very efficiently administered since 2022, publishing minutes of meetings and – after my FOI request to NatureScot – some background information too. This transparency is welcome – an interesting question is whether this is because the group is not dominated by royal sporting interests? Interestingly too, the minutes shows that Balmoral/Bachnagairn have not been the best attenders at the SGDMG meetings, being absent from the meeting on 25th January 2023 where the revised Section 7 agreement was signed off and from the most recent meeting on 5th November 2024 where the recent stag cull was reported to be about 100 below target. Unfortunately, the minute did not record which estates had culled less than their target but, wherever responsibility for this lies, at a time when leadership is needed to keep up the momentum to reduce deer numbers at Caenlochan, Balmoral was conspicuous by its absence..

Deer impacts in the upper reaches of Glen Muick and the north side of the loch



Broad Cairn and Creag an Dubh Loch (the leftmost hills with Cairn Bannoch hidden behind) viewed earlier in the day with the lines along each side of the glen marking the boundary of a large new native woodland enclosure

The rain started to tip down as we descended from Cairn Bannoch to the floor of the glen above the Dubh Loch and left Bachnagairn. As a consequence we saw very little but there was no reason to believe that deer density here was any less than that recorded at Bachnagairn. The bare hillsides and the large new native woodland enclosure told a tale.

The rain relented somewhat as we approached Glas Allt Shiel and the state of the policy woodland around the lodge provided some further easy to see evidence of grazing pressure:



Note the low understorey and evidence of ring barking – the colour of the bottom of the tree trunk on the right is much greyer than the reddish bare areas above, indicating that it died as a result of ring barking before starting to shed bark from higher up.

We then passed further woodland enclosures along the north shore of Loch Muick, which provided a good example of all that is wrong with woodland conservation in Scotland but which I will consider in a further post.

A right royal mess

This post has shown that the Royal Family, now headed by King Charles, have for over 20 years failed to co-operate with NatureScot's attempts to use the voluntary provisions contained in Section 7 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 to reduce the extremely high number of red deer at Bachnagairn on what used to be – and should be – a nature reserve and is still designated a Special Area of Conservation. It has also shown that deer numbers on the open hill on the main part of Balmoral are likely to be far higher than 8-8.5 per square kilometre.

The Royal Family continue to put their sporting interests above all else when it comes to managing their own land in Scotland. The evidence shows they see maintaining high numbers of deer and grouse to shoot as being far more important than tackling the nature and climate crises at a landscape

scale.

The various conservation initiatives at Balmoral – which I will consider further in another post – are dwarfed by the failure to reduce deer numbers to the sustainable level of two or less per square kilometre. The evidence from Glen Feshie and Mar Lodge ([see here](#)) shows an average of 8 deer per square kilometre is four times higher than what would be necessary for the land at Balmoral to regenerate naturally.

The real problem is that NatureScot's target deer density of 10 per square km is far too high and plays into the hands of sporting interests. One of the consequences at Balmoral is the native pinewood at Ballochbuie, one of the last refuges for the capercaillie, has no chance of expanding beyond its killer fencing ([see here](#)). Whether or not Balmoral or the other estates covered by the Section 7 Agreement at Caenlochan reach that target deer density by 2026, as NatureScot claimed they were on course to do earlier this year, is irrelevant: there is no chance of the land recovering until deer densities are much much lower than that.

One need look no further than Bachnagairn and Balmoral to understand the failures of deer management in Scotland since the creation of the Scottish Parliament. Just like in Victorian times, where the Royal Family lead, most other sporting estate landowners follow. Why, when the Royal Family fail to act and get away with it, as at Bachnagairn, would any other sporting landowner take reducing deer density seriously?

Most MSPs appear completely unaware that one of the recommendations of the Deer Working Group was that the Scottish Parliament should investigate why NatureScot's Section 7 agreement at Caenlochan had failed year after year and why NatureScot failed to use its compulsory powers. The Royal Family's management of Balmoral should be central to that and a parliamentary inquiry needs to happen BEFORE the Scottish Government introduces any new legislation to control deer numbers.

MSPs could also usefully ask why the Cairngorms National Park Authority has failed to speak out about this scandal but instead has been bunging more public subsidies ([see here](#)) to one of the richest landowners in the country.

If you have not watched it Channel 4's Dispatches programme on the large amounts of private income the Royal Family raise from the Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster it is well worth viewing ([see here](#)). King Charles could easily afford to manage Balmoral for conservation purposes, following the example of the NTS and the estates in Cairngorm Connect, while continuing to stalk some deer and shoot some grouse but that would mean accepting smaller game bags. Its the number of birds and animals that are available to be shot year after year which drives Balmorality.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. landed estates

5. NatureScot

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