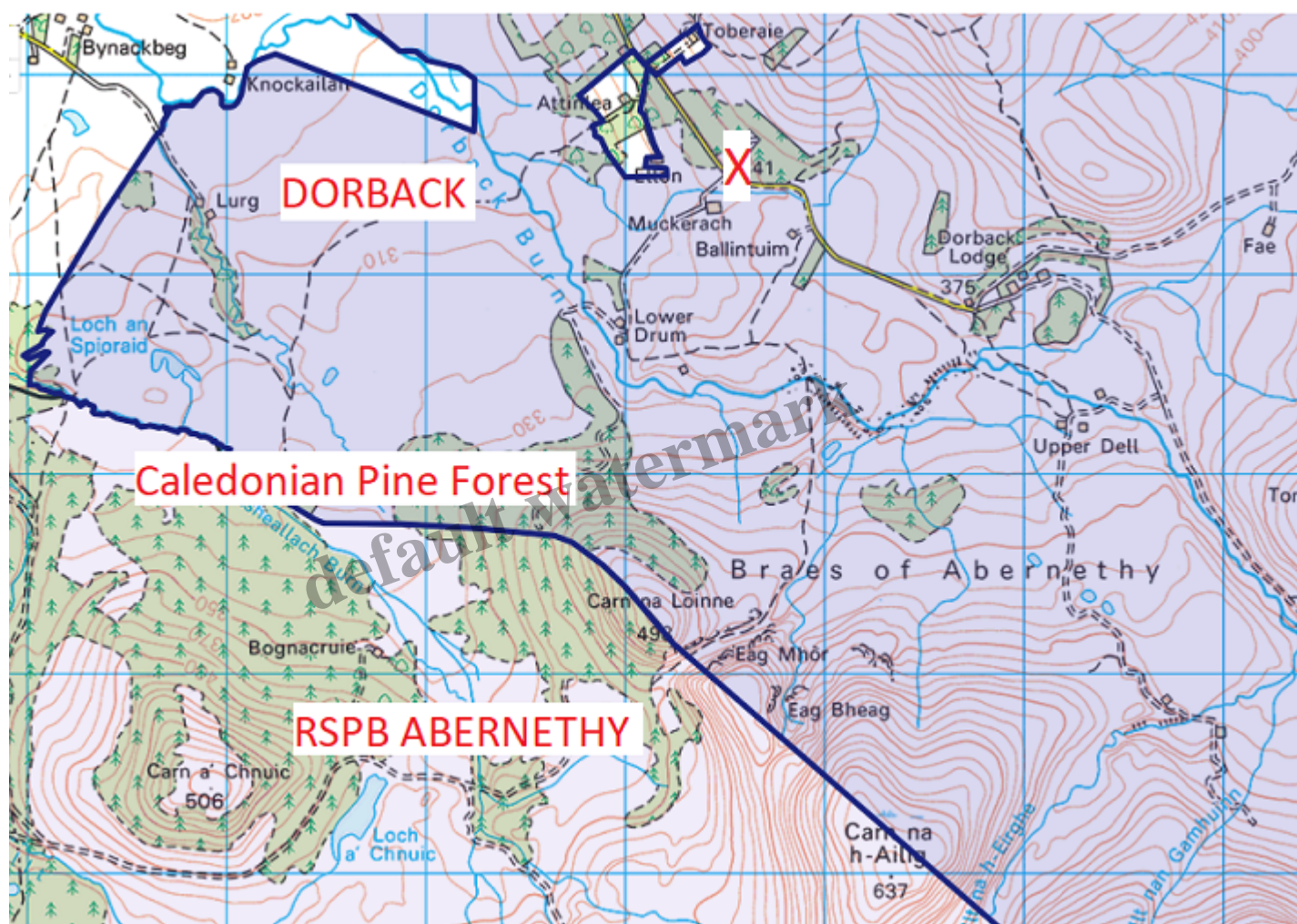


What's really killing capercaillie at Dorback in the Cairngorms National Park? Not walkers but deer fences.

Description



The blue line shows the boundary of the Dorback Estate. Map credit Who Owns Scotland. We started our walk near Muckerach at the point marked X.

On New Year's Day I went with Dave Morris for a short walk on the Dorback Estate which had previously been managed primarily for sporting purposes. The estate had been owned for the last four years by Salingore Real Estate Ltd, registered in the Bahamas, but at the end of 2024 was bought by Oxygen Conservation ([see here](#)) who are saying they want to plant trees and sell carbon credits ([see here](#)). The southwest boundary of estate marches with the Abernethy National Nature Reserve owned by the RPSB and includes an area recorded on the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory ([see here](#)).



Looking towards Abernethy from Dorback

We had walked less than a hundred metres when we came across this unlawful sign asking people to stay on the path and keep their dogs under close control from April till August. What the Scottish Outdoor Access Code actually states is “Access rights apply off-path, but when you are close to houses or in fields of crops or in places where the environment is particularly vulnerable to damage, it may (my emphasis) be sensible to follow paths and tracks where they exist”. It also advises “keep dogs under close control from April till July”, the bird breeding season. The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project recommended extending this period till August so they may have been responsible for erecting this sign: if so they somehow failed to notice the almost unmarked killer deer fence on the left side of the track.



This fence was less than one km from the small area of Caledonian Pine Forest which lies within the Dorback Estate. Young caper are known to disperse up to 11km from the nest.

If it was not for the plastic markers, the fence would have been almost invisible to the human eye and almost certainly would be to any young capercaillie dispersing from the Abernethy Forest in search of their own territories. The deer fence extended along the strip of farm woodland to an area of newish native tree planting



One of the justifications for planting native trees like this, as Oxygen Conservation say they wish to do, is that it will create new habitats for birds like capercaillie. Unfortunately, the single most important proven cause of premature capercaillie mortality is collision with unmarked deer fences ([see here](#)) such as those in these photos. Without the posts the fence would be almost invisible to the human eye but our brains can deduce what is in-between. There is no evidence birds can do so.



Much of the area on the right side of the burn is recorded in the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory. Note the spruce plantation at the top of the bank

As we walked up the Dorback it was good to see that the Caledonian Pine Forest was regenerating successfully and had expanded across the burn. That is an indication that the previous owners had successfully reduced grazing pressure and that there is no need for planting. Unfortunately further expansion of the Pine Wood is blocked by the spruce plantation at the top of the bank. The good news for the Caledonian Pine Forest is Oxygen Conservation have stated “any species considered non-native will go”.

The current rules are that there should be no planting of non-native trees within a 500m buffer zone around woods recorded in the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory. It looks as though those rules were breached here but we clearly need much larger “extension” zones, such as the whole of the catchment of the Dorback, which preclude any planting if the Caledonian Pine Forest is to expand significantly and provide habitat for birds like capercaillie.



Among the regenerating broom on the bank were a number of Scots Pine

Further along the plantation at the top of the embankment changed from spruce to native trees and another section of unmarked deer fence became visible. With the Caledonian Pine forest just a few hundred metres away on the other side of the burn any dispersing capercaillie to this area are likely to be decapitated.



Dead grouse by new deer fence in the Southern Highlands. Photo credit Prof Douglas MacMillan

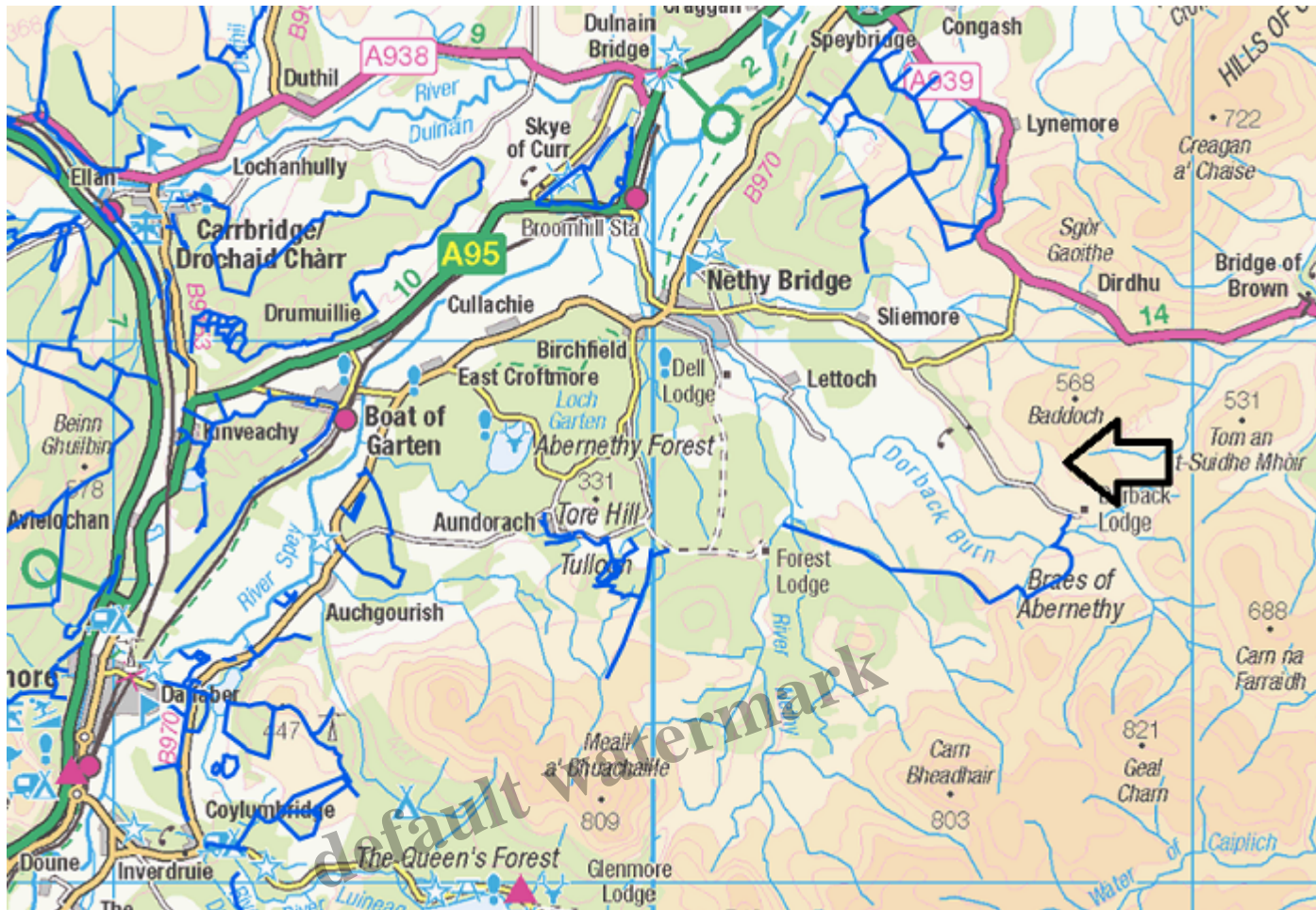
A few days after my walk I was sent this photo by Dougie MacMillan, a parkswatch contributor, who thought this grouse had died after colliding with the fence on the other side of the track. Few people ever come across evidence of these collisions because carrion eaters get there first. Perhaps part of the reason for the recent decline in red grouse numbers is that they, like capercaillie, are flying into the deer fences that Scottish Forestry is paying to have erected around most new forestry carbon offsetting projects?



View back to Carn na Loinne, the hill on the right, and Carn ha h'ailrig, the hill left of centre which mark the boundary between Dorback and RSPB Abernethy showing the pinewood regeneration on this part of the Dorback Estate.

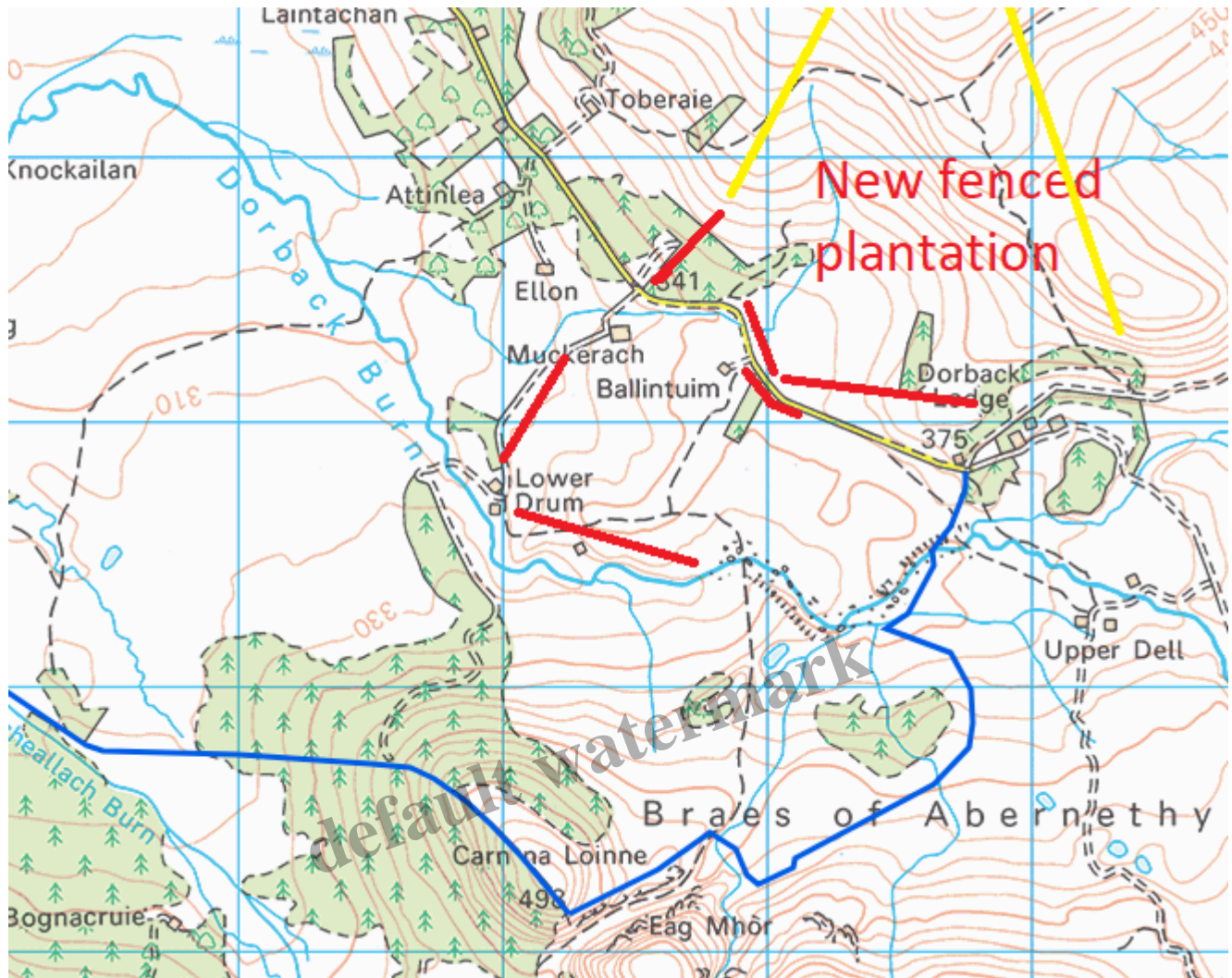
Abernethy pioneered the removal of deer fences after their staff, Desmond Dugan and Ron Summers, and others conducted research in the 1990s showing the number of capercaillie being killed in collisions each year. The numbers were horrific, over one capercaillie dying for every km of deer fencing each year. RSPB immediately began removing deer fences and experimenting with marking them to make them more visible. Further research showed that prominent marking reduced capercaillie mortality through collisions by about two thirds, less than that for other species.

The continued risk of marked fences to capercaillie is why RSPB's Abernethy reserve is now free of deer fences except along the march with Dorback. The reason for that fence is that the land title contained a number of burdens (conditions) to maintain fences and up till now RSPB has never got agreement from the previous owners to remove it. This fence is shown on the Capercaillie Project's map of deer fences in the Cairngorms (below the black arrow):.



Black arrow points to area of deer fences recorded in this post, the blue line below to the deer fence part of which

The map shows the rest of Abernethy and Dorback as fence free by contrast to the area around Carrbridge and Aviemore which is covered in blue lines. The Capercaillie Project's fence map ([see here](#)) was an important initiative but since becoming interested in the impact of deer fences on wildlife, I have realised there are far more fences around Strathspey than were ever recorded on the map. My short walk on Dorback provided further evidence of this:



Extract from capercaillie project deer fence map showing just one fence for Abernethy and Dorback (in blue). The red shows the approx position of the other deer fences on Dorback I walked by and the yellow the possible line of the boundary fence round the new plantation.

Why the Capercaillie Project didn't obtain accurate maps of all the deer fences that had been paid for with public funds from Scottish Forestry is unclear. However, had they done so the problem posed by deer fences might have been impossible to ignore. Instead, the Cairngorms National Park Authority's Capercaillie Emergency Plan treats deer fences as just one factor among others – like walkers! – which are leading to the extinction of the capercaillie for the second time in Scotland ([see here](#)). It includes a budget to remove/mark fences of £790k in the next two years which is clearly far too small – but what price saving the capercaillie from extinction?

The situation at Dorback helps demonstrate that one of the last surviving strongholds of the capercaillie at Abernethy cannot disperse anywhere without having to cross deer fences. And the research shows it is young capercaillie, those that are most likely to disperse, which are most likely to collide with deer fences. Capercaillie are almost certainly doomed unless we tackle this issue quickly.



Looking back to the pinewoods on Carn na Loine, the hill in centre, across another unmarked deer fence

Instead of waiting to decide what to exactly to do at Dorback, as they claim to be doing on their website, Oxygen Conservation should start removing all deer fences from their property now. They also need to reach early agreement with the RSPB that they no longer require the deer fence part of which runs along the boundary of the two estates. Most of the deer fences featured in this post could, with a bit of will, be removed before this year's capercaillie breeding season and, if that goes well, might allow some of the young capercaillie on Abernethy to disperse.

Along with this, of course, Oxygen Conservation will need to employ sufficient stalking staff to ensure deer density on the estate is kept at two or less per square km and that the removal of the deer fence does not result in higher deer numbers at Abernethy.



Above the road is a large new native woodland plantation surrounded by a deer fence.

While deer fences marked with wooden batons reduce bird collisions there has been NO research to show how far it at all marking them with thin bamboo canes, which catch the wind less and are cheaper, stops the carnage. The capercaillie population is now in such a perilous position, c500 individuals according to last year's survey, there is no excuse for Oxygen Conservation removing the fences around the plantation in the photo. Removing this fence will immediately attract in deer which is why Oxygen Conservation also need to employ a team of stalkers in addition to the existing estate staff named in the Scotsman article ([link above](#)).

The Oxygen Conservation website encourages people to criticise them ([see here](#)). Please use this to ask them to remove all deer fences and take on a team of stalkers to ensure the Caledonian Pine Forest and its wildlife can naturally expand through the Dorback catchment.

If we had proper National Parks, however, there would be no need for people to do that. In a proper National Park land would either be publicly owned or at the very least any private owner required to sign up to legally binding commitments before they could purchase land. A proper National Park would NEVER have allowed the new deer fence in the photo above. Having allowed the carbon offsetting planting disasters at BrewDog's Lost Forest, Muckrach and Far Ralia to go ahead without protest, the CNPA needs to speak out at Dorback and tell Oxygen Conservation that, with one of the most important remnants of Caledonian Pinewood spilling over onto their land, it is not appropriate to plant trees and that they should reduce deer numbers, remove deer fences and let nature do the rest.

For a further critique of the Capercaillie Emergency Plan Victor Clements wrote a very interesting post in November which was published on the Scottish Gamekeepers Association blog and is well worth reading ([see here](#)). Among the important points he makes is that the population of the capercaillie may

now be just too low to survive without being re-inforced from abroad, something discounted in the emergency plan – perhaps because the CNPA knows that any reintroduced bird would most likely end up dead by a deer fence!

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. forestry
4. sporting estates

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