

Why the Cairngorms National Park targeting outdoor recreation won't save the capercaillie

Description

Last week the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) issued a news release ([see here](#)) which started with the following statement:

Members of the Public are being advised not to use the following paths into Abernethy Forest from Glenmore and Nethy Bridge during early mornings (before 8.30am) over the next few weeks to avoid disturbing breeding capercaillie:

- Ryvoan Bothy to Forest Lodge path
- Vehicle access track to Forest Lodge
- Dell Road to Forest Lodge track
- Forest Lodge to Rynettin path

The Lek It Be campaign ([see here](#)), a product of the CNPA's Capercaillie Project advises that *From 1 April to 31 August, when capercaillie are breeding and raising their young, avoid capercaillie areas if you can, or stay on the main paths, avoid stopping and keep noise to a minimum.* Now the CNPA is advising the public to stop using those main paths before 8.30am, which represents a further attempt to restrict access rights.

This latest advice is likely to be counterproductive. The number of people normally walking these routes before 8.30am is small, but anyone desperate to see a capercaillie now knows where to go. The CNPA should have learned from what happened at Carrbridge ([see here](#)). My post on what happened there also contained a link to the Guidance for Responsible Capercaillie Watching. This advises the public in two places that if you come across a capercaillie, don't share its location! One wonders if volunteers will now be recruited, as at Carrbridge, to police the public?

The news release claims that capercaillie are easily spooked by people passing by, which can stop them from breeding. This claim appears based on the widespread general presumption that people always disturb wildlife. While there is evidence that people, and more particularly their dogs, can disturb capercaillie, whether they are easily spooked is another matter. Had the CNPA read the minutes ([see here](#)) of their very own Local Outdoor Access Forum held in March 2025 they would have seen evidence to the contrary:

AOB

- JG/AQSS/BOJ- Discussed rogue capercaillie near Ryvoan that has been reported as intimidating and at times attacking individuals in the vicinity. RSPB have moved signage correspondingly to advise visitors.

In their

informative book *“Grouse”* Adam Watson and Robert Moss estimated that *“perhaps one cock in a thousand loses his fear of humanity”* (P143). With capercaillie numbers now around 500 in Scotland that estimate appears rather low. The authors reported, however, that the peck of an irate cock can break the skin *“through a thick tweed jacket”* and *“a blow from his wings leaves a painful bruise”*. Rather than claiming capercaillie are *“easily spooked”* the CNPA might be better repeating the author’s advice:

“If you are attacked, stand on one leg and place the sole of your boot against this chest. He pushes against the boot in a trial of strength, but stops the pecking and buffeting, You can then hop an inelegant retreat”.

Capercaillie are actually doing very well at Abernethy, despite the visitors, with numbers reported to have increased 50% since 2020 ([see here](#)). After all the support the RSPB received from those visitors against the proposed telecommunications mast at Ryvoan ([see here](#)), it is disappointing that they still can’t bring themselves to trust the public.

While I have been critical of the Capercaillie Emergency Plan 2025-30 ([see here](#)), in a welcome move the CNPA have brought all the information relating to it together ([see here](#)). This includes information from the scientific advisory group. In July last year this considered the *“Capercaillie Integrated Population Model”* developed by Glasgow University ([see here](#)):

“The model currently incorporates covariates for diversionary feeding and fencing and predicts that the population is likely to recover if both are implemented effectively.”

This is a reference to the diversionary feeding scheme for pine marten, perhaps the most significant predator of capercaillie eggs and chicks, and the plan to remove all deer fences within 5km of a capercaillie lek. The important point is that reducing any disturbance by outdoor recreation is not seen as critical to the species recovery.

The minutes also record that *“It is essential that on-the-ground interventions are targeted where they will deliver the greatest benefit to the capercaillie population, and not just where there is proactive engagement from land managers.”*

One can understand why the RSPB, as a proactive landmanager, is keen to do whatever it can to increase capercaillie numbers further. The real issue, however, is not whether or not capercaillie numbers at Abernethy might have increased still further if there were fewer visitors. That is a complex issue because whatever the disturbance, people also help to keep predators like foxes on the move. The real issue is what happens when young capercaillie from Abernethy disperse from their natal

areas.

Research ([see here](#)) shows capercaillie disperse between 1-30 km, with the median distance being 11km. I have heard from two different sources reports of a capercaillie from Abernethy being found on Deeside downstream from Braemar. Within 11km of Abernethy there are many deer fences, the biggest proven killer of capercaillie. Despite that, the Capercaillie Emergency Plan only commits to removing fences within 5km.

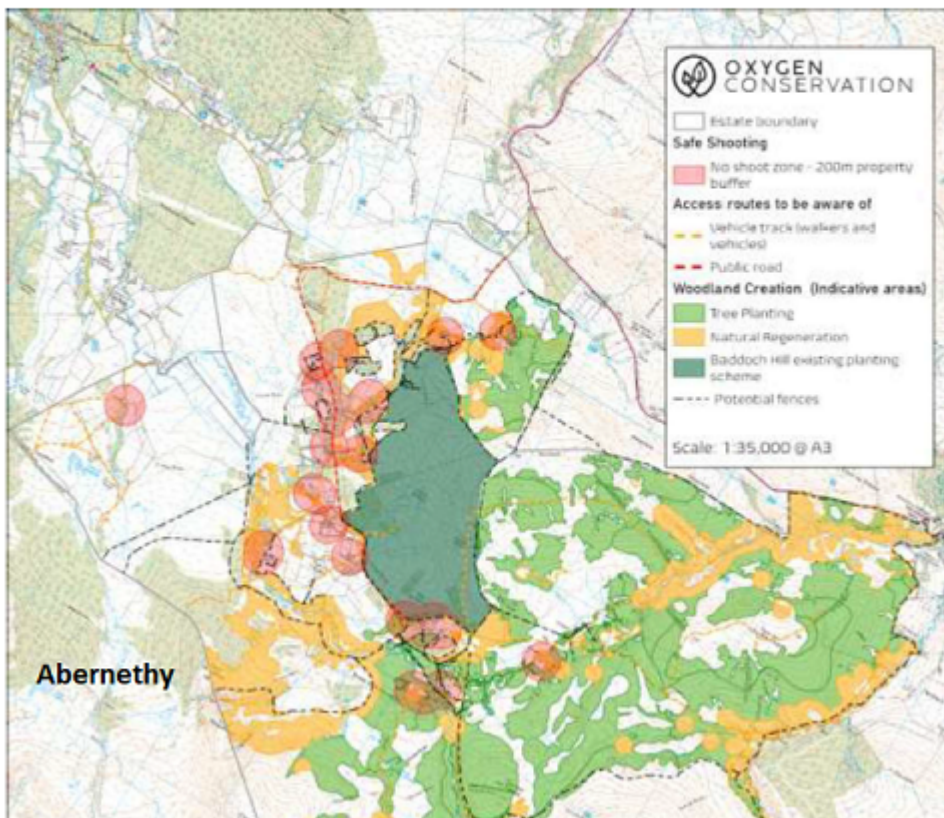
Fifteen months ago I wrote about the killer fences at Dorback, the estate on the northern side of Abernethy which was bought by Oxygen Conservation ([see here](#)). A few months later three of us went to meet OC staff and their woodland advisers, Tree Story, to ask them to remove the boundary fence. They were sympathetic â?? I donâ??t know whether they have acted before this breeding season â?? but were adamant new deer fencing would be required to protect the new woodland they were planning to plant.

In January, I obtained through an FOI request a copy of Oxygen Conservationâ??s Herbivore Management Plan (Implementation date 1st August 2025). The wording in the Plan is far from clear and the maps hard to read but the worst case appears to be that, whatever happens to the boundary fence with Abernethy, OCâ??s â??conservation managementâ?? will end up with the rest of Dorback being criss-crossed with killer fences:



11.3 Site Map of Non-shooting Zones AC/LS

Figure 7 - Dorback Safe Shooting Zones



Map of northern part of the Dorback estate. The dotted lines show potential fences but do not distinguish between which might be stock fences and which deer fences. This map is easier to read than the proposed planting map which is almost indecipherable. Credit OC Dorback Herbivore Management Plan.

The map shows most of OC's potential fences are less than 5km from Abernethy and well within the 11km capercaillie dispersal zone from existing leks. Although OC would no doubt mark the fences, that will only reduce the carnage, not stop it. The crucial conservation point is that the more young capercaillie Abernethy produces, the more that will garotte themselves at Dorback and on other estates in Strathspey while dispersing.

Rather than spending staff time and resources trying to deter walkers from visiting Abernethy, the RSPB and the CNPA would have more impact if they directed their attentions to OC and other such landowners (as per the minute of the scientific advisory group.) In the case of OC, they should be publicly calling on them not to erect ANY new deer fences at Dorback and remove all existing ecocidal deer fences at Dorback and the Lost Forest ([see here](#)) which they acquired last year.

The underlying problem here is political. It is far easier to blame the general public for the plight of the capercaillie, than tackle the landowners who are responsible for the erection of deer fencing and the loss of capercaillie habitat. Unfortunately, the CNPA has let itself become an integral part of that political problem.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. landed estates
5. outdoor recreation
6. visitor management

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