

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project

Meeting notes

A meeting with members of project staff and the 'local team' in Royal Deeside who have volunteered to support the delivery of the action plan to help capercaillie in the Deeside Forest.

Meeting date: 11 July 2022

Venue: Ballater Golf Club

Attendees: Carolyn Robertson (Project Manager, CNPA)
Elspeth Grant (Project Officer, CNPA)
Eric Baird (Head Ranger, Glen Tanar Estate)
Georgia Carrington (Seasonal Ranger, Balmoral Estate)
Glyn Jones (Head Ranger, Balmoral Estate)
Jocasta Mann (Communications Officer, CNPA)
Naomi Kaye (Project Coordinator, CNPA)

Apologies: Angus McNicol (Estate Manager, Invercauld Estate)
Dan Brown (Owner, Wild Discovery)
Ian Hill (Forester, Invercauld Estate)
Rachel Brown (Owner, Wild Discovery)
Richard Gledson (Factor, Balmoral Estate)

1. General update

On 31 May at the Victoria and Albert Halls in Ballater, Deeside residents, and people who work and visit the area, were invited to discuss and refine a new draft action plan to help capercaillie in Deeside. The presentation shared at the workshop and feedback received regarding the draft action plan is available at cairngormscapercaillie.scot/communities/deeside. Since the meeting the project has published a media release, picked up by the Deeside Piper, to raise awareness of the action plan and invite more people to get involved in its development and delivery. The project has also reached out to more stakeholders identified at the meeting in May. A number have responded and expressed interest in being involved. Meetings have also been scheduled, or are in the process of being scheduled, with landowners and managers in and around capercaillie areas in Deeside; businesses and organisations involved with managing for visitors in Deeside; and the Aberdeenshire Trail Association. The aim of these meetings is to discuss the actions in the draft plan and develop a more detailed programme of work and costs for the next 12 months.

2. Reflections and feedback so far

It was felt that the meeting on 31 May was positive; a wide range of people attended reflecting a variety of interests and generally there was a good level of support for the draft action plan and for additional work to complement and strengthen ongoing work for capercaillie in Deeside.

It was felt that there is a need to provide an overview, potentially in the form of a simple timeline, to enable greater understanding in the community regarding past and ongoing work to help capercaillie in Deeside and how that links with the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project. This may also help to provide a clearer rationale for the project's work in the area which is not necessarily about just doing more of what has or is currently being delivered for capercaillie. Instead, the project is focused on the social side of capercaillie conservation and involving more people to secure wider ownership of solutions, particularly around the issue of human disturbance. This is a key difference compared to lots of other work for capercaillie which has tended to be more ecologically focused.

A key piece of feedback from members of the community on 31 May was around the project's exit strategy and how to secure a legacy in Deeside in a relatively short space of time. The draft action plan is due to be delivered by July 2023. It was felt that it should be updated to include an action around legacy planning. The meetings scheduled over the next couple of months (see 'general update') will also enable a more detailed programme of work to be developed from July 2022 to July 2023 and this will help to define the exit point for the project.

The draft action plan includes an action to stay abreast of any approved recommendations in response to the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report about capercaillie conservation and management, and to explore if and how recommendations could be incorporated into the action plan. At the meeting on 31 May observations were made about the top-down nature of the report and the community-led nature of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project and how these two approaches can work alongside each other. The greatest overlap between the report and the project is around human disturbance. Although the report provides top-down direction regarding the issue of human disturbance and creating nature refuges in response, the advice from NatureScot and CNPA is that the mode of delivery for refuges should build on the community-led approach of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project.

The draft action plan includes an action to deliver frequent volunteer work parties to help improve and expand habitat for capercaillie. Another key piece of feedback was the need to recruit more local residents and forest user groups, e.g. ramblers, mountain bikers, to volunteer. It was felt that the impact would be greater if volunteer work parties not only improved conditions for capercaillie, but also provided an opportunity to raise awareness and develop understanding amongst local residents and forest user groups.

3. CaperMap

A first version of the CaperMap was explored. The map includes capercaillie data and formal and informal paths. It has been developed as part of the action plan to enable the identification, development and delivery of management options to reduce disturbance in specific areas. It was felt that it would be helpful to add mountain bike trails to the map and to have capercaillie data available in layers according to year, so the most recent capercaillie data can be viewed in isolation. The latest National Survey data, available in September, will also be included in the map and will be viewable as a separate layer. The CaperMap will be explored in more detail in August at a meeting with landowners and managers in and around capercaillie areas in Deeside and with the Aberdeenshire Trail Association. All feedback on the map will then be collated and the map will be updated in response. Guidance also needs to be developed to ensure the map is used appropriately and only for the purpose for which it was designed. A public facing version of the map that does not include capercaillie data could be developed if needed.

4. Ways of working and next steps

It was felt that a natural next step for the 'Deeside Team' is to come together again once all other initial meetings have taken place with landowners and managers in and around capercaillie areas in Deeside; businesses and organisations involved with managing for visitors in Deeside; and the Aberdeenshire Trail Association. At that point the Deeside Team will be able to review and discuss a more detailed programme of work for the next 12 months; to flag and help to work through any associated issues; and to act as a 'critical friend' to the project to strengthen delivery and help to secure success.