

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project Project Board - Meeting Notes

Meeting date: 23 June 2022, 13.00 - 15.00

Venue: Teams

Attendees: Carolyn Robertson (Project Manager, CNPA)
Claire Smith (Senior Conservation Officer, RSPB)
Debbie Greene (Operations Manager, NatureScot)
Doug McAdam (CNPA Board member)
Will Anderson (Chief Executive, Seafield and Strathspey Estates)

Apologies: Adam Smith (Independent)
Andy Ford (Director of Nature and Climate Change, CNPA)
Priscilla Gordon-Duff (Independent)

1. Actions from previous meeting

The actions listed below from the previous meeting were all completed:

- Develop a proposal for a project extension based on the project activities which will not be completed by 30 July 2023 and those which would benefit from more time.
- Develop a plan for working with the dog walking community from July 2022 - July 2023.
- Work with the Carrbridge Capercaillie Group to identify a way forward in response to the Project Board's feedback on the draft 2022/23 Action Plan for the Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy.

2. Review project progress (April - June), risks and issues

A Highlight Report was reviewed detailing the project's activities from 1 April to 30 June. Progress across several areas of work was discussed:

The grant scheme for habitat improvement received four applications in the latest and final round. All the applications have been approved.

The Carrbridge Capercaillie Group have revised the Carrbridge Action Plan for 2022/23 in response to feedback from the Project Board. The revised plan was discussed and approved. It was agreed that it is in scope and in keeping with the Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy and the project's Approved Purpose.

An open workshop in May to discuss and refine the draft action plan to help capercaillie in Deeside was attended by a wide range of people who live and work in Deeside. There was a good level of support at the workshop for the action plan which stands to complement and strengthen existing work for capercaillie in Deeside.

Recruitment is now taking place for a part time Business Engagement Officer to join the Cairngorms Business Partnership team as part of the Business Community Action Plan. The Business Engagement Officer will provide dedicated and tailored support to help businesses across the Cairngorms National Park excel in promoting responsible enjoyment that will enhance visitor experiences and benefit the natural heritage of the National Park, including capercaillie.

The long-term goal of the project's work with the dog walking community is to enable more positive outdoor experiences in Badenoch and Strathspey for residents and visitors with dogs, that also enables wildlife in the area to thrive. It was agreed that during the lifetime of the project the work should focus on achieving two outputs; a 5-year programme of actions, representative of the dog walking community's views, for delivery post-project led by CNPA; and at least one action from the programme delivered and evaluated by the project related to disturbance of capercaillie by dogs. Progress towards the agreed outputs will begin in July when a range of canine professionals operating in and around the Badenoch & Strathspey area, including dog walkers, trainers, clubs, dog parks, vets and individuals who work dogs and rely on assistance dogs, will be invited to share their views through listening sessions conducted by an independent third-party. The aim of the listening sessions is to begin to identify the key issues and themes at play for the resident dog walking community in Badenoch and Strathspey.

Attention was drawn to the revised timelines for the genetic diversity research. The final report will now be available in October, slightly later than planned due to issues including sourcing lab equipment because of the pandemic. It was noted that the National Survey results are scheduled to be available in September and the revised capercaillie population estimate commissioned as part of the Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy is expected to be published later this year.

The tender for developing and producing learning resources to help more primary school pupils and their teachers to learn about capercaillie was not awarded due to a lack of response. It can be re-issued this autumn. Organisations that may be interested were suggested. An alternative option for delivering the work is also being explored with the Cairngorms 2030 project which is in the process of scoping ways to help schools in the National Park take climate action.

3. Review the case and budget for a project extension

It was agreed in the previous Project Board meeting that a decision should be made as to whether to seek a project extension. The project's delivery phase began in July 2020, four months after the first national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The restrictions introduced in response to the pandemic have created multiple issues for the project over the last two years. Progress has still been made across all areas of work, but the pace has been slower than originally scheduled. In response, and with 12 months of the delivery phase remaining, an initial proposal

for an extension was reviewed and discussed. The project's projected underspend would finance the proposed extension. The request to NLHF would therefore be for additional time only. It was felt that the initial proposal provided a clear case for more time to complete work delayed by the pandemic and if granted, an extension would also provide opportunity for additionality. It was therefore agreed that a conversation should be initiated with NLHF regarding a proposed extension to the project's grant expiry date. The current grant expiry date is July 2023.

Specific action points were raised related to the project extension proposal. These have been captured in the actions on page 4. It was also recommended that the risks in the Highlight Report should be updated to include the following: reduced capacity in the last 12 months of the project due to staff leaving fixed-term posts early to secure future employment; and reduced ability to deliver actions in the last 12 months due to time constraints and contractor availability.

4. Update and overview of how the project is being evaluated

A presentation was shared by Ann Nicol from Heritage Pathfinder and discussion followed about the project's Evaluation Framework and Toolkit which is designed to measure and present findings as evidence of the extent to which the project is achieving / has achieved what it set out to do; track the differences the project is making to people, heritage and communities; and capture lessons learned and support the sharing of these with others for their benefit. A workshop for project and partner staff, facilitated by Ann, is planned for early August to focus in more detail on using the Toolkit to assist the monitoring of ongoing work.

5. NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report regarding capercaillie conservation and management

It was confirmed that Ms Lorna Slater MSP, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity will be briefed in July / August regarding the report. The briefing will incorporate the recommendations and advice from the NatureScot and CNPA Board discussions in response to the recent stakeholder consultation about the key areas for action outlined in the report.

The greatest overlap between the report and the project remains around human disturbance. Although the report provides top-down direction regarding the issue of human disturbance and creating nature refuges in response, there is alignment amongst stakeholders that the mode of delivery for refuges should build on the community-led approach of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project. This is a positive legacy for the project and will be considered as part of the project's legacy planning over the coming months.

6. Comms looks ahead July to September

Comms activities over the next quarter will include:

July: a media release will be published to raise awareness of the Deeside action plan and invite more people to get involved in its development and delivery; a short explanatory video about the pilot genetic lek survey will be published on the project Facebook page; direct contact will be made with members of the dog walking community inviting them to take part in listening sessions from late July.

August: a media release will be published to announce the successful applicants of the grant scheme and the work that will be delivered as a result to improve conditions for capercaillie; an article about capercaillie and the project will be published in the August edition of Birdwatch magazine; an end of season report about the trial signage in Carrbridge will be published on the project website; volunteer sessions to improve capercaillie habitat will be promoted from late August onwards.

September - the National Survey results will be published.

Actions:

1. Work with the Carrbridge Capercaillie Group to develop a detailed programme of work and communications for the approved 2022/23 Action Plan for the Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy. The programme of work should include a clear timetable for delivering the agreed actions and a meeting schedule for the group.
2. Update the project extension proposal to include all deliverables and confirm which will be funded centrally and which will be funded through community action plans.
3. Meet with NLHF to discuss the proposed extension to the project's grant expiry date.
4. Liaise with Seafield Estate re future and legacy plans for the Gamekeeper post funded through the project and employed by the Estate.
5. Liaise with Scottish Forestry and RSPB re Scottish Forestry funding for the Capercaillie Advisory Officer post once the project ends.
6. Liaise with Brook Forestry re the scope for short-term funding from the project for deer control in Tom an Uird Forest to potentially help to secure longer-term support for a whole forest approach to deer control in Tom an Uird.
7. Review the potential for additionality within the mountain biking community work once the MTB Recreation Management Plan for Badenoch and Strathspey has been assessed through the Habitats Regulations Appraisal.
8. Update the risks in the Highlight Report to include the following: reduced capacity in the last 12 months of the project due to staff leaving fixed-term posts early to secure future employment; reduced ability to deliver actions in the last 12 months due to time constraints and contractor availability.