

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project Operational Management Team - Meeting Notes

Meeting date: 5 October 2022, 13.30 - 15.00

Venue: Boat of Garten Community Hall

Attendees: Anne Elliott (Area Officer, NatureScot)
Carolyn Robertson (Project Manager, CNPA)
Joan Cumming (North Region Environment Advisor, FLS)
Keith Ballam (Business Engagement Officer, Cairngorms Business Partnership)
Ruari Watt (Highland Mountain Bike Development Coordinator, DMBinS)
Peter Ferguson (Biodiversity Manager, Rothiemurchus Estate)

Apologies: Ewan Archer (Head Keeper, Seafield Estate)
Mark Tate (CEO, Cairngorms Business Partnership)
Neil Wilson (Badenoch and Strathspey Trail Association)
Richard Gledson (Factor, Balmoral Estate)
Uwe Stoneman (Senior Site Manager - Abernethy, RSPB)

1. Review and discuss project progress July to September

A Highlight Report was reviewed detailing the project's activities from 1 July to 30 September. Good progress is continuing to be made across all areas of work. Additional detail was provided on the following areas of work:

- Another trial period ended in August for the seasonal signage developed last year as part of the Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy. The signage is designed to encourage responsible enjoyment in capercaillie areas around Carrbridge during the capercaillie breeding season. An End of Season Report on the trial signage is due to be published on the project website soon. Members of the Operational Management Team felt there was potential to do more work with Police Scotland to address the issue of birders and photographers ignoring the trial signs and, in light of the project's new work with the dog walking community, that scope also exists to increase the level of compliance with the signs by dog walkers, including professional dog walkers (See Actions, page 3).
- The visitor experience audit (part of the Visitor Action Plan) will provide recommendations for how the sites involved (Rothiemurchus, Abernethy and Glenmore) and their experiences can be refined, promoted and facilitated in the short to medium-term to make it even easier for all visitor segments to enjoy the sites responsibly, leading to long-term sustainable outcomes which stand to benefit both capercaillie and natural heritage more widely. One aspect of this work will involve developing a shared hierarchy of messages with the sites to trial, i.e. an order of messages that can be used consistently across the three sites to make it easier for visitors to enjoy the sites responsibly.

- A wide range of businesses attended a recent meeting in Ballater delivered in partnership with the CBP as part of the Deeside Action Plan. The visitor segmentation model was shared (produced as part of the Visitor Action Plan). There was particularly positive engagement with the idea of a Hapi Capi trail to help drive visitors to businesses and provide a unique talking point about responsible enjoyment in capercaillie areas. Work is progressing with Genoa Black, co-ordinated by the Business Engagement Officer. Genoa Black have been commissioned to develop and produce targeted, online content that businesses can share with their customers to promote responsible enjoyment that will enhance visitor experiences and benefit the area's natural heritage. Whilst capercaillie is very much the foundation and catalyst for this work, the intention is to also achieve far wider-reaching, positive effects. The online content will be available for businesses to use from March.

- The listening sessions with canine professionals (the first stage of work with the dog walking community) have revealed common ground within the project's scope. The online survey to seek views from the wider dog walking community will go live in mid-November.

- Members of the Trail Feathers group met recently to prioritise the actions to deliver by the end of the project. The actions (listed in the Highlight Report) all stand to help achieve the intended outcomes of the Trail Feathers project which are: a credible, visible and sustainable Trail Association; consistent, co-ordinated and relevant signage and trail information across the strath; and local and visiting riders aware of the plight of capercaillie and taking action to help. One of the priority actions to improve habitat in mountain biking areas requires specific input from landmanagers (See Actions, page 3). The MTB Recreation Management Plan was also discussed, specifically related to land managed by FLS and the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report (See Actions, page 3).

2. Update from Project Board

At the most recent Project Board meeting (September) a discussion was had about the fact that whilst all project activities need to be delivered, those that are proving to, or now stand to have the greatest impact and leave the greatest legacy should be prioritised for the remainder of the project. Priority activities could be given more resource, for example, compared to other activities which are likely to have a lower impact in the short to medium-term. Insights from the project's monitoring and evaluation work will be key to identifying the activities that should be prioritised and an interim evaluation report will be discussed with the Project Board and Operational Management Team in January to inform decision-making. In the meantime, it was agreed that an initial review should be conducted of all project activities to identify those that are proving to, or now stand to have the greatest impact; those that stand to leave the greatest legacy; those that need to be carried forward into the Spatial Strategy to be developed in response to the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report; and those for which there is an alternative pathway once the activity comes to an end within the project. The outcomes of this process will then be reviewed alongside the evaluation report and an updated programme of work for the project will be produced.

3. Legacy planning - identifying the project's priorities over the next 15 months

The members of OMT present felt that the following activities were important to prioritise over the next 15 months: Positive messaging on the ground towards dog walkers, to be delivered as part of the project's work with the dog walking community; Re-visiting options for facilitated opportunities for people to see capercaillie - to help reduce reckless and intentional disturbance during breeding season; Developing with project partners a shared, strategic position on capercaillie conservation that helps to enable the future delivery of conservation, recreation and business ambitions and the successful development of a Spatial Strategy for capercaillie.

4. Update on the National Survey and NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report

A discussion was had about the national survey result and ongoing work, outwith the project, to begin developing a Spatial Strategy in response to the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee Report, consultation with stakeholders and CNPA and NatureScot Board discussions about the report. The national survey result strengthens the need for this work to continue at pace. The greatest overlap between the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee 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.

5. Comms looks ahead October to December

Comms activities over the next quarter will include: An end of season report about the trial signage in Carrbridge will be published on the project website; a newspost will be published to highlight some of the work delivered through the latest round of the grant scheme; volunteer sessions to improve capercaillie habitat will be promoted throughout the autumn / winter; the second in a new series of blogs will be published for people to learn more about members of the Project Board and the Operational Management Team - the blog will feature OMT member Neil Wilson from the Badenoch & Strathspey Trail Association; an online survey seeking views from the wider dog walking community will be published; the project will have a presence at the CBP conference and Scottish MTB conference.

Actions

1. Convene a meeting with Police Scotland and relevant partner and project staff to review the incidents of disturbance during the 2022 breeding seasons and develop a plan for the 2023 breeding season to include patrols of key sites; an updated protocol for lek surveys to enable a robust and consistent approach if members of the public are encountered during lek surveys; Procurator Fiscal and Police training on the issue and impact of disturbance.
2. Work with the dog walking community to scope the idea of a 'Wildlife Friendly' accreditation for responsible dog walking services to help customers (dog owners) make more informed choices when using dog walking services.

3. Scope positive on-the-ground messaging towards dog walkers as part of the project's work with the dog walking community.
4. Re-visit options for facilitated opportunities for people to see capercaillie to help reduce reckless and intentional disturbance during breeding season.
5. Develop with project partners a shared, strategic position on capercaillie conservation that helps to enable the future delivery of conservation, recreation and business ambitions and the successful development of a Spatial Strategy for capercaillie.