

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project

Meeting notes

Meeting date: 21 October 2022

Venue: Balmoral Estate

Attendees: Arthur Fernie (Mar Estate)
Carolyn Robertson (Project Manager, CNPA)
Fiona Robertson (FLS)
Glyn Jones (Head Ranger, Balmoral Estate)
Helen Gray (Capercaillie Advisory Assistant, RSPB)
Ian Hill (Forester, Invercauld Estate)
Malcolm Nicol (Ballogie Estate)
Mark Nicolson (Mar Estate)
Toni Watt (Birse Community Trust)

1. Update and overview

In May the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project invited Deeside residents, and people who work and visit the area, to discuss and refine a new draft action plan to help capercaillie in Deeside. The action plan was developed in response to the views of 768 Deeside residents and visitors. The aim of meeting landmanagers was to discuss the actions in the draft plan and begin developing a more detailed programme of work and costs for the next 12 months. An overview of the project was shared before exploring the actions in the draft plan in more detail.

2. Habitat suitability assessment

A discussion was had about the need to strike a balance between the project helping to deliver actions in Deeside that stand to benefit capercaillie in the short and long-term.

From a long-term perspective, it was suggested that an assessment of habitat suitability in Deeside would be a worthwhile exercise to add to the draft plan as it would help to inform reinforcement plans, if reinforcement becomes an option. It was noted that it has taken over 5 years to reinforce the wildcat population in Scotland since it was identified that the population was no longer viable. An opportunity exists for the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project to work with landmanagers in Deeside to commission an assessment of habitat suitability in Deeside to ensure that no time is lost if the project's genetic research identifies the need for reinforcement. The CaperMap (see overleaf) already includes some habitat data, so an initial desk-based assessment could be conducted using CaperMap, followed by ground-truthing.

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 proposed that the CaperMap is extended so all Deeside estates, including those outwith the Park boundary, that hold capercaillie are included. It was also confirmed that the national survey data would be inputted to CaperMap so it can provide the most up-to-date picture of capercaillie populations across the National Park, and beyond the Park boundary in Deeside.

A discussion was had about including other species data in CaperMap. This could potentially be achieved using existing data, for example, data available through the National Biodiversity Network. Predator and invertebrate abundance studies were also discussed although due to the time involved and the project ending in December 2023 it may not be feasible for the project to commission such studies.

4. Volunteering

The draft action plan includes an action to deliver frequent volunteer work parties to help improve and expand habitat for capercaillie in Deeside. So far volunteers have donated over 3,000 hours of their time to help capercaillie through the project. Lots of that time has been spent helping to improve and expand over 8,000 hectares of habitat, including on Balmoral Estate. Volunteers have been delivering a variety of tasks including fence marking, ditch blocking to restore forest bogs, ring-barking to increase insect abundance, removing spruce saplings to encourage Scots pine to grow and creating grit piles to encourage capercaillie away from tracks and trails. A number of landmanagers present expressed interest in working with the project to deliver volunteer sessions on their land.

5. Staying in touch

It was noted that there is room to improve communications related to capercaillie in Deeside. For example, some landmanagers present had never seen an overview of lek results in Deeside before the project shared them in advance of the meeting. The project will continue to share a summary of lek results on the project website for anyone interested to see.

The Black Grouse newsletter was discussed as a good example that the project could follow. It was felt that a similar Capercaillie newsletter could be useful, however it was also felt by some that the readership may be limited at the moment to those directly involved with capercaillie, e.g. landmanagers, and in the short-term other communication methods, e.g. periodic online meetings, may be more effective as it allows for more dialogue and people to ask questions etc. It was agreed that the project would take forward the idea of a regular online 'Capercaillie Catch-up'