

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project Operational Management Team - Meeting Notes

- Meeting date:** 28 June 2023, 13.30 - 15.00
- Venue:** Hybrid (Park Authority office, Grantown-on-Spey and Teams)
- Attendees:** Anne Elliott (Operations Officer, NatureScot)
Carolyn Robertson (Project Manager, Park Authority)
Ewan Archer (Head Keeper, Seafield Estate)
Joan Cumming (North Region Environment Advisor, FLS)
Keith Ballam (Business Engagement Officer, CBP)
Peter Ferguson (Biodiversity Manager, Rothiemurchus)
Richard Gledson (Factor, Balmoral Estate)
Ruari Watt (Highland Development Coordinator, DMBinS)
Uwe Stoneman (Senior Site Manager - Abernethy, RSPB)
- Apologies:** Mark Tate (CEO, CBP)

1. Review and discuss project progress April to June

- The Carrbridge Capercaillie Group are continuing to make good progress delivering the Carrbridge Action Plan for 2022/23 with all actions due to be delivered by September.
- RSPB have installed a remote camera in Abernethy to provide video footage of a dust bath (root plate) used by capercaillie. The footage will be streamed into the Nature Centre and online via the RSPB YouTube channel in the coming weeks. The camera has been installed as part of the project's work with the visitor community which aims to provide high quality, sustainable visitor experiences alongside thriving capercaillie areas.
- A number of trail cameras are also in place in Abernethy to monitor capercaillie activity. A discussion was had about whether these cameras would still be in place in August and could be used as a way to count broods.
- As part of the Trail Feathers project, two Trail Academies have been successfully delivered on Seafield Estate by the Badenoch and Strathspey Trail Association. Over 10 local riders aged 12 to 18 attended the Trail Academies to learn about developing trails in a more sustainable and responsible way under the guidance of a professional trail builder and through hands-on experience. Three more Trail Academies are scheduled for the coming months in different locations in Badenoch and Strathspey.
- The Badenoch and Strathspey Trail Association have been invited to speak about the Trail Feathers project at the UCI Mountain Bike Downhill World Cup in Fort William in August. This is really positive opportunity for the Trail Association to raise their profile and share some of their learning with the wider mountain biking community in the UK and beyond.

- Recruitment is currently underway for a 5-month part-time paid intern to enable the dog walking community in Badenoch and Strathspey to make more rapid progress towards their vision of a 'Dog friendly Cairngorms where wildlife can thrive'. The successful intern will help to scope plans to create and develop a series of free, welcoming and accessible dog-friendly exercise spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey. It was noted that dog-friendly exercise areas have been provided by Seafield Estate, but the estate has experienced issues with the management of those spaces, e.g., dog walkers not picking up dog poo and now the spaces are less well used.
- Work commissioned by the Cairngorms Business Partnership is ongoing with agency Genoa Black to produce targeted, positive and engaging online content for visitors that promotes behaviours that will be of benefit to the area's natural heritage, including capercaillie. The final draft assets were reviewed. It is currently felt by the Project Board that not all the assets meet the brief, but they could do with some relatively minor amends. Genoa Black are in the process of responding to this feedback.

2. Overview of the genetics research and next steps

- Analysis of the genetic diversity of the capercaillie population in the National Park is now complete and an online drop-in event with RZSS is scheduled for Wed 12 July for project partners and other interested parties to learn more about the research and findings. The session will be recorded for those who are unable to make it.
- The headline results from the research were reviewed. As available habitat, predation and human disturbance are still considered to be some of the main drivers of decline, a discussion was had about the value of translocation and what benefit it would have (and the feasibility of it) without further *in situ* management, and whether this was more of a priority.
- Concerns were raised regarding the recommendation to take birds from the genetic strongholds in Kinveachy and Abernethy to safeguard the genetic diversity in those forests. There was a feeling that taking birds from those forests could be counterproductive given the low numbers of capercaillie we have left.

3. Next steps for the project's Legacy Plan and wider work for capercaillie

- A workshop will be held on 16 August in Aviemore for all the stakeholders that attended the workshop last year in response to the report from NatureScot's Scientific Advisory Committee. The aim of the workshop is to develop more detailed plans for delivering short-term / emergency action for capercaillie from 2023 – 2030 focused on protecting and saving, and longer-term action from 2030 – 2040 focused on restoring and reconnecting.

- A discussion was had about how important it is that there is a smooth transition from the project to the next phase of work for capercaillie. Concerns were raised about the need to ensure that, where possible, continuity is maintained, e.g., in the case of keepers funded by the project. It was felt that there are lessons to be learned from the impact of the gap between the 'Urgent Conservation Management for Scottish Capercaillie' EU Life funded project, which ended in 2007 and the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project starting over 10 years later in 2018. Whilst significant work for capercaillie continued between 2007 and 2018, maintaining a coordinated approach is now key.
- Linked to this, a discussion was had about the strength of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project to bring people together with different views and how critical it is to maintain this. It was suggested that a lot could be learned from the facilitated work with Deer Management Groups that has enabled better working relationships between landmanagers regardless of views.

4. AOB

- Concerns were raised regarding the recent news published by FLS about lek count results on FLS land. The news was published without informing or involving the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, any project partners or the Park Authority. As such, there was a strong feeling that FLS had not acted in the spirit of the partnership.
- The next Operational Management Team (OMT) meeting in September will be the last OMT meeting before the project ends. It was agreed that a final meeting will take place in January with the Project Board. That meeting will be focused on reviewing the project's final Evaluation Report which will be shared in December.
- It was noted that the Capercaillie Advisory Officer is leaving the project in August and work is underway to manage this change.

Actions:

1. Uwe to confirm whether the trail cameras in Abernethy will still be in place in August and could be used as a way to count broods.
2. Carolyn to arrange a meeting with Ewan and the new dog walking community intern (once in post) to learn from Seafield Estate's experiences with dog-friendly exercise areas.
3. Carolyn to take forward the idea of learning from the facilitated work with Deer Management Groups to aid coordinated work for capercaillie post project.
4. Joan to follow-up the concerns raised regarding FLS comms.