

# OH DEER!

The landscape in this area has been managed by humans for hundreds of years. For most of that time cattle farming was the main activity. The change from cattle farming to sheep farming happened all over the Highlands in the 1800s. At this time many farmers were evicted from the land to make space for sheep. This period is known as 'The Clearances'.

Glencanisp Lodge was built in 1850 as a farmhouse for the new sheep farm established on the estate. By 1881 the farm had become Glencanisp Deer Forest and deer stalking remained the main interest for the various owners until a community buy out of the estate in 2005.



The Assynt Foundation was set up to complete the community buy out of Glencanisp and the neighbouring Drumrunie estate. Assynt Foundation bought the estates on behalf of all the people of Assynt in 2005 after raising the £2.9 million needed with help from the Scottish Land Fund / Big Lottery Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Tubney Charitable Trust, the John Muir Trust and many donations from individuals to the Assynt Foundation appeal.

One of the aims of the Assynt Foundation is to return the land to good health, enrich biodiversity and enhance the experience of visitors through positive management of plants, animals and humans. If you had visited this area 4000 years ago it would have looked very different with fewer peat bogs and a lot more trees. Assynt Foundation is keen to increase the number of trees through natural regeneration and allow small woods to join up and create a woodland 'network'. This means the management of deer is still an important aspect of life here at Glencanisp, because deer like eating young trees which can affect the growth of the wooded area.

You are standing in the old deer larder for Glencanisp Lodge. This is where deer were brought after they had been shot. Carcasses were hung for up to three weeks (depending on the weather) to allow the meat time to become tender and acquire a more 'gamey' flavour. If you look up you can still see the hooks that were used.



Traditionally people employed to manage the deer on the estate would have used ponies to carry the carcasses home and some estates still do. Here at Glencanisp you are more likely to see all terrain vehicles carrying the carcasses back to the larder. The building to the side of this one is the new larder. It was built to comply with current food preparation regulations.

Deer are wild animals, they are not domesticated like sheep or cows. There are three types of deer in the Highlands: red, roe and sika deer. The deer you are most likely to see in this area are **red deer**.

Male red deer are called **stags**. They are the ones that have antlers and look very majestic when you see them. The females are called **hinds**. For most of the year stags and hinds don't spend any time together. Herds of hinds can be **hefted** or loyal to a particular area. This means that they are usually found within the same area most the time. Stags move around a lot more. During the mating season, called the **rut**, the dominant stags will round up their herds of hinds who will follow them wherever they go.



If you are out walking during the rut (from the end of September to early November) you can often hear the stags **roaring**. Though it's more of a loud bellow than a roar like a lion. You might also see or hear the stags fighting over groups of hinds, clashing their antlers and barging each other. The winner gets to add the loser's hinds to his herd.



Deer will often go to the same area of ground at the same time of year. For instance, during the summer they go up into the hills; perhaps to catch a breeze to keep the midges away. In the winter months they come back down to the lower ground where it is more sheltered. So you are more likely to see deer by the roadside in winter.

Apart from humans deer no longer have any natural predators. If left alone their numbers will increase and soon there will be too many for the land available to support. Sadly, what happens then is that deer starve to death in the winter when the food supply is limited. A responsible land manager has to cull some deer to make sure that the food available can sustain the rest all year round. If there is enough food then the deer are healthier and grow bigger, and the calves are more likely to survive their first winter.

One way of ensuring there is more food available is to have more woods. How to expand woods yet still maintain a healthy deer herd is a balancing act that many land managers have grappled with over the years.

There are two ways to allow more trees: one is to plant them, the other is to let them grow by **natural regeneration**. Both methods can be achieved either with or without a fence but there are pros and cons to each approach. As young trees (**saplings**) are often eaten in preference to other plants deer numbers always need to be managed to give the trees the chance to grow.



Deer fences can help an area to recover from too many grazing deer and can be used to allow woodland to regenerate naturally or to protect planted trees. They are often put up around existing woods to keep deer out of an area where the land manager wants to plant trees or allow them to grow naturally. Once the fence is up the young trees (planted or hidden in the heather) are able to grow without being eaten. But what often happens is the heather grows too tall. Smaller plants below the heather then cannot get enough light.

more deer in the area outside the fence than before. So their numbers need to be reduced to stop too much grazing outside the fence, because there are more animals on less ground. This is called a **compensation cull**.

Fences can also be very visible in the landscape. Think of the views that you have seen on your drive here, then imagine a 2m high fence running through them. While it is possible to hide fences from some viewpoints, especially in this **cnocan lochan** landscape they also have an impact on access. Gates need to be put in at the right places so that people, such as walkers, can make use of them.

If a fence is not used there will still be deer in the area eating plants which include saplings. Getting the deer numbers right is key to getting more trees to grow without a fence. Natural regeneration of woodland can happen when the number of deer is small enough to allow saplings to grow unhindered. Ensuring the level of grazing is right so as to keep plants in check while keeping them healthy is a difficult balance to maintain. Too many deer and young trees will be eaten before they can grow. Too few deer and some plants will grow tall and 'shade out' the more fragile ones, just as can happen in your own garden.

If the numbers are right then the deer help prevent this, which means any saplings will get enough light. Often land managers will focus the culling of deer in the area that they want trees to grow. This keeps the numbers lower both by killing any extra deer and by scaring away the rest.

In many natural systems tree regeneration happens in pulses as the grazing demand naturally varies. Thickets of young trees grow around the edges of the older trees. Not all the new trees will survive so over a long time you get a woodland with trees of various ages. This kind of woodland will support a wide variety of animals and other plants.



There is a fine balance between deer numbers, the extent of a habitat, and how healthy it is. Getting this right is one of the hardest aspects of land management, especially as it can be many years before you know if you've got it right!

One day, when you visit Glencanisp, you might see a view like this: deer and trees in harmony.

Assynt Foundation is member of the West Sutherland Deer Management Group and works with neighbouring estates to manage the deer.

