

Deer stalking - a view from a 'non-elite' deer stalker

There are many reasons why a person may want to shoot deer, and perhaps as many reasons why that same person would rather not shoot deer. Hugh Chalmers explains how circumstances made him a deer stalker.

Deer stalking, especially for roe deer, is generally an individual pursuit, and the stalker has to have made many decisions well in advance of having a deer in the crosshairs of a rifle scope. Not the least of these is deciding that it is right to take a life. I am a deer stalker (it's like a confession to a therapy group) and would like to explain why. To the readers of this Journal, it may be obvious, in light of the current debate over the impact of high densities of deer on woodland regeneration in many parts of Scotland, but we know that there may be other ways of dealing with too many deer: by fencing them out, or perhaps we could wait for research on deer contraception. (It could be a long wait...)

However, in 2004, the issue of roe deer control became the number one problem at the Carrifran Wildwood in Moffatdale, in the Southern Uplands, where over 150 hectares of new native woodlands had been planted, protected only by 20-centimetre-tall vole guards and a fence to keep out sheep and goats, not deer. A deer fence was not practical as most of the fence would have been above 2,000 feet and exposed to extreme weather such as ice formation and collapse. From the outset, the Wildwood Steering group knew that we would need to cull deer, if (and only if) the amount of damage done became a threat to tree establishment. As Project Officer, I had arranged for some deer culling to be carried out, but with 660 hectares of valley to patrol, this was too much for one part-time deer controller. The Deer Commission for Scotland^[1] were very helpful, and advised us to put much more effort into deer shooting, and

would grant us licences for night and out of season shooting.

A price worth paying

Although deer control was obviously going to cost more than we had budgeted, the alternative was to risk total failure and the payback of a Forestry Commission tree establishment grant, which at around £1,000 per hectare, meant that the stakes were high - £150,000. A new culling regime included taking on an experienced, enthusiastic and very fit stalker to patrol the valley once a week, and to allow volunteer stalkers to look for deer too. In order to vet volunteers, I felt that it would be useful for me to get some experience, so I enrolled on a Deer Management Qualification Level 1 course at the local agricultural college. Once qualified and with some tutoring from more experienced stalkers, I too walked the valley once a week, armed with a high velocity rifle.

Thankfully, the high level of stalking effort at Carrifran has paid off, and though the deer cull averages around 25 per year, that seems to be enough to allow trees to become established, though we need to remain vigilant, with the first sika stag shot at Carrifran in November 2013. A group of around ten volunteers are signed up to assist and are coordinated by Borders Forest Trust.

So, circumstances made me a deer stalker. The motivation was to make sure one small valley in southern Scotland would be reforested. From the outset, like all deer stalkers I have spoken to, I felt a duty to take a life in a humane and respectful way. At this point, one could get misty eyed (not good when taking a shot!) and talk about apologising to the deer

for taking their life, and truthfully, I do not enjoy the act of killing. To kill a deer humanely is to place a shot in the right part of the deer (the chest). This is what deer stalkers aim to do every time. Wounding a deer is unacceptable.

Getting qualified

To be confident that this can be achieved safely every time is why knowledge, training and practice are required. There are many skills and attributes required, including a decent level of fitness, being able to move quietly through woods or hills, accurate shooting, firearms knowledge, knowledge of deer behaviour and biology, and being able to process the meat (gutting, skinning and butchering). Venison can be a very healthy part of our locally sourced diet, and this may be another big motivator for becoming a trained hunter.

Like operating a chainsaw or using a spreadsheet, deer stalking is not for everyone, but it is a very useful skill and one which we hope will be employed more, by more people, in controlling deer to maintain a healthy deer population whilst allowing tree regeneration and establishment. Starting from scratch, the first step would be to enrol on a Deer Stalking Certificate level 1 course^[2], organised by the British Deer Society (BDS) or the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)^[3]. The course covers deer biology and behaviour, the law (including calibres of rifle for deer), stalking techniques, safety and carcase inspection and has a written assessment and a shooting assessment. Ideally, a person would have spent some time with a deer stalker beforehand, and spent plenty of time 'stalking' with binoculars only.



After gaining the DSC1 qualification, which can be done in a few months, the next step would be to apply to the police for a firearms licence^[4], and this includes the requirement for a comprehensive police check, two referees and a good reason to own a rifle, and this usually means having permission to shoot deer on suitable land. By the end of this process the cost will be no less than £800, including a second-hand rifle and telescopic sights, gun cabinet and qualification. The local gun shop is your first stop. (Don't be put off by the camouflage and testosterone!) It may be preferable to have insurance, and this can be arranged through BDS or BASC. The DSC level 2 certificate is required to be able to shoot in most Forestry Commission sites, and this is a much more arduous process, with three witnessed stalks required by an accredited witness. It does show that a good level of experience has been built up over a few years.

Where to stalk deer

Finding a place to stalk deer may be the biggest challenge, though it may be as simple as asking your nearest community woodland if they need assistance in deer culling. It is possible to pay for stalking by the day, and for roe deer this may be around £100,

Above: Craigdilly stalker and deer.

while it would cost much more for a red deer stag (though I am not talking about trophy hunting in this article). Contracts to cull deer in large forests change hands for lots of money, but it may be possible to sub-let some days at low cost, particularly for culling roe does during the winter. Another good place to start would be the local Forestry Commission office, and have a chat with their wildlife manager. Publications such as the *Deer Stalking Handbook*, by Graham Downing (2008) provide a good background^[5].

Finally, the Scottish Natural Heritage Best Practice Guides^[6] are an excellent source of detailed and up to date information, and BDS local groups organise shooting range days where shooting accuracy can be refined.

Missing links

Deer stalking is a legitimate activity but in Scotland has a tarnished reputation, in that it is seen as an elite activity which persecutes 'Bambi'. We need to move on from such attitudes. Ecological restoration, including native woodland restoration, requires all the elements of the ecology to be present in order to work. It is a bit simplistic to say that as we have lost our natural deer predators, we can replace the lynx and wolf with the rifle. We will get recovery of

natural ecosystems, and woodland in particular, only if we take into account soil types (including soil disturbance), tree seed sources, herbivore density and climate. We already have a great Ecological Site Classification system^[7] to guide us, but if there is some element missing due to anthropogenic factors, then we will need to replace it. Perhaps another missing link for native woodland restoration is ground disturbance from pigs, elk and aurochs, but that is another story.

References

- ¹ www.dcs.gov.uk/Deer%20Management/default.aspx
- ² www.bds.org.uk/deer_stalking_certificate_1.html
- ³ <http://basc.org.uk/>
- ⁴ www.scotland.police.uk/about-us/finance/service-fees-and-charges/firearms/
- ⁵ Downing, G. (2013) *Deer Stalking Handbook* (3rd edition). ISBN: 978-1-84689-183-0
- ⁶ www.bestpracticeguides.org.uk/
- ⁷ www.forestry.gov.uk/esc

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