

Birse Parish Deer Management Group

Deer Hunting in Birse Parish - Historical Context

Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief historical background to current deer management in civil parish of Birse.
- 2 Birse parish covers 12,700 hectares (127 sq.kms) and is relatively well wooded, with around 33% tree cover overall. As the attached map show, these woodlands are concentrated in the northern half of the parish, which has over 50% tree cover, while the southern half of the parish is very largely open moorland.
- 3 There are populations of both Scotland's native species of deer, red deer and roe deer, in Birse parish. These are both naturally woodland species and most of the deer in the parish live in the local woodlands, although both species also occur in the open hill areas.
- 4 The parish with its extent of woodlands and pattern of other land uses, provides a favourable environment for both species of deer. One reflection of this is that an average of 500 deer a year have been culled in the parish over the last ten years, as part of managing the local deer populations.
- 5 Birse parish has always been a relatively well wooded area and has a rich cultural heritage associated with the history of its forests. As noted below, that history has also always included deer hunting.

Medieval Period¹

- 6 The ancient place name of 'Birse' means a well wooded area and there has been a continuous history of deer hunting in Birse since prehistoric time.
- 7 The first historical record to the area, which dates from over a 1,000 years ago in the 10th century, reports that the King of Scots, Kenneth 11, came hunting deer in Birse in 995 AD. His successor, Kenneth 111, is also recorded as having built two deer traps in Birse in around 1005.
- 8 Birse's history as one of Scotland's Royal Hunting Forests continued until the 12th century, when the Crown conveyed all the land of Birse to the Bishops of Aberdeen. This included the Forest of Birse with the Forests of Glencat and Glen Aven. These area were still wooded at that time and continued to be used for hunting by the Bishops, who had their hunting lodge at Easter Clune.
- 9 The Bishops of Aberdeen continued to own Birse parish and manage its Forest areas for 400 years until the Reformation in the mid 16th century. During that period, settlement and agriculture continued to expand in the north and east of the parish. In the early 1500s, the Bishops also reduced the area governed under Forest laws to just

¹ For more information on this period, see History in Birse (BCT, 2000), for example, page 88 et seq.

the Forest of Birse. At the time, for example, a third wood cutting offence was liable to the death penalty at the Bishop's court in the parish.

17th & 18th Centuries

- 10 The Forest of Birse still had extensive woodland at the start of the 17th century. This is shown on Gordon of Straloch's map of the parish from around 1630, with the woodlands appearing to fill most of the land up to around 450 m.² However, following the break up of the Bishops' land and disputes between the parish's new land owners over their shared rights in the Forest of Birse, the remaining woodlands in the Forest had been destroyed by 1650.
- 11 The loss of these woodlands and the continued expansion of settlement and agriculture in the rest of parish, meant that the amount of woodland in Birse during the second half of the 17th century was at its lowest level before or since. Similarly, while red and roe deer continued to survive in the remaining woodlands outside the Forest of Birse, their populations are likely to have been at their lowest level as well.
- 12 The end of the 17th century was also the historical low point in the survival of red and roe deer in Scotland more generally due to woodland loss and hunting. Red deer survived in relatively few locations outside the Cairngorms area of which Birse is a part. The distribution of roe deer was also restricted to the Cairngorms and some other parts of the Highlands.
- 13 There are thus relatively few areas in Scotland that have, like Birse, a continuous history of local populations of native red and roe deer and associated deer hunting since medieval times and pre-historic times.³
- 14 The area of woodland in the parish started to increase from around the beginning of the 18th century, and with it the local deer populations. While some of the pinewoods were enclosed to form 'plantations', local land owners were also planting an increasing number of new plantations. As part of this, the local deer numbers also increased
- 15 At end the 18th century, it was reported in the Old Statistical Account for Birse (1792) when noting the large area of natural and planted woodland in the parish, that red and roe deer *abound in our plantations, where the hind calves and brings up her young*". It also noted that "*These are troublesome to the husbandmen*".

19th & 20th Centuries

- 16 The area of woodland in the parish continued to increase during 19th century and, while open hill red deer stalking became fashionable amongst land owners, the predominantly woodland character of the local deer populations in Birse parish continued. This is reflected in the New Statistical Account for Birse (1842) which, when describing the parish's wildlife, noted "*and in the woods the roe and red deer.*"
- 17 However, in the first half of the 20th century, there was a significant reduction in the extent of woodland in the parish. This was due to fellings during the First and Second World Wars, as well as a lack of re-stocking locally between the Wars due to death

² The 450 ms contour is shown on the attached map.

³ The most recent 'prehistoric deer hunt' was in the 1990s, when a video was made in the pinewoods east of the Laird's Burn for the Archaeolink Visitor Centre. It showed an iron age hunter successfully hunting a (previously shot) red deer

duties and economic recession. The 1953 Gale also had a major impact on the local plantations still remaining after the Second World War.

- 18 By the 1950s, there were significant numbers of red deer living on the open hills in the south and west of the parish. The Red Deer Commission was involved soon after it was formed in 1959, for example, in issues over open hill red deer marauding on to farm land on the south side of Finzean.
- 19 During 1950s and 1960s, there was extensive re-planting of local plantations using mainly Scots pine. These new plantations were largely established using deer fencing to protect the trees from deer damage, and the local red deer population continued to survive mainly on the open hills in the south and west of the parish. The generally reduced numbers of deer locally following the war, also resulted in increasing natural regeneration of pine around the edges of the open hill area.
- 20 During the 1970s and 1980s, as the post war plantations matured and areas of self sown pinewoods became established, the numbers of red and roe deer in these woodlands started to increase significantly. At the same time, the numbers of red deer on the open hill started to be gradually reduced as part of managing these areas as grouse moor.
- 21 In the 1980s, the East Grampian Deer Management Group (EGDMG) was formed as a voluntary association to promote more cooperation and improved deer management, amongst land owners in the wide geographic area covered by the Group. The three main estates in Birse parish became members of the EGDMG and by the 1990s, they were reporting their annual red deer culls to the EGDMG and participating in the EGDMG's open hill deer count each spring.
- 22 During the 1990s, the numbers of deer in the parish's woodlands continued to increase and by the end of the 20th century, the deer in Birse parish were once again very largely woodland populations, with relatively few red and roe deer living on the open hill.

21st Century

- 23 During the last 15 years, there have continued to be relatively high densities of red and roe deer in and around the more than 4,000 hectares of woodlands in the parish, with relatively few deer in the open hill.
- 24 Since the start of the century, there have been significant improvements in local cooperation over local deer management and deer management planning. All the land owners with over 100 hectares of land in the parish are now members of the Birse Parish Deer Management Group (BP DMG). The Group's first Birse Parish Deer Management Plan covered 2009-14 and about to be succeed by a Plan for 2014-17.⁴
- 25 The average cull of 500 deer a year in the parish over the last 10 years reflects the on-going local effort to control the local red and roe deer populations, with only a small proportion of these deer shot as commercial let stalking with clients.

⁴ These Plans and the other papers and reports produced by the Group are available on the BCT website.



Birse Community Trust

Woodlands in Birse Parish and Land Above 450m

Scale 1 : 55,000 23/11/2014

Woodland types (woodland >0.5ha)

-  Native pinewood -self-sown
-  Native pinewood - self sown (low density)
-  Scots pine woodland - planted
-  Non-native conifer woodland
-  Native broadleaved woodland
-  Mixed broadleaved woodland
-  Land above 450m
-  Public road
-  Parish boundary

Sources: National Forest Inventory (2013); Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (2014)

