Supporting guidance for Deer Census – Helicopter Counts

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For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page .

Note: In September 2023, references to Scottish Natural Heritage and Natura Sites have been updated to NatureScot and European Sites respectively.

Helicopter counting provides deer managers with high quality information on deer numbers and their distribution over open range habitats in a deer range. Deer managers can use this information to set culls to benefit habitats and deliver management objectives over the deer range.

Plan the deer count with all land owners and land managers within the deer range. The deer range must cover land designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest or European site, which is in, or is at risk of falling into 'Unfavourable' condition. Land out with a designated site can be included in the count area where the deer presence and localised movement will impact on the designated site.

You must consult the relevant NatureScot Wildlife Management Officer to agree the area that the count will cover and the methods that will be used before submitting your application.

Helicopter count – © NatureScot

What needs to be done

Submit a deer census plan with your application and include the following information:

- a justification for why a helicopter count is required
- 1:50,000 map with 1:50,000 OS backdrop showing:
  - property boundaries
  - designated site boundaries
  - the areas excluded from count and reasons why (e.g. enclosed woodland)
  - the count area
  - the woods to be driven
  - the location of deer fencing
- the procedure you will follow for driving woodlands
- the proposed personnel to undertake the count
- a date range for the proposed count
- the proposed classification to be used
- details of the NatureScot Wildlife Management Officer who was consulted and advised on the plan

NatureScot Wildlife Management Officers can provide the expertise of the planning and delivery of a deer count.

Consider the following when planning a helicopter count:

- the count should be planned for a suitable weather window with adequate staff and helicopters to achieve a reliable census of the area planned. Each helicopter should have a navigator, a cameraman, a recorder and a spotter
- suitable natural boundaries if the count is to take place over multiple days to minimise deer movements
- classification should be agreed before the count and should normally be of stags, hinds and calves. You may wish to use cameras to record larger groups of deer to enable post-count classification
- the count team in each helicopter should have experience in counting and classifying deer
- the count co-ordinator should provide a report of the count and a map showing the results of the count within two months of the count taking place

Deer census – © NatureScot

Relevant management items

- Moorland Management

Relevant capital Items

- Upland Habitat Impact Assessment for Deer Management

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