

Access and stalking: background information

Purpose

This paper summarises the Forum's previous work to integrate access and stalking, to provide some wider context to discussion of the presentation about the Glen Lyon research project currently underway by researchers from the James Hutton Institute, Durham and St Andrews University. This may be particularly helpful for more recent members who may be less familiar with the work that the Forum has undertaken in this area.

Action: For information only.

Background

The National Access Forum has had a long-standing interest in the interaction between hillwalking and deer stalking, which was the key catalyst for the formation of the original Access Forum in the early 1990s, prior to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (LRSA). A great deal of relevant expertise has been developed since that time, which has been incorporated into the access legislation, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and more specific guidance on hillwalking and stalking.

As with access in other contexts, the Code sets out reciprocal responsibilities on hillwalkers and land managers (<http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/Practical-guide/Public/Deer-stalking-on-the-open-hill>), which are as follows.

Responsible behaviour by the public	Responsible behaviour by land managers
Deer management can take place during many months of the year but the most sensitive time is the stag stalking season (usually from 1 July to 20 October, but with most stalking taking place from August onwards). During this season, you can help to minimise disturbance by taking reasonable steps to find out where stalking is taking place (such as by using the Heading for the Scottish Hills service) and by taking account of advice on alternative routes. Avoid crossing land where stalking is taking place. Stalking does not normally take place on Sundays.	Be aware of where recreational use is likely, such as along paths, popular routes and ridge lines. Tell people about where stalking is taking place by using the Heading for the Scottish Hills service or by using signs and information boards (in accordance with this Code) to give on-the-day information on stalking and alternative routes.

This bilateral approach reflects the social, economic and environmental importance of both outdoor recreation and stalking.

It is worth noting that this guidance only applies to the stag stalking season. There is no expectation in the Code that hillwalkers will seek out information in advance during the hind cull, and communication during this period would normally take place on the day and according to need, in line with the approach taken for all other land management activities.

Previous NAF initiatives

The original pre-LRSA Access Forum considered access and stalking in some detail in the legal context of that time. Early landmarks included the Access Concordat, the *Heading for the Scottish Hills* publication and the *Hillphones* recorded message service – which were all underpinned by the principle of effective communication between hillwalkers and stalkers. These principles were carried forward into the access legislation which came into force in 2005 and the advice in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (as above).

A wide range of general guidance on access and visitor management has been developed by SNH and the Forum to support the access legislation. This has evolved over time to

reflect experience and address emerging issues and is available on the Code website (see <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/Access-management-guidance/visitor-planning> and <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/Access-management-guidance/signs>).

The Forum has also undertaken various lines of work to support the advice in the Code on access during the stag stalking season, and this has been guided by the same adaptive approach to reflect practical experience. The Forum established a stalking sub-group during 2008-2009, comprising representatives of all the relevant recreation and land management bodies, to develop more detailed guidance for land managers on stalking signage. This was subsequently expanded to cover all communication methods: http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/sites/default/files//docs/deer_stalking_and_public_access_-_guidance_on_stalking_communication.pdf.

This key guidance incorporates much established good practice, emphasising the importance of credible requests which apply for the minimum necessary time and area, are easy to comply with and are sympathetic to the needs of hillwalkers, maximising the likelihood of a positive response. Specific daily messages (in line with the Code) are likely to be most effective, but experience has demonstrated that this cannot always be achieved in practice. The guidance therefore includes sign templates for both daily and longer-term messages, which have been developed pragmatically to best meet the needs of both hillwalkers and stalkers.

Much parallel work has also taken place, with input from the Forum, to directly support communication between stalkers and hillwalkers. *Hillphones* was superseded in 2010 by a pilot online version of *Heading for the Scottish Hills* (HFTSH), in response to demand for a web-based service from both hillwalkers and stalkers. This has in turn evolved to reflect experience, in particular to reconcile the aspirations of hillwalkers with the level of information that land managers are able to provide, and to meet demand for the service to extend to a wider area. A simpler and more geographically comprehensive version of HFTSH was therefore launched in 2014 (<http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/Practical-guide/Public/heading-for-the-scottish-hills>), along with guidance for land managers which translates accepted good practice principles into this online context. This has been accompanied by complementary efforts by Mountaineering Scotland and SNH to promote responsible behaviour to hillwalkers during the stalking season, in particular by encouraging them to use this service.

Wider context

Current public policy continues to provide strong support for outdoor recreation and seeks to promote sustainable deer management for a wide range of public benefits. These are set out in *Scotland's Wild Deer – a National Approach* (WDNA), which provides a national vision for deer and their management and notes the need to encourage responsible outdoor access through provision of accurate and up to date information about stalking activity. This exchange of information is the only contact that most hillwalkers have with the stalking community, and in addition to its practical value, good communication therefore helps to convey a positive public image of the deer industry as a whole.

The Forum's work on access and stalking has been undertaken with a recognition that it will not be possible to completely eliminate the risk of disturbance, and the aim has therefore been to help reduce this as far as can realistically be achieved. Disturbance does continue to occur, resulting in occasional lost days for stalking (and some corresponding impact on hillwalkers), and the potential for such difficulties will depend on factors such as the topography and level of use of each estate. This tends, however, to be a sporadic issue and does not appear to be a dominant concern for the great majority of estates across Scotland.

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