

DRAFT - Cairngorm Nature Action Plan Mid-Term report

Introduction

1. The Cairngorms Nature Action Plan 2019 – 2024 was launched at Holyrood in February 2019. It is a five year plan and this year is approaching the half way point. The actions within the plan, delivered by a wide range of partners, are the principle vehicle for the collective and coordinated conservation of habitats and species within the National Park.
2. The plan is integrated within an establish hierarchy of national and regional strategies and policies, as per the table below, and is CNPA’s contribution to the delivery of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and Biodiversity Duty.

<p>SCOTTISH BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY – 6 BIG STEPS FOR NATURE</p> <p>1. Ecosystem Restoration</p> <p>2. Investment in Natural Capital</p> <p>3. Quality Greenspace for health & education benefits</p> <p>4. Conserving Wildlife</p> <p>5. Sustainable management of land and freshwater</p>	<p>NATIONAL</p>
<p>Water Framework Directive, Scotland’s Wild Deer a National Approach, Scottish Land Use Strategy, Scottish Forestry Strategy, Scotland’s Climate Change Plan, Scottish Pollinator Strategy National Planning framework</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">NATIONAL PARK PARTNERSHIP PLAN – BIG CONSERVATION CHALLENGES</p> <p>Enhancing habitats on a landscape scale Protecting & enhancing declining and fragile species Building support and engagement</p>	<p>REGIONAL</p>
<p>Cairngorms Nature Action Plan, Cairngorms Forest Strategy, Catchment Management Plans, Deer Management Plans, Cairngorms Economic Strategy, Local Development Plan, Active Cairngorms, LBAPs</p>	

3. The plan is one of the five key strategies that support the delivery of the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan. It specifically aims to deliver for the three big conservation challenges identified within the NPPP:
 - a) Enhancing landscape on a landscape scale
 - b) Protecting and enhancing species
 - c) Building support and engagement
4. The Cairngorms Nature Strategy Group supports the CNPA to deliver the plan by providing advice, representing key stakeholders, facilitating and co-ordinating

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partnership working, enabling delivery activities and information sharing and maintaining an overview of the processes in place to deliver actions and meet the targets in the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan. This specifically involves:

- a) Taking responsibility for areas of work, encouraging and supporting delivery partners
 - b) Leading the way in demonstrating the ‘added value’ that working collaboratively can bring
 - c) Monitoring progress and providing strategic advice to CNPA staff
 - d) Advocating and being an ambassador for the work of Cairngorms Nature within organisations and in meetings with others
 - e) Providing leadership, inspiring and providing support to organisation, individual and community involvement
5. Membership of the Strategy group currently comprises representatives from: CNPA, Crown estate Scotland, River Dee Trust, FLS, MAP, NFUS, NTS, RSPB, SEPA, SLE, SGA, NS and Cairngorms Connect.

Overview of Activity

6. The action plan was written in consultation with a large number of organisations. The resulting 83 actions and 39 targets were set out into three sections according to each aim.
7. Each action is assessed on the expert judgement of the lead organisation and CNPA conservation officers and its status is indicated using a ‘traffic light’ system:

Red	Actions and targets that are at high risk of not being delivered
Amber	Work is delayed and/or additional activity or resource may be required
Green	Work is either complete or progressing as expected

Actions

8. Overall there is steady progress on the majority of actions. There are two red actions (peatland and raptors) and eight amber. The four actions that were amber in 2020 are now green. The reduction in green actions from 2020 is largely due to the effects of COVID-19.

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AIM	Red	Amber	Green	Not reported	Actions
Landscape Scale Conservation	1	2	17	1	21
Priority Species	1	5	38	0	44
Involving People	0	1	11	0	12
Delivery and monitoring	0	0	6	0	6
Totals	2	8	72	1	83

9. The following table contains actions that are amber or red (i.e. at risk of not being delivered or associated targets not being met). All other actions are green and so are progressing satisfactorily. The commentary below has been provided by partners.

Action	Action Lead	Summary of progress and Issues	Status
Moorland and Peatland Work with a range of land managers across the National Park to deliver restoration management of peatlands at a sub-catchment level to improve ecosystem benefits such as carbon, water quality and biodiversity.	Peatland Action	COVID-19 impacts on contractors, a continued lack of contractor capacity and Peatland ACTION staff working reduced hours all meant that delivery in 2020 was very limited. This has resulted in a revised estimate of 3340ha of peatland under restoration by 2024.	
Moorland and Peatland Pilot new approaches in the ECMP to establish, deliver and promote across the National Park a shared understanding of sustainable moorland management.	ECMP	Partners in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership continue to investigate opportunities for more sustainable management, including gathering data on moorland burning, hare populations, wader breeding success and opportunities for woodland expansion. Moorland managers awaiting Scottish Government direction from Werrity Report, including licencing of driven grouse moors, which will impact management principles.	
Nature Friendly Farming Work with farmers, crofters and agents to encourage integrated woodland development		General applications to AECS schemes continue to support nature friendly farming, however new projects, schemes and work in areas where it is not already happening is delayed, as CNPA farm advisor post vacancy has impacted on project development. Agro-forestry trials are incorporated into the Heritage Horizons bid	

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on farms for ecological and economic benefit			
Mountain Hare Develop collaborative population management plans to sustainably manage at a landscape scale	ECMP	ECMP estates are sharing data with GWCT to manage hare populations at a landscape scale. Land managers are keen to see how protected species status and future management based on licences may affect methodologies currently being used.	
Raptors Identify unoccupied golden eagle, hen harrier and peregrine territories and work with land managers to carry out positive management that will encourage re-colonisation	CNPA	Focus continues to be on building trust & relationships between Raptor Study Groups, estates and CNPA. In order to make progress with positive action, work needs to identify and implement changes to land management on-the-ground.	
Raptors Develop and deliver wildlife tourism opportunities that benefit local businesses and promote the National Park as an example of raptor conservation success	CNPA	Press release in Sept. 2020 on successful breeding of white-tailed eagle on an ECMP estate, the first in Deeside for around 200 years. Plans are in place for interpretation panels in the Ballater Information Centre. Work is not happening at the scale and speed needed to deliver the action in full.	
Pinewood mason bee Develop strategy for incorporating species' needs into forestry management	SF	Mapping and therefore survey work delayed due to Covid-19 and staff resources.	
Small Cow Wheat	RBGE	This component has been severely affected by lockdown, and lack of access to facilities during 2020/2021.	

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Alectoria ochroleuca (Hair Lichen)	RBGE	This component has been severely affected by lockdown and travel restrictions that limited site survey and monitoring during 2020/2021.	
Greater collaboration and engagement in discussions and decisions about land use Provide training for land managers in approaches to engaging communities in land management decision making and involvement	CNPA	Scheduled work delayed due to impacts of COVID-19 on operational plan priorities. Work incorporated into Heritage Horizons bid.	

Targets

10. Three of the targets in the Action Plan are unlikely to be met. Two species targets are unlikely to be met by 2024 (capercaillie and raptors) and the target of 5000ha of restored peatland is predicted unlikely to be reached, although it is still possible that this may pick up pace in 2023 and get to 5000ha by 2025.

11. There are 5 amber, largely reflective of delays due to COVID-19, and 29 that are green. There are 2 unreported targets, scabious mining bee and farmland waders, due to the effects of COVID-19 on survey work and furloughed staff.

Targets	Red	Amber	Green	Not reported	Total targets
Landscape Scale Conservation	1	3	3	1	8
Priority Species	2	0	24	1	27
Involving People	0	2	3	0	5
Totals	3	5	30	2	40

12. Species targets are measured as progress along the 13 stage species recovery process. The starting, current and target stage for each species, different in each species' case, has been assessed by species experts.

13. In some cases the reporting of actions and targets highlights where project activity is on track but the target population status is still unlikely to be achieved (capercaillie) and vice versa (pinewood mason bee).

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14. Two species are predicted to be in a better SRC position than originally thought. Twin flower has already reached its target stage. One is no longer applicable because the work on shining guest ant has been subsumed into that for wood ants in general.

Landscape scale conservation

Target	% complete										Status	Notes	
5,000 Ha new woodland (incl. regeneration and montane)	█	█	█	█	█							█	2800ha to date
70% of new woodland to be native species	█	█	█	█	█							█	90% of the 2,800Ha planted to date is native woodland
750 Ha PAWS and Native woodlands under active restoration	█	█	█	█	█							█	340 ha under active management
Increase in farmland wader populations from 2015 baseline												█	2020 Survey delayed until spring 2021 due to Covid
20 farms in woodland & grassland projects	█	█	█	█	█							█	Delayed by farm advisor post vacancy; species rich grassland project planned for start in 2022
5,000 Ha peatland restoration	█											█	681 ha delivered 2019-2021; 2,200Ha planned for 2022-2024
50 ponds created or restored, including SUDs ponds	█	█										█	20 planned for 2021
150 km river and riparian restoration	█	█	█									█	Significant restoration planned as part of Heritage Horizons bid

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Species conservation

Target	% complete	Status	Notes
<p>There are 29 species on the priority list. Population target status is identified for 27 of them.</p> <p>There is no target status for beaver, as activity is around planning and preparation; and shining guest ant, as the target is now incorporated into wider reporting on wood ants.</p>		On Track	Activity for 24 of 27 priority on track and expected to reach target status.
		At Risk	Capercaillie: Very high risk that target will not be met. Full national survey results due in 2022 but other surveys suggest population has declined seriously from the 1100 birds estimated 2016
		At Risk	Raptors: Unlikely that sufficient actions on the ground will be in place such that continued interventions are enabling a sustained increase in home range occupation and breeding success of golden eagle, hen harrier and peregrine.
		Not Started	Expert assessment of scabious mining bee status unavailable due to staff furlough.

Engaging people

Target	% complete	Status	Notes
Over 50 volunteer rangers working in Cairngorms National Park		On Track	No recruitment since 2020 due to Covid. More planned in 2022.
5 communities fully engaged in landscape values project		On Track	Development stage complete, scheduled to start after decision on Heritage Horizons bid
15,000 people attended outdoor, nature-related events		Delayed	Covid 19 restrictions on outdoor events in 2020/21.
3 communities involved in land-use decision making		On Track	Development stage complete, activity incorporated into Heritage Horizons bid
20 Land managers trained in community engagement		Delayed	Delayed due to COVID, work not yet started, scheduled to start 2022

Areas of work at high risk of not being delivered

Peatland restoration target

15. A continued lack of contractor capacity, the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 on site work and the effect of Peatland ACTION staff working reduced hours all meant that delivery in 2020 was limited to a number of projects carried forward from 2019. As a result, just 131ha of restoration management was achieved in 2020. The programme of work planned for the next 3 years, with direct funding from Scottish Government, aims to deliver 550ha in 2021/22, 900ha in 2022/23 and 1300ha in 2023/24. Therefore, the likely target could be 3340ha during the plan period, still well below the 5000ha target.
16. Interest in peatland restoration is very high and there is no shortage of potential sites on which to undertake work. To accelerate future restoration as much as possible, the Peatland Action programme in the CNPA will have a total of 6 staff by the end of 2021. To help meet demand on the availability of skilled contractors, CNPA is working closely with Highlands and Island Enterprise to support skills development and capacity building in the private sector.

Home range occupation and breeding success of golden eagle, hen harrier and peregrine

17. While raptor populations are generally increasing in the west of the Park, ongoing persecution and habitat availability means that, in the east of the Park, territory occupancy of golden eagle, peregrine and hen harrier has not recovered from declines monitored in recent decades. This is despite constructive ongoing dialogue with several estates in the east of the Park and with the relevant raptor study groups.
18. Work in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership has built a solid foundation for establishing trust and improving relationships between estates and raptor study groups, although the recent poisoning incident will undoubtedly make working together more difficult. This could be further developed and expanded with additional staff time.
19. Progressing practical, habitat management interventions alongside the elimination of wildlife crime is essential to improving breeding success and occupancy. More work is needed to map habitat availability and investigate options for incentivising positive management in order to make gains in places where it is not already happening.

Population status of capercaillie

20. The National Lottery Heritage Fund Cairngorms Capercaillie Project (CCP) is on track to achieve its outputs in all areas from managing human disturbance to improved understanding of the genetics of the remaining population. However, there is increasing evidence, particularly from annual lek counts, that the population is in

serious decline. This decline seems to be affecting the core Strathspey population, which was previously considered stable, as well as the outlying areas.

21. CCP activities are now underway and building a good momentum. It is however far too early to see any demonstrable effects on the population. Also, the scope of the CCP, as per the agreed outcomes with National Lottery Heritage Fund, does not cover all of the issues affecting capercaillie breeding success and survival.
22. The CCP project board recognised a declining population as a serious issue and have discussed contingency approaches. There was general agreement that serious consideration of other measures, such as population reinforcement, should not wait until the end of the project. CNPA is currently leading discussions with key stakeholders on all issues affecting capercaillie in Scotland with a view to finding agreed ways forwards.

Progress towards long term objectives:

AIM: Support landscape scale conservation and collaboration to deliver **ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management, balancing environmental, social and economic factors.**

23. Main objectives:
 - a) Bigger, more natural woodlands, expanding up to a natural treeline, providing connections across catchments and around the central core of the mountains
There has been a strong increase in woodland and above the target rate. This is very likely to continue. Early indications are that roughly 10,000 ha of new woodland could be delivered within the next five years; potentially a doubling of the pace of reforestation seen in recent years, and something likely to be catalysed by the increasingly buoyant carbon market. There is a high proportion of native woodland bolstered by the use of scot pine as a commercial plantation crop. The uptake of the woodland challenge fund has increased this year with 7 successful applications leading to a total of 350 ha of new woodlands.
 - b) More natural, dynamic rivers connected to functioning wetlands and floodplains
Freshwater restoration, including riparian planting, is a well-established practice in all of the catchments in the National Park. Water Framework directive funding has targeted the removal of barriers to fish passage and increasing naturalness. Riparian planting in upper catchments and the use of woody debris to re-naturalise and provide spawning habitat is becoming commonplace. Catchment Management Partnerships are highly effective mechanisms for delivering 'shovel-ready' projects and have been able to capitalise on recent Biodiversity Challenge Funds with criteria for immediate, capital spend and demonstrable outputs. Proposals in the Heritage Horizons bid will enable work to scale up from relatively small, demonstration projects into larger, landscape-

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scale river and floodplain restorations with more demonstrable connections with local communities.

- c) Restored peatlands stopping the loss of carbon, improving water quality and helping alleviate flooding
Only 131 hectares of the planned restoration management work was completed in 2020 due to the combination of the coronavirus pandemic and contractor availability. A large programme of peat depth, herbivore impact assessment, vegetation monitoring and breeding bird surveys are currently underway across our sites. This information will enable future planning of works. Early access to sites to start restoration is essential in expanding the window for working and we are looking at the potential of working in the spring and placing a condition on all future funding for a start date for projects of 1 September 2020. In April 2021 CNPA received direct peatland restoration funding and has established its own Peatland Action Team. This together with a three year fund arrangement will lead to a rapid expansion of the rate of restoration and 3,500ha is anticipated within the next five years.
- d) More sustainably managed moorlands with more structural and species diversity and pockets and strips of trees and shrubs on moorland edges, steep slopes, in gullies and around woodland remnants
Improvement to the sustainability moorlands is still the focus for the ECMP and there are diverse projects and studies aimed at achieving more structural diversity. Conversations are still being had through the deer management groups and the Cairngorms Upland Advisory Group. The outcome of the Werrity review and the prospect of licencing of shooting estates has changed the context and will hopefully accelerate good practice. However there are still many issues around moorland management, climate change and the illegal killing of raptors.
- e) More habitat suitable for breeding waders as part of agricultural systems
Surveys in Badenoch and Strathspey between 2000 and 2010 showed a 42% decline in one of the most important breeding wader populations in mainland Britain. Repeat surveys in 2015 showed the wader declines had halted. This is largely due to the efforts of farmers and land managers working with the Strathspey Wetlands and Waders Initiative to manage rush and create scrapes suitable for breeding and chick rearing. The success of this project has been replicated by the Peesie project as part of the Tomintoul and Glenlivet Landscape Partnership. Similar projects run in Grampian and the Angus Glens, albeit with less resource and funding. Both SWWI and the Peesie Project have been able to take advantage of capital funding at short notice to deliver habitat creation. Funding from CNPA and Working for Waders is currently supporting a CNPA officer working with SWWI, to noticeable effect particularly in coordinating resource and activity across the whole of the Park.
- f) Wildlife-rich grassland and woodland on productive profitable farms.
Recent monitoring highlighted a trend of decreasing extent and quality of species

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rich grassland in Badenoch & Strathspey. 39% of sites surveyed in 2006/07 have shown a loss in species diversity and cover. Of the 87 sites where species rich grassland was the predominant cover in 2006/2007, 58% have experienced significant losses. The main cause of loss, responsible for 56% of the changes (in both groups) has been due to a reduction in grazing, and the second biggest factor, responsible for 22% of changes/losses has been development. Other factors included woodland planting (2%) and livestock damage (2%). Surveys are underway in Glenlivet and Deeside to establish if this pattern will be found elsewhere. As a consequence of this data, we are developing new projects focused on maintenance and restoration of species rich grassland.

There are some very good, relatively small, case studies and examples of woodland and trees integrated with productive farmland within the National Park. Larger scale and mainstreamed agro-forestry is challenging, not least because agro-forestry is highly dependent on basic payments schemes, Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) and Forest Grants Schemes. The farmed straths of the National Park continue to be a nationally important stronghold for aspen. Good relations with farmers and crofters in the Park remain critical to identifying opportunities for protecting and expanding the resource.

Aim: Deliver **focussed action** to improve the conservation status of threatened or declining species

24. Main objective:

- a) Getting species back on a sustainable footing, where they are no longer reliant on targeted action, but have been recovered within a robust and resilient network of habitats

Innovative conservation techniques and translocations/ reinforcements, such as work on pine hoverfly, wood ants, twinflower and Scottish wildcat, continue to support and reinforce the Park's special reputation as a stronghold for some the country's most unique, rare and endangered wildlife. Species work continues to be driven forward by specific projects, often led by the environmental Non-Governmental Organisation (eNGO) sector with support from CNPA and NatureScot. The projects are largely reliant on external funding and operate on 2-3yr funding cycles.

Aim: **Engaging, inspiring and encouraging local communities and communities of interest** to value and care for nature, be proud of the conservation work in the Cairngorms and want to do something to protect their natural heritage.

25. Main objectives:

- a) Raising awareness and understanding of land management and clearly demonstrating the benefits that conservation brings for people as well as wildlife

The appointment of a conservation engagement officer has brought additional focus and resource to activity in an area of the Action Plan which historically hasn't seen as much progress as landscape-scale and priority species

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conservation. COVID restrictions have clearly impacted on the flagship BIG weekend, but there has been increasing recognition and appetite to be involved in the event from land managers' none-the-less. There is a strong focus on the relationship between communities and the surrounding landscapes and land management in the Heritage Horizons bid. Community-led nature-based projects are strongly encouraged through the Green Recovery Fund; close monitoring of uptake may identify strengths, barriers and opportunities for skills development and capacity building.

- b) More engagement with nature: more people involved in decision making, getting out and enjoying it and helping to look after it.

People's relationship with the nature around them has been brought into sharp focus and many partners are keen to capitalise on the possibilities for increased and sustained engagement. Whilst some communities in the Park have very active wildlife groups and there is clearly an appetite for involvement in volunteering, communities taking the lead in conservation projects is relatively limited, particularly when compared with e.g. cultural heritage activities. The development of Cairngorms Nature 'engagement pathways' has the potential to build on the BIG weekend and Volunteer Rangers as cornerstones of a wider programme of engagement and support.

Funding

26. In 2019 and 2020 NatureScot administered a new funding stream for conservation: the Biodiversity Challenge Fund. The £2million annual fund is for capital works to restore habitats and carry out species conservation that would contribute to international Aichi targets and address the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis. Funds need to be spent within one financial year and have land owner permissions in place to secure a minimum 10yr legacy. Delivery of the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan was considered a key criteria in judging applications in the Cairngorms. CNPA successfully applied for funds totaling c£200,000 and managed these funds on behalf of a range of partners.
27. Delivery of the Action Plan has benefitted massively from the ability of partners with the resources and permissions already in place to deliver projects within one financial year. Funds administered by NatureScot were targeted at large, transformative interventions and after the first round of funding partners with the capacity to do so were encouraged to apply directly to NatureScot. In 2021 CNPA successfully applied for a further £196,000 of Biodiversity Challenge Funds, to be administered directly by CNPA, further enabling targeted spend and the involvement of a wider range of smaller projects, land managers and organisations.
28. In 2021, Scottish Government also launched the Nature Restoration Fund: a further £10million of investment into efforts to tackle the climate emergency and biodiversity

crisis through nature recovery. Whilst criteria are still being developed it is clear that funds are for capital interventions and must be spent this financial year.

Green Recovery

29. Recent investment into delivering the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan and the aspirations for peatland restoration, woodland expansion, river restoration and species conservation has resulted in millions of pounds into local economies. There is significant opportunity in the Cairngorms to excel at demonstrating a diverse rural economy building on the traditional and developing land management skills needed to deliver the nature-based solutions at the heart of tackling the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis.