

East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership 5-year Action Plan (2022-2027¹)

INTRODUCTION

The East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership is a landscape-scale collaboration between five estates² (Balmoral, Glenavon, Glenlivet, Mar and Mar Lodge) and the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

Purpose of Partnership

The over-arching purpose is to demonstrate a clear contribution to the aims of the National Park, the National Park Partnership Plan and Cairngorms Nature Action Plan through sustainable moorland management. This includes recognition of the varied priorities and objectives of the estates, and the need to maintain viability of estate enterprises as a basis for delivering a viable mix of public and private interest outcomes.

Specifically, the purpose is to collaborate across land holdings to achieve the following, alongside the estates' sporting and other management objectives:

- Woodland and scrub expansion;
- Peatland restoration;
- Raptor and other priority species conservation;
- Landscape enhancement.

In doing so, the partners seek to demonstrate the combined delivery of public and private interest outcomes and the successful integration of grouse moor management with other land use objectives.

Outcomes

The partners set out to achieve the following outcomes:

- Combined delivery of private and public interest outcomes;
- Greater habitat diversity, including expansion of woodland and scrub in key locations;
- Retained sense of wildness and landscape value;
- Diverse wildlife populations appropriate to the landscape and habitats;
- Improved understanding of moorland habitat and species management;
- Collaboration and communication based on a set of agreed principles.

OBJECTIVES

To achieve the outcomes above, ECMP aims to demonstrate sustainable moorland management by restoring, managing and monitoring moorland habitats and species, including healthy red grouse populations which support sustainable rural businesses. It also aims to communicate the value of moorlands and how they can contribute to meeting the twin nature and biodiversity crises, and a fair and just transition to a net-zero and nature-based economy.

¹ Amended 11/03/25 to end of 2027/28 financial year

² Abergeldie Estate joined in March 2023

While individual estates may put a different emphasis on the delivery of the following objectives, together partner estates will:

1. Actively restore moorland, woodland and freshwater habitats

Within the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, we will ensure we have resilient, more natural moorland ecosystems that provide a greater range of habitats for plants, insects, birds and mammals, that are resilient to and can mitigate against the effects of climate change and contribute to restoring the state of nature. We will work together on landscape-scale restoration plans to deliver:

- Pockets of trees and shrubs on moorland edges, steep slopes, in gullies and around woodland remnants
- Re-wetted and restored peatlands and bogs
- More natural river and wetland systems
- Bigger and better connected native and riparian woodlands

2. Deliver focused action to improve the conservation status of threatened or declining species

Moorlands are an important place for biodiversity, with internationally recognised habitats supporting communities of plants, breeding birds and invertebrates that are uncommon elsewhere. While most species will benefit significantly from landscape-scale habitat restoration, there are some priority species with very specific and sometimes urgent management needs that demand focused action.

The Cairngorms Nature Action Plan identifies priority species most closely associated with moorlands including curlew and other wader species, mountain hares and moorland raptor species, particularly golden eagles, hen harrier and peregrine. Capercaillie, twinflower, woolly willow and aspen, as well as invertebrates associated with aspen, are also included. ECMP estates have significant aspen stands so contributing to aspen conservation is an important public benefit that can be delivered on the moorland edge and in riparian zones.

In the longer term, ecosystem restoration will ensure vulnerable species are less reliant on targeted action and can recover within a network of habitats.

3. Create a strong evidence base and foster knowledge exchange by surveying, monitoring, conducting research and sharing data

Monitoring provides robust evidence and data which in turn allow us to demonstrate the sustainability of our land management practices, the biodiversity of our moorlands, the conservation status of our moorland species and the delivery of other public benefits such as sequestered carbon, enhanced landscape quality and healthier upland rivers. Monitoring also provides information that supports sustainable sporting interests and contributes to a better understanding of the importance of moorland habitats. In addition, such data will feed into the Cairngorms Nature Atlas (Atlas of Living Scotland), Cairngorms Nature Index and allow comparison with sites elsewhere, under alternative management. They also provide information that can be shared with the public to demonstrate the importance of moorland habitats.

4. Achieve estates' private interests through sustainable moorland management

Moorland management is often funded through red grouse shooting. Well managed moorland supports healthy populations of red grouse which should produce a surplus for shooting. This in turn

supports rural employment. Thriving estate businesses provide opportunities for skills development, apprenticeships and other training and contribute to the green economy.

5. Raise awareness and understanding of how moorland management works and the contributions it makes

Moorlands can be an overlooked habitat and engaging with the public to communicate their importance helps to raise their profile and publicise the work carried out by ECMP estates, demonstrating multiple land use benefits.

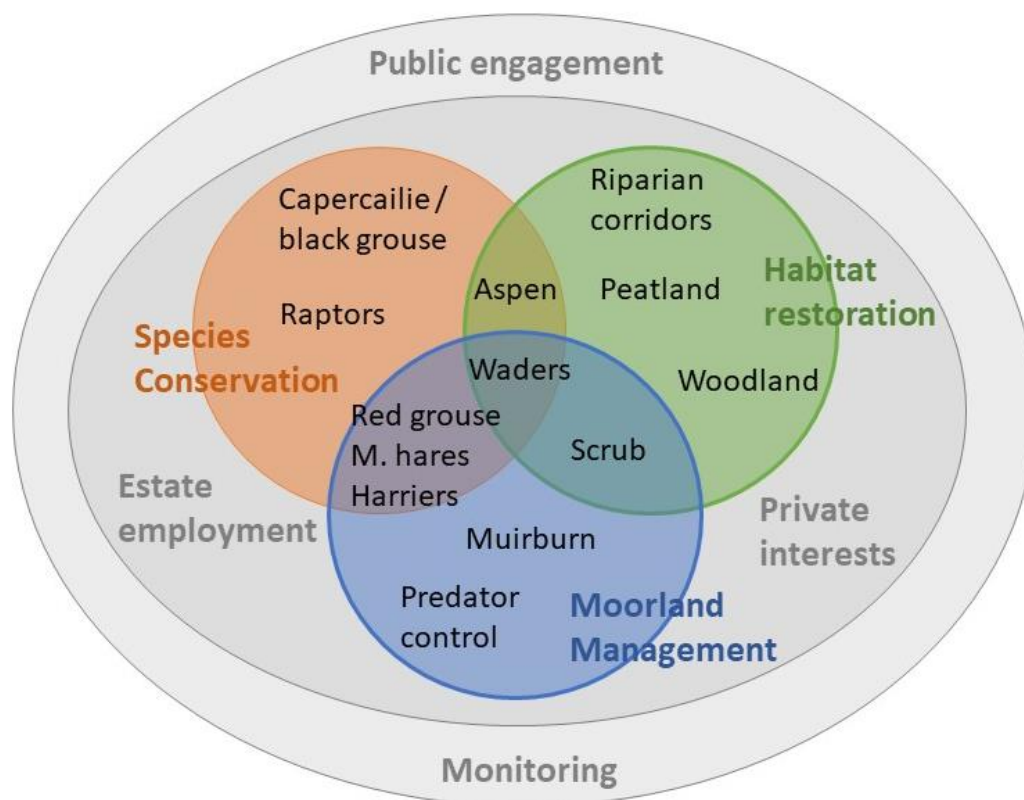


Fig. 1 Objectives of East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership, showing overlaps in moorland management, target habitats and species.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The area managed by ECMP estates amounts to 98,000 ha³, around 22% of the area of the National Park. Moorland, which can be considered as open upland heath and blanket bog habitats, characterised by acidic soils and low-growing vegetation, accounts for over 60 % of ECMP ground. It is dominated by dwarf shrubs, certain grass communities and bog species including *Sphagnum* mosses. The broad habitats across ECMP are shown in Appendix 1, with heathlands covering 43,000 ha and blanket bogs 19,000 ha. Commercial and native woodlands, including riparian corridors, cover nearly 11,000 ha, around 11% of ECMP.

³ Increased to 100,000 ha with the addition of Abergeldie

ACTION PLAN

Objective	Area of work	Action	Key indicators
1. Habitat restoration	Peatland	Restoration of actively eroding peat & peatland drainage features Develop a landscape-scale plan for the restoration of all peatland across ECMP, including priorities, timeframe & costings	Area of peatland restoration (Target: > 1,350 ha over 5 y)
	Moorland	Ensure that all managed burning (muirburn) occurs within mapped areas, follows best practice & is compliant with muirburn licensing (when enacted), supporting habitat restoration & recovery	
		Mitigate wildfire risk through collaborative approach	Presence of juniper, dwarf birch, willows (Target: increase)
		Assess current scrub presence Increase moorland vegetation diversity by expanding & connecting areas of juniper, willows, dwarf birch & associated species assemblages	
	Woodland	Increase woodland habitat through planting & natural regeneration	Area of new woodland (Target: > 1,500 ha of new woodland over 5 y, with an increase on all estates)
		Protect & enhance condition of existing woodland Identify at risk woodlands & develop plan to move towards favourable recovering condition	
		Create & connect riparian corridors along upland tributaries	
	Freshwater	Introduce woody debris	River restoration projects (Target: 1 in each major catchment)
		Reconnect rivers & floodplain	
	In-bye and grassland	Create & maintain wader habitat (rush cutting, cattle grazing of rushes & scrapes)	No. wader scrapes (Target: increase)
		Support pollinators & species rich grasslands	

Objective	Area of work	Action	Key indicators
2. Species conservation	Raptors	Collaborative monitoring	Home range (re)occupation & breeding success of golden eagle, hen harrier & peregrine (Target: stable / increase & no persecution incidents)
		Positive land management that will encourage re-colonisation	
		Work with CNPA raptor project to eliminate persecution	
	Waders	Habitat management as above	No. breeding wader pairs (Target: stable or increase)
	Twinflower	Monitoring & translocation where appropriate	
	Aspen	Expansion & connectivity of aspen stands across ECMP & Deeside aspen corridor	Area of aspen (Target: increase)

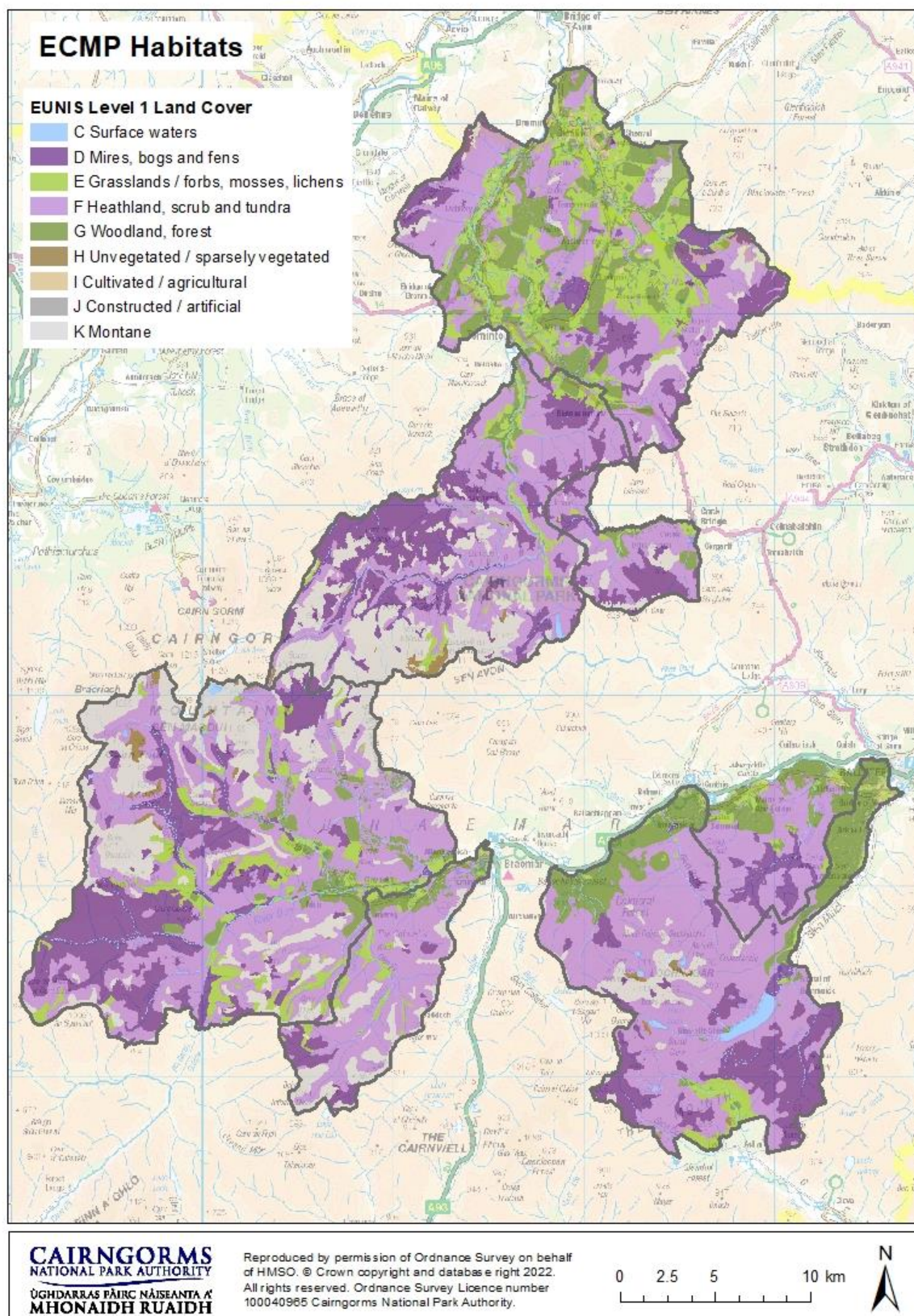
3. Research, Survey & Monitoring	Vegetation	Monitor condition of moorland by Habitat Impact Assessment	Herbivore impact (Target: moderate / low)
		Site Condition Monitoring of designated sites	Condition of designated sites (Target: favourable or recovering favourable condition)
		Juniper & willows	
	Landscape	Special Landscape Qualities mapping & monitoring (with input from CNPA colleagues)	
	Species	Mountain hare index of population size (GWCT methodology)	Counts of mountain hares, waders & black grouse (Target: healthy populations)
		Wader transects to determine conservation status & effects of habitat improvements	
		Black grouse surveys	
		Comparative monitoring with Cairngorms Connect	
		Curlew sensitivity maps	

4. Estate interests	Economic activity	Sustainable moorland management for benefit of game species	Target: Sustainable surplus for shooting No. land management staff (Target: stable / increase)
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Objective	Area of work	Action	Key indicators
5. Public engagement and comms	Collective ECMP communication of key messages	Periodic press releases, social media posts &/or blogs on progress to targets or achievement of milestones Create ECMP webpage	No. communications (Target: at least 3 /y)
	Ballater interpretation centre	Maintain / update digital material in centre	Visitor numbers
	Knowledge exchange and sharing of good practice	Hold, host & participate in events incl. CN BIG weekend, walk & talk, knowledge exchange, sharing good practice, seminars / workshops, invited speakers	No. events (Target: at least 2 /y)

APPENDIX 1.

Map. 1. Distribution of EUNIS habitats⁴ across East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership estates



⁴ <https://www.nature.scot/landscapes-and-habitats/habitat-map-scotland>