

Red Squirrels United SciuriousLIFE

Layman's Report 2017
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Helping to secure the future
of red squirrels in the UK





Grey Squirrel ©Pixabay



The history of red squirrels

The red squirrel has lived in forests and woodlands across the UK since the end of the last ice age, 10,000 years ago. Their numbers have declined drastically over the last century and now there are approximately 140,000 left in the wild. Grey squirrels were brought to the UK in the 1800s by the Victorians and the first record of them escaping and establishing a wild population was in 1876. Since then they have spread across much of the UK, arriving in Ireland in 1911. Many scientific studies show that the introduction of the grey squirrel from North America has been the major factor in the red squirrel's decline over the past century. This is due to competition for food and shelter and spread of the squirrelpox virus (which grey squirrels can transmit to red squirrels). Unfortunately, without conservation management, red squirrels could become extinct from the UK mainland.

What is Red Squirrels United?

Organisations, volunteers and other conservationists have been involved in local conservation work and projects to protect red squirrels for many years. The Red Squirrels United partnership is joining up some of these initiatives, together with other academics, practitioners and volunteers to deliver a unique programme of coordinated red squirrel conservation and knowledge sharing across the country. The focus for Red Squirrel United is to protect remaining red squirrel populations where they are under threat from invasive grey squirrels across Northern Ireland, Northern England and Wales.



Red Squirrels United 2017 highlights

2017 has seen the launch of the programme in earnest:

- More than 90 people attended the first Knowledge Fair in March 2017 in Belfast
- By the end of 2017 more than 1,000 volunteer interactions had taken place. Volunteers took part in red squirrel conservation activities, grey squirrel control, red and grey squirrel monitoring surveys and community engagement events
- Red Squirrels United hosted or attended almost 300 community engagement events, reaching more than 20,000 people
- Early warning and rapid response systems were established across all focal areas, enabling project partners to respond quickly to reported sightings of red and grey squirrels or potential disease outbreaks

Red Squirrels United Knowledge Fair

The first annual Knowledge Fair took place in Belfast from 7-8 March 2017. This two-day event was attended by 95 people, including volunteers, conservation practitioners and other participants from across the UK and Europe. The Knowledge Fair represented a great networking opportunity and provided people with the chance to hear more about Red Squirrels United. In addition, delegates explored lessons learnt from European red squirrel conservation projects, shared best practice for red squirrel conservation and visited the Mourne Mountains to view the work Red Squirrels United is undertaking in this area.





Preventing subsequent grey squirrel invasion on the Island of Anglesey

Red Squirrels Trust Wales continues to control grey squirrels in an area of 165km² in Gwynedd, as part of the effort to prevent grey squirrel invasions onto Anglesey, following their successful removal in 2013. The early warning system and rapid response network is well established on Anglesey and responds quickly to any reported sightings of grey squirrels. Two grey squirrels were detected in the autumn of 2017 and removed. This highlights the importance of the early warning network. In partnership with other organisations, Red Squirrels Trust Wales also developed an agreed protocol for when grey squirrels are accidentally trapped and transported in motor vehicles.

Managing squirrelpox virus outbreaks

During the autumn of 2017 Red Squirrels Trust Wales discovered an outbreak of squirrelpox virus in red squirrels in Gwynedd. These were the first cases recorded in wild red squirrels in Wales (in the 1990s cases were identified in red squirrels released into the wild). In response Red Squirrels Trust Wales carried out significant media and public outreach and stopped all use of feeders in Anglesey and Gwynedd.

In many cases public and garden squirrel feeding stations were removed. Clear guidance was issued on how to monitor the red squirrel population, the signs of the virus, and the important steps needed to prevent spread. If people wished to continue feeding, diffuse scatter feeding was recommended. A total of three confirmed cases were recorded.



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Monitoring squirrels in rural areas

The early warning system that monitors Kielder, Kidland and Uswayford provided extremely useful information which helped the team at Northumberland Wildlife Trust to identify woodlands where grey squirrels were present in 2017. Regular monitoring using trail cameras satisfied the team that the forests of Kidland and Uswayford remained grey squirrel free.



However, in the valley of Coquetdale to the south of the area, grey squirrels were captured on camera. Working in partnership with the local Coquetdale Red Squirrel Group, follow-up monitoring and control work resulted in the successful capture and removal of 30 grey squirrels around Holystone and Harbottle. This example provided real evidence that early detection, followed up by rapid response is the key to preventing grey squirrels from reaching the main red squirrel forests. Similarly, in areas of Northern Cumbria, grey squirrels were captured on camera in remote locations where they would have otherwise gone undetected, enabling Northumberland Wildlife Trust to respond accordingly. It proved difficult to carry out such rapid responses in all areas, particularly in some of the most remote camera locations. Encouraging local ownership of red squirrel conservation in areas where very few people live is one of the key priorities for the rest of the project.

Ulster Wildlife

Our work in Northern Ireland has been making good progress. The Northern Ireland squirrel and pine marten monitoring survey for 2017 recorded the highest density of red squirrels in Co Fermanagh, compared to other survey areas with no grey squirrels recorded at all. Co Fermanagh also recorded the highest density of pine martens which were observed in almost half of the sites surveyed in this area.

By the end of 2017, Ulster Wildlife had delivered:

- 46 community engagement events
- 28 events in partnership with third parties
- 33 education activities
- 19 training events

In addition, Ulster Wildlife liaised with more than 100 landowners to support them with grey squirrel control and developed new community groups in North Down, Rostrevor, West Tyrone and Cityside in Londonderry. In the Mourne eradication zone, Ulster Wildlife focused on refining the early warning and surveillance system using two rings of volunteer monitoring. The outer ring of volunteers monitor feeders with double sticky tape and camera traps to identify grey and red squirrel presence and absence. The inner ring of volunteers seeks to ensure that any grey squirrel incursions are reported to Ulster Wildlife, who respond in less than 48 hours. This area is also participating in a documentary called 'A Life In The Year Of The Mourne' which will air in 2018.



Community engagement in urban areas

Volunteer participation and community engagement can make a huge difference to Lancashire Wildlife Trust's work. Compared to other Red Squirrels United areas, Merseyside is a very urban landscape, with a large human population. This provides different challenges for grey squirrel management and red squirrel conservation. Red Squirrels United is working with local communities to raise awareness and encourage people to report squirrel sightings, help with monitoring and participate in the urban trap loan scheme. During 2017, 23 community events were held with the help of 16 volunteers. These included guided squirrel walks, community talks, squirrel fun days, squirrel monitoring and grey squirrel management training. This enabled Lancashire Wildlife Trust to engage with around 750 people, of which almost 400 were children.



The bi-annual monitoring programme, which is completed every spring and autumn with the help of over 30 volunteers, indicate that the red squirrel population remained stable and numbers had even increased in some areas during 2017. 74 households participated in the urban trap loan scheme. Throughout 2017 Lancashire Wildlife Trust received 398 sightings of red and grey squirrels reported by members of the public throughout parks, gardens and woodland. This provided vital information which added to the monitoring and grey squirrel control data to help further inform conservation strategies.



Working with communities

In 2017 Forest Research continued to explore motivations and attitudes to red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel control. This was conducted with engaged volunteers and other key stakeholders in Northern England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Merseyside. The research focussed around:

- aspirations for red squirrel conservation and key challenges
- motivations for initial and persisting involvement
- barriers and challenges faced
- how the volunteering experience could be improved

Evidence showed that motivation for volunteers typically revolved around a desire to save the threatened red squirrel, or the broadleaf trees which the grey squirrels impacts. Many noted the pleasure they receive from seeing or photographing red squirrels, particularly in their gardens and local woodland. Others expressed a desire to make a difference and preserve the opportunity to see red squirrels for future generations. Aside from this sense of purpose, volunteers noted that their role provided great opportunities to form friendships and the motivation to go out and enjoy the outdoors, ultimately improving their wellbeing. Insufficient time and lack of interest from the local community emerged as key challenges.

In addition, many volunteers felt that widespread distribution of grey squirrels necessitates a national approach to management and that without a country-led approach there are concerns that grey squirrels will simply return to well-managed areas from those which are under-resourced. Better communication and feedback from host organisations were among the most common suggestions for improving the volunteering experience.



Working with science

Newcastle University monitor all the conservation work at Red Squirrels United, to enable learning from our actions and improve best practise. Throughout 2017 data collection mechanisms were implemented across the programme and data gathering began in earnest. This enables the university to map the distribution of red and grey squirrels, predict how best to protect the remaining red squirrel populations and to plan the management of red squirrel populations in the future. Disease outbreaks in red squirrel populations can be devastating. Further understanding about the squirrelpox virus requires studying how the control of grey squirrel populations can protect red squirrels from the disease. This will be a key priority for 2018.

Who are Red Squirrels United?

Red Squirrels United, coordinated by The Wildlife Trusts, is a partnership of organisations from Wales, England and Northern Ireland, including The Wildlife Trusts, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside, Red Squirrels Trust Wales, The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, Ulster Wildlife, Newcastle University and Forest Research.

Who do we work with?

We are working alongside a range of community groups and organisation including land owners, estate managers and farmers and volunteers. We hold an annual knowledge fair where anyone interested in helping red squirrels and controlling the numbers of grey squirrels can meet to share ideas.

We also work closely with Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels to ensure a joined-up approach to red squirrel conservation is taken across the whole of the UK.



How to get involved

If you are interested in volunteering or would like to learn more about the project areas, please contact the following partner organisations:

- The Wildlife Trusts
rsu@wildlifetrusts.org
- Northumberland Wildlife Trust
red.squirrels@northwt.org.uk
- The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside
red.squirrel@lancswt.org.uk
- Red Squirrels Trust Wales
angleseysquirrels@hotmail.co.uk
- The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales
info@welshwildlife.org
- Ulster Wildlife
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