



## In a nutshell: A volunteer's experience of the Red Squirrels United Knowledge Fair 2019

Alice Watson, a volunteer with the Merseyside Red Alert group gives us the lowdown on her experience at this years Knowledge Fair.



As a red squirrel fanatic; attending a Red Squirrel United (RSU) Knowledge Fair was exhilarating! To be surrounded by people with the same desire to preserve and see these beautiful creatures flourish in their natural habitat and historical ranges across the UK, was a privilege.

### The conference In's and out's

The conference was spread over two days, with [22 presentations](#) and four practical sessions on the Sunday afternoon. Presentations included habitat management, red squirrel monitoring, social science of grey squirrel management, disease, volunteer experiences, grey squirrel management and volunteer experience in red squirrel projects.

### My experience

Over the two days I learnt so much about red squirrels. Each speaker taught me something new. David Everest's talk (['It's not a question of colour: why we do what we do'](#)) had me truly gripped. As part of the Merseyside Red Alert, we had seen several outbreaks of squirrelpox (SQPV) in 2018. Improving detection of SQPV and adenovirus (ADV) can improve monitoring and management in red squirrel areas. David developed an innovative technique to increase the efficacy of testing red squirrels for SQPV and ADV. Previously red squirrels being tested for SQPV and ADV had blood samples taken, with ADV only present in the squirrel for one to two days after death. This makes testing tricky as when a dead squirrel is found, it could have already been dead for longer than two days. This approach found 20% of the tested red squirrels were positive for ADV. However, by retesting the 80 using whisker and hair samples increased detection to 84% with whiskers and 94% for hair. These results have huge significance as squirrels can be tested over a longer period after their death, providing an increased rate of detection of SQPV and ADV. This means more accurate results and allows data on squirrel deaths to more practically assessed. Outcome: better management and monitoring can then be undertaken.



Paul Harry, a volunteer from Mid Wales Red Squirrel Partnership, opened his session (['Using Ground Cameras to Locate the Elusive Red Squirrel in Mid Wales'](#)) with a super cute video of a red squirrel and automatically won the hearts of those people in the room. His



enthusiasm, passion for recording and monitoring squirrels in an area where sightings are sparse and only captured on camera monitors was inspiring. This also resonated strongly with me, as I'm also passionate about saving the species. I could understand the drive to go through tens of hours of camera footage, with only a chance to see even five minutes of footage of a red squirrel feeding was worthwhile. Paul's presentation showed that by removing feeders, the number of grey squirrels decreased, and that red squirrel sightings increased. He also identified that by moving the cameras to ground level enabled him to get sightings of the red squirrels feeding. It showed that small and simple adjustments could lead to effective monitoring and management.

#### **My five takeaways**

1. There are increased populations of red squirrels in Wales and Scotland
2. David Everest's work on SPQV and ADV; further highlighted the need for captive squirrels to undergo testing before release
3. Increased use of citizen science by encouraging involvement from the general public in red squirrel monitoring makes a huge difference e.g. the [Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels](#) Community Hub is already proving to be very successful and the Mammal Society's [Mammal Mapper App](#) also looks very promising.
4. Use of conservation dogs. Max and Rachel ([Lancashire Wildlife Trust](#)) have been tracking dead squirrels with SQP for a while, finding numerous dead squirrels during the outbreaks in 2018 and identifying another, two weeks after the outbreak was thought to have finished (highlighting the importance of their work). More accurate numbers of SQPV deaths can be accessed as they can be found more effectively and quickly.
5. There is ongoing work into a form of oral contraceptive for grey squirrels which will hopefully remove the need for culling.

#### **Final thoughts.**

The Red Squirrels United Knowledge Fair gave a vital platform to discuss and share research, conservation techniques, and experiences. The collaborating of this information is invaluable, as it allows further development of red squirrel monitoring and encourages groups to continue to improve their strategies. The knowledge fair not only left me feeling a lot more knowledgeable but incredibly enthused by the successes of other groups. I left with my head filled with ideas that my own groups could use and adapt, in each I'm sure other left feeling the same.

