



Red Squirrel Awareness Week: What makes the red squirrel conservation world go round?

Ahead of Red Squirrel Awareness Week, Red Squirrels United (RSU) Programme Manager, Nikki Robinson reflects on the vital role people play in red squirrel conservation.



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Red Squirrel Awareness Week (21-29 September 2019) is a great opportunity to celebrate red squirrels and raise awareness about the challenges they face. As we enter the last six months of [RSU](#) programme delivery (boo!), it seems a good opportunity to reflect on how people engaged in the red squirrel community are making a real difference.

What's the story?

I could talk about our iconic native red squirrel, immortalised by Beatrix Potter's famous Squirrel Nutkin and their decline following introduction of the grey squirrel in 1876. I could talk about the impacts of squirrelpox virus, a disease carried harmlessly by greys but invariably fatal to red squirrels. But that would just be repeating a story that many of us are aware of already.

I could talk about the programme and say that RSU has engaged over 50,000 members of the public at community events, hosted over 500 volunteer training events and set up six new volunteer groups. But that's just numbers. I could highlight the best practice guides, videos and webinars that have been produced through the programme. But that's just resources. I could talk about the three Knowledge Fairs that we've held to date; uniting volunteers, conservationists, landowners and academics across the UK. But that's just people...



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But that's it! People! People drawn together from all walks of life, young and old, scientist, academic; conservationist and volunteer. All united by a common goal, a shared interest, determination and continuous action to conserve the red squirrel. People are what drive red squirrel conservation. So, I'll tell you a story. Not about Nutkin, but about the volunteers and conservation rangers out in all weathers, across all terrains, 365 days of the year and the backroom team that underpin and support the frontline conservation effort. All coming together in the name of safeguarding red squirrels.

What is it all about?

It's about volunteers and conservation rangers from [Ulster Wildlife](#) removing grey squirrels from the Mourne Mountains and the [Montalto Estate](#) and re-introducing red squirrels into [Silent Valley](#) and Montalto, (where they have since bred successfully in both locations!). It's about the constant vigilance of the community in County Fermanagh, the county with the highest distribution of red squirrels in Northern Ireland, to keep it free from grey squirrels. It's about 'Red Squirrels Rock' a fun activity for old and young alike, which involves painting squirrels on stones and hiding them for others to find. It's about participating in the All-Ireland presence and absence survey where community groups and conservationists are mapping red squirrel, grey squirrel and pine marten distribution across the whole country.



It's about the community led effort to restore red squirrels on Anglesey, following the eradication of the grey squirrel pioneered by the indomitable Esmé Kirby. This work has now extended to mainland Gwynedd led by [Red Squirrels Trust Wales](#) (RSTW), allowing red squirrels to repopulate the area. In 2018, red squirrels were spotted in Snowdonia National Park for the time in 50 years!



It's about the dogged determination of the newly created [Clocaenog Red Squirrels Trust](#) (CRST) volunteers and RSTW ranger, working to increase populations of red squirrel in Clocaenog Forest in North Wales. Clocaenog was once considered the last stronghold for red squirrels in Wales but sadly red squirrel populations declined sharply in recent years. Happily, the picture looks more positive now and the CRST will continue the work to ensure a thriving population of reds in the future.

It's about the tenacity of the volunteers in the [Mid Wales Red Squirrel Partnership](#) (MWRSP), working across the Tywi Forest. These isolated areas can be very difficult to access and often for little return. Red squirrels in these parts are notoriously difficult to spot! Often the only reward may be a fleeting glimpse captured on a camera. But the volunteers carry on, driven by the desire to protect red squirrels in this remote upland forest. They have pioneered a new technique of camera trapping using 'ground cameras' which are trained on signs of squirrel feeding activity rather than directly onto a feeder.



It's about [Formby](#) in Merseyside, an area containing one of the best-known populations of red squirrels. These are the urban sophisticates of the red squirrel world, happy to show off and pose beguilingly like any good supermodel, delighting conservationists, volunteers and the general public alike with their antics. The red squirrel community in this area is supported by Max; the UK's first fully trained squirrel detection dog; and his handler Rachel from Lancashire Wildlife Trust. Max can sniff out a dead red squirrel in record time, enabling it to be removed quickly from the environment. This is particularly

important during outbreaks of squirrelpox virus as carcasses can continue to shed the virus.

It's about Northern England. Largely community led, a plethora of voluntary groups operate across the landscape from larger, well established operations to smaller two to three person groups. United through [Red Squirrels Northern England](#) and [Northern Red Squirrels](#), the work covers territory ranging from the vast remote Sitka Spruce forests of Kielder National Park, to the urban centre of Newcastle, to the Lake district. All bound by the common goal of conserving the red squirrel.

The 'boots on the ground' are at the coalface of red squirrel conservation, but there are other vital parts of the jigsaw, such as the 'bums on seats' in the backroom.

It's about the academics at [Newcastle University](#), analysing data laboriously collected by rangers and assessing the efficacy of grey squirrel control efforts across the programme. It's about the scientists at [Forest Research](#) who are assessing public attitudes to red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel management. Not forgetting the pathologists at the [Animal Plant Health Agency](#), who are analysing squirrel tissue samples for signs of disease and pioneering new techniques in disease detection. It's about the fundraisers, administrators, communication folk, policy officers and those that work to engage and raise community awareness of the issues and challenges facing the red squirrel. All these roles work together to make a real difference to red squirrel conservation.



Ultimately the effort to conserve the red squirrel is a multi-faceted one with each and every person making a vital contribution. United we stand, together we fall and united we must remain if we are to be successful in conserving the red squirrel for future generations to enjoy.

Red Squirrel Awareness Week

If you would like to learn more about red squirrels, why not participate in an activity for Red Squirrel Awareness Week. There are walks, talks and other [events](#) going on all around the country. You could even [volunteer](#) with your local red squirrel project! No matter how you get involved, know that you're joining a nationwide, dedicated team, determined to conserve the UK's red squirrel.