

SQUIRRELS

PROTECTION AND CONTROL

JACKIE FOOTT of British Red Squirrel looks at how grey squirrels are impacting British woodlands and explains how red squirrels are making a comeback in some areas of the UK.

For most of us, the sight of a red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) is a rare thing. Britain's only native squirrel species, the red squirrel has been displaced by the grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), which was introduced during the 19th century. The larger greys outcompete reds and, having originally been regarded as an ornamental species, are now commonplace in towns, cities and the countryside.

Estimates vary regarding the number of red squirrels versus grey squirrels, but the huge environmental and economic damage caused by grey squirrels is now widely accepted. Grey squirrels damage trees by stripping bark from the trunks and branches of trees, especially during the spring and summer months. This can weaken the tree, leaving it susceptible to disease or, if they strip a complete ring of bark from around the trunk, it can cause the tree to die.

Trees such as oak, beech, hornbeam and sweet chestnut between 10

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The UK Squirrel Accord 2014

and 40 years of age are frequently targeted, often leaving the tree with no value for useful timber. On Anglesey, with no grey squirrels and a high red population, there are reports of damage only to a very few hornbeams.

Grey squirrels also raid birds' nests, stealing eggs and preying on fledgling young.

Controlling grey squirrels

In 2014 more than 30 forestry, land management and conservation organisations signed the **UK Squirrel Accord**, an agreement that ‘records a common purpose and resolve concerning squirrels in the United Kingdom. Grey squirrels need controlling because of the economic, social and environmental damage that they cause and their adverse impact on red squirrel populations which are part of the natural heritage of the United Kingdom and need protection. Many different parties are involved in work to protect reds or control greys. The signatories to this Accord recognise the vital importance of both these work areas and agree the following long term aim: red squirrel populations protected and thriving and greys controlled, through targeted and sustained action.’

The most recent estimate of the annual cost to British Forestry is £40



RIGHT: Grey squirrels gnaw trees to get at the sweet sap-filled layers of the bark. Classed as an invasive non-native species in the UK and an invasive alien species in Europe, the grey squirrel was moved outside its natural range by humans and has negative consequences for native biodiversity and the economy.



BELOW: Pine martens reduce grey squirrel populations.

million in lost revenue. A Royal Forestry Society survey reported one member’s comments: ‘Grey squirrels are the single biggest threat to growing hardwoods (especially oak) in the UK and must be controlled, especially in the light of diseases in other hardwoods.’

THE LAW

- It is illegal to release a grey squirrel back into the wild.
- It is not illegal to lawfully and humanely shoot or trap in order to control grey squirrels.
- Kill traps must not be used if there is any chance of reds squirrels being in the area.

If you live in a ‘grey only’ area with no control group, start by clearing the greys on your own property. You may find that squirrels from adjacent properties will fill the void so you could develop a network with neighbours, possibly even covering large areas such as this [rewilding project in Staffordshire](#). Woodland owners could profitably join with their neighbours to hire a pest controller to reduce numbers in their woods.

Methods of control

LIVE CAPTURE TRAPS

Regular wire traps are widely available. Pest controllers advise setting them up for a week or so with bait to lure the squirrels into what appears to be a feeding station.



If the bait has been taken, set the trap properly after a week or move it to another location and start again. These traps must be checked every day (preferably twice) and the captured squirrels despatched humanely. Read this [best practice guidance](#) from British Red Squirrel. A [comprehensive list](#) of traps is available here.

KILL TRAPS

There are many different types of kill traps available and it is essential to be sure of the licensing requirements in your part of the UK.

SHOOTING

Shooting grey squirrels is legal and can be highly effective. It is important that owners plan carefully and ensure safe shooting angles with a backstop within the area in which you have permission to shoot. (Obviously, if it is your own wood, permission is not needed, but be mindful of your neighbours.) Shooting guidelines and best practice are available from the [British Association for Shooting and Conservation](#) (BASC). Tree surgeon Bob Wilson advises setting up a feeding station in front of a tree for a few days to lure the squirrels. ‘Keep it filled for five or six days to let them get a taste for it before shooting. That way, the squirrels are drawn to a safe shooting area, with the hopper and tree acting as a safe backstop.’

FERTILITY CONTROL

The UK Squirrel Accord is funding research into fertility control and is now in the third year of a five-year project developing an oral contraceptive for squirrels. Research has also just started on gene editing for grey squirrels, but results are some years away.

PINE MARTENS

A number of projects have proved that they can play an important role in reducing grey populations, although



Common in Scotland, but near threatened in the rest of the UK, red squirrels are protected under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.

the exact reason for this remains unclear. Faster and more nimble, reds are less often preyed upon by pine martens. Pine martens are a natural predator of grey squirrels (and also reds); monitoring and research are continuing for the limited reintroductions and natural populations in the UK. *Living Woods* reported on pine marten reintroduction in **Issue 52, Summer 2019**.

Red squirrel conservation

Local volunteer groups in the north of England began work 25 years ago to control greys and to protect red squirrels. They were the first to understand that grey success came at the expense of red squirrel populations. Over the years the groups kept careful records and these, along with more recent scientific monitoring and analyses, have shown that reds can survive and thrive if there is consistent grey squirrel control.

Grey squirrels will outcompete reds for food and habitat, generally harassing them so that they are unable to breed. Grey squirrels also carry the squirrel pox virus (SQPV) that is harmless to them

but fatal to the reds, subjecting the majority of any infected population to a long and painful death.

Red squirrels do not need special habitats and can live in areas stretching from northern British climates as far south as Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, and in rural, suburban and sometimes even urban locations. The notion



that red squirrels prefer conifers is somewhat confusing: they have been increasingly restricted to large conifer woodlands and plantations due to encroaching grey squirrels. While they can utilise coniferous trees better than grey squirrels, red squirrels reach their highest population densities in mixed or broadleaf woodlands that offer a diversity of tree species and availability of food.

The surviving populations of red squirrels in the British Isles are not there by chance, but because of the work of volunteers in the first instance and then, more recently, through funded projects and organised conservation groups. However, there is still a reliance on volunteers to carry out much of the work on the ground. If you would like to get involved, follow the links in the boxes on the right.



British Red Squirrel

To see whether you live in a red squirrel area, check their **Activity Map** and contact your nearest group to work with it.

British Red Squirrel is collecting evidence of tree damage caused by red squirrels. Email reports of woodland squirrel damage to contact@redsquirrel.org.

View a short film about about the ecological damaged caused by grey squirrels: **Red Squirrels: Turning the Tide**.

LINKS

Click on the organisations to link to their websites.

[European Squirrel Initiative](#)

[Red Squirrel South West](#)

[Red Squirrel Survival Trust](#)

[Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels](#)

[UK Squirrel Accord](#)

[Vincent Wildlife Trust](#)