



Red Squirrels in Tayside

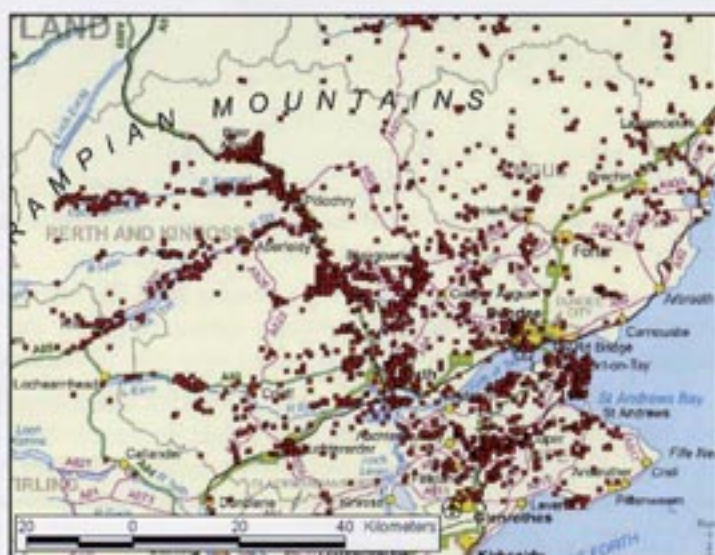
Newsletter Issue 01

The Red Squirrel is a 'flagship' species whose range across the UK is steadily declining. The current British population is thought to be only 145,000, of which three-quarters is present in Scotland. Research is showing that if the current decline continues the Red Squirrel could be extinct on mainland Britain within 20 years. A short series of hard winters, combined with poor cone crops, could devastate our remaining population.

Britain has an obligation under both Earth Summit and European biodiversity agreements to safeguard its native fauna. Many local volunteers and land managers are keen to help and the Forestry Commission is now actively considering funding opportunities for Red Squirrel

conservation across Scotland. Tayside is seen by many as the frontline in the battle between Red and Grey Squirrels. Combined with monies available from a variety of sources, it is anticipated much can be done to win the war. Such grant measures will encourage local Red Squirrel Groups to undertake surveys, plan woodland management agreements and, ultimately, prepare a Red Squirrel Strategy for their area. Where no groups exist, funding will also be considered to fill the gaps.

In the meantime, the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's Draft Red Squirrel Action Plan will be featured on its website in the New Year. Everyone is welcome to comment on the Plan and either sign up to proposed actions or suggest their own.



© Distribution of Grey Squirrels (left) and Red Squirrels (right) © Copyright SNH

REDS AND GREYS – WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Many people are familiar with Grey Squirrels but not everyone has seen a Red Squirrel. They look very different and can be easily recognised.

The native Red Squirrel (right) is a lightly built animal well suited to life in trees. Its distinctive deep reddish brown fur and in winter, conspicuous tufted ears, make it easy to identify. Pale and dark varieties do occur, and the bushy tail can turn almost white following bleaching in the summer sunshine. It is most likely to be seen in the tree canopy and is usually harder to spot than a Grey Squirrel. The Grey Squirrel (left) is a native of North America. It is more heavily built than the Red Squirrel and is seen more often foraging on the ground. Its fur and tail are mainly grey, although some have a marked reddish tinge on their back, feet and head in summer. The grey tail has bands of dark grey and white along the outer edge.



Dundee's Red Squirrel Project

Dundee is the best city in Britain for seeing Red Squirrels. Ten years ago they were known on The Law, in the Dundee Botanical Gardens, and at Balgay, Reres Hill, Dawson Park and numerous gardens and public open spaces across the city.

A few years ago the American Grey Squirrel was rarely seen in the city, but it is now a common sight. Now we are left with our native Red Squirrel in only five sites - Camperdown Country Park, Templeton Woods, Caird Park, Downfield Golf Course and Liff Hospital.

Many of the City's parks and woodlands consist of mixed and broadleaved trees - feeding conditions favourable to the Grey Squirrel. Elsewhere in Scotland habitat loss and fragmentation are contributing to the decline in Red Squirrels, but in Dundee the amount of suitable woodland has actually increased. The Squirrel Pox disease, fatal to Red Squirrels, has not come to Dundee - yet.



Our Red Squirrels have other problems - such is the nature of the city's green space that they are only found in woodland pockets and are therefore very susceptible to changes within them. Within the city they are at risk from domestic cats and on the outskirts, they are at risk from birds of prey. Road signs and rope bridges have been put up at Camperdown Country Park and Templeton Woods to help prevent squirrel road casualties.

One of the most contentious issues - that of controlling the Greys is being handled as sensitively as possible. Without sufficient Grey Squirrel control, some parks would now be exclusively Grey Squirrel areas - this has already been proven in the city's Balgay Park where Red Squirrels have become locally extinct. So Dundee City Council's own Gamekeeper is contributing to the continuing existence of Red Squirrels in the city.

The Dundee Red Squirrel Action Group was set up to discover how many squirrels there are in Dundee. With the Dundee Countryside Ranger Service, volunteers are finding out where the Reds are clinging on. Action Group volunteers carry out over a dozen surveys every month and we are looking to recruit and train five more volunteers. If you can help with surveys, or would like information on how to feed Red Squirrels, please contact the Ranger Service - tel. 01382 431848; e-mail: countrysiderangers@dundeecity.gov.uk.

Other organisations are involved including NHS Tayside and Downfield Golf Course. Sustain Dundee has been awarded a Scottish Executive Biodiversity Action Grant to boost the project over the next two years. This will support private landowners and garden owners and others who wish to become fully involved with red squirrel conservation efforts.

A video has now been produced to show what's happening in Dundee to protect and enhance our important Red Squirrel population. An Education Pack and CD is next on the cards. The video (together with the Dundee Red Squirrel Management Strategy), can be viewed on www.dundeecity.gov.uk (Click on A-Z, then 'C' for Countryside Ranger Service).



The Bigger Picture — The Scottish Squirrel Survey

The Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group is one of nine local Squirrel Groups in Scotland. It covers a critical area for Red Squirrels as Greys spread further into their territory. If we want to protect our native Reds, we need to know

- Where they still occur in healthy numbers
- Which forest areas offer the most secure populations.
- Where the Greys are expanding their current range
- And where the Greys are moving into areas currently supporting healthy Red Squirrel populations.

Experience in Southern Scotland shows that public involvement in Red Squirrel conservation efforts is vital. Ecologist Dr Mel Tonkin is the new Scottish Squirrel Survey Co-ordinator, funded by Scottish Natural Heritage. She will be encouraging as many volunteers as possible to help undertake squirrel counts in 135 chosen woodland sites. This will allow comparison between different woodlands' capacity to support Reds, as well as confirming locations

for both Reds and Greys. Where animals can't be seen easily in dense forest, open ended tubes baited with food will be set up. Sticky tape will catch some hair as the animals feed. This can be examined later to distinguish between Red and Grey Squirrels.

A lot of volunteer surveyors are needed to help with all this, together with sightings of both Reds and Greys. To get involved in the surveys or to send in records, either contact the Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group or Mel Tonkin.

WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

- Woods that contain a variety of conifer species, as well as broadleaved woods - especially those containing hazel.

WHAT ELSE DO THEY EAT?

- Tree flowers, shoots of trees, bark
- Invertebrates (insects, including caterpillars)
- Fungi, nuts, berries, fruit and lichen

New Red Squirrel Trail at Blair Atholl

As many visitors to Highland Perthshire have never seen a Red Squirrel before, the Atholl Estates Ranger Service has set up a Red Squirrel Trail in the policy woodlands at Blair Castle. It starts from the Glen Tilt car park near Blair Atholl (follow the road to Old Blair).

There is now a mile long trail in a woodland teeming with one of our most endearing mammals. The squirrels have already got used to the large number of people and dogs in the woods and are therefore relatively easy to see. Two squirrel feeders provide a focus for 'squirrel spotters'. One of the residents in the nearby caravan park has reported that he has heard the squeaky feeder lid go up and down over a hundred times in just one morning!

In the meantime, annual cone core counts have been undertaken for the past five years and some interesting facts are emerging. Some years the Red Squirrels favour Larch over Scot's Pine; other years it appears they eat a lot of beechnuts. There is still a lot to discover about their feeding habits.



Golfers help Red Squirrels

Three of Dundee's Red Squirrel sites are on golf courses. Golfers have therefore been extremely important in helping with sightings. Information is collected by staff at the starter boxes. These highly accurate records (for example 21/2/05 1 Red in pine plantation by 6th tee) have enabled detailed maps to be produced. The maps are displayed at starters boxes to provide feedback.

The Countryside Ranger Service is co-ordinating and encouraging community participation and education such as this and Red Squirrel conservation greatly benefits from it - in fact the survival of our Red Squirrels depends on it.

Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group

The Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group recently reformed and is busy building up its membership and raising awareness about the plight of Red Squirrels. Its aim is to conserve and promote the species by protecting populations and their habitats, as well as endeavouring to learn more about the interaction between Red and Grey Squirrels.

In the future, the Group will work with local businesses - especially tourism-related ones who may be able to help promote this important and attractive animal as an incentive to visit the area. Funds raised will pay for road signs and rope bridges to help reduce casualties on the roads. Ahead of this, information is being sought about Red Squirrel black spots, so please get in touch with the Group if you know of any.

Within Perth and Kinross, threats to Red Squirrels come from various sources, but one of the major ones is habitat loss. This can be from building development or replacing conifer species to a variety not suitable for foraging squirrels. The loss of habitat leads to isolated populations having to take increasing risks in moving between feeding and mating areas. The American Grey Squirrel appears to be better adapted to this sort of movement.

Red Squirrels are only one of many species affected by habitat loss, fragmentation and isolation - other mammals,

birds and many plants are also under threat. In helping to conserve our rare Red Squirrel we are also improving the situation for biodiversity as a

whole which needs a healthy environment in which to thrive. This includes humans too who can benefit from the pleasure derived from wildlife, whether it is walking in an area where Red Squirrels and other locally-important species can be seen, undertaking voluntary surveys, or just playing a part in enhancing the local area.

If you would like to join the new Group, or have any other squirrel-related information or questions, please get in touch with the following members: Louise and Paddy Garthwaite on Tel. 01250 872710 or Sarah Davidson on E-mail: sarah.davidson@virgin.net.



To take part in the Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Survey, complete the Group's new postcard or download details from www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk.

Backmuir Wood - A Case Study

Backmuir Wood is owned by the Woodland Trust Scotland and consists of 50ha of mixed woodland 4km to the northwest of Dundee. Since 1996 the wood has been managed in partnership between the Trust and the Backmuir Community Woodland Group, who have been key in promoting and carrying out the policy of Red Squirrel conservation on the site. The population of Red Squirrels in the wood was at one time threatened by an ever-increasing Grey Squirrel population, but this trend has been successfully reversed by planning ahead. Community group members have undertaken an annual programme of monitoring Reds and trapping Greys, removing over 100 between 2001 and 2004.

The wood will be managed to maintain a diverse age and species structure to provide a suitable habitat for Reds, as well as improving general woodland biodiversity. Mature conifers currently occupy a quarter of the woodland, and the Scots Pine will be thinned to encourage crown development and seeding with the aim of retaining a significant conifer component of at least 20% in the long term. The broadleaves will be thinned and regeneration encouraged to ensure there are always thicket areas as well as mature trees. The species mix will be managed to include a high proportion of native small-seeded trees such as Birch, Rowan, Ash, Willow, Hawthorn and Alder which are not favoured by Grey Squirrels.



Planting for Red Squirrels

A small wood, specifically designed to encourage Red Squirrels has been planted in Strathmartine Park, just north of Dundee.

The woodland was designed with the help of SNAG (the Strathmartine Nature Action Group), the wider local community and Angus Council Leisure Services. In the last two years trees and wild flowers have been planted by local people who even grew some of the trees from seed at the nearby Primary School.

The species were especially selected to provide Red Squirrel habitat and food. Some of the trees such as the Silver Birch have light branches – the heavier Grey Squirrels tend to be more ground dwelling. A third of the trees planted are cone-bearing trees such as the Scots pine. This is one of the Red Squirrel's favoured foods,

although they will have to wait a few years until the trees mature. Other preferred trees include European Larch, Norway Spruce and Douglas Fir. Smaller native fruit- or seed-producing trees have also been favoured, as they will support the Red Squirrel rather than the Grey. Hazel has also been introduced to provide a storable food source for the Reds even though the Greys may take advantage of this.

In years to come this woodland will hopefully be a welcome additional 'larder' for the nearby Red Squirrel population in the old Strathmartine Hospital grounds woodland. A good diverse age structure of food-providing trees is difficult to achieve within such a small area, but a good start has been made in Strathmartine Park.

TAYSIDE EVENTS

Dundee Ranger Service runs regular "Red Alert" events – activities for all ages. Find out how you can join in by contacting the Rangers (details below).

ANGUS NEWS

Fred Conacher, Angus Council's Tree Officer, reports that many of the 16,470 Hazels planted in 23 of the Angus Millennium Forest woodlands throughout the Angus burgh towns are producing Hazel nuts already! The trees are only between 3 and 5 years old.

CONTACTS IN TAYSIDE

Angus Council – Fred Conacher: Tel: 01307 473371

Angus Squirrel Contact - Chris McGregor,
Tel. 01575 530333; e-mail: Chris.McGregor@snh.gov.uk

Dundee Ranger Service: Tel. 01382 431848;
e-mail: countrysiderangers@dundeecity.gov.uk

Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group: Tel. 01250 872710 or
07880 90642; e-mail sarah.davidson@virgin.net

Scottish Squirrel Survey (Dr Mel Tonkin) - c/o Scottish Wildlife
Trust, Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4
6NS – e-mail: mtonkin@swt.org.uk

Did you know?

• Red Squirrels **do not hibernate**. They need to eat every day. In the UK they have been observed to be active in deep snow at -15°C. Even during blizzards and storms they cannot survive more than 3 days without coming out to feed.

Newsletter compiled by Catherine Lloyd, Tayside Biodiversity Co-ordinator, with contributions from Mark Simmons, Perth Museum; John Whyman, Dundee Ranger Service; Fred Conacher, Angus Council; Sarah Davidson, Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group; Roy Barlow, Woodland Trust Scotland; Atholl Estates Ranger Service; Dr. Mel Tonkin, Scottish Squirrel Survey; Mike Strachan, Forestry Commission Scotland

Thanks to SNH for supplying the distribution maps. Squirrel Data Contributors include Perth Museum & Art Gallery; SNH NE Region; BRISC; Fife Nature; Forestry Commission; Dundee Art Gallery & Museum; Inverness Museum & Art Gallery; Centre for Environmental Recording; SNH Grampian; CARSE; SNH Highland; Scottish Wildlife Trust; Grampian Ranger Service

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Published by the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership with funding by the Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage – Autumn 2005



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Scotland



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