

Red Squirrels in Tayside

Newsletter Issue 02

The Tayside area is fortunate in having so many 'champions' for its Red Squirrel population. Three local groups are undertaking a great deal of work and are joined by smaller groups and individuals who are all working to safeguard one of our most important flagship species. The Tayside Red Squirrel Forum is bringing together all these groups, especially the Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group, the Angus Squirrel Group and the Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel Group. Together with Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Squirrel Survey, who are all members of the Forum, it is hoped regular meetings will encourage an exchange of ideas and expertise.

In the meantime, the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership's Red Squirrel Action Plan will be published during 2007 and details on what is happening in the area will be highlighted on www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk, with links to local and national groups. This second Newsletter will also help to highlight work already underway.

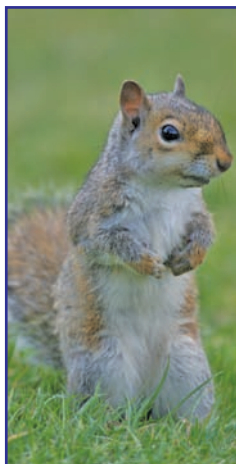
With a British population of only about 145,000 - of which three-quarters are in Scotland - there is a very real possibility that the Red squirrel could be extinct in the UK within just two decades.

Tayside is at the frontline in the battle between Red and Grey squirrels and much research and on-the-ground management is necessary to know how best to safeguard the existing population.

It is not always easy to distinguish Red and Grey squirrels, even though adult Greys are about a third larger than the native Red squirrels.

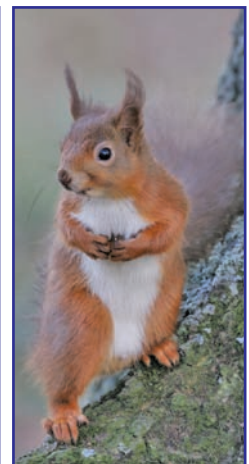
Reds vary considerably in colour from grey to brown or dark brown, or from sandy to bright red; the tail is often darker than the rest of the coat. The underside is whitish. The most important characteristic of the coat to note is that, during the autumn and winter months, some individuals can be quite grey in appearance, particularly about the head and down the flanks.

The underside of the North American Grey squirrel is white or pale grey and the sides, limbs and paws are often reddish-brown. The underfur is grey but their coat can have a salt-and-pepper appearance. The grey squirrel's natural home is the oak, hickory and walnut forests of eastern North America, where its numbers are controlled by owls, foxes and bobcats. Grey squirrels often strip the bark from young trees to gain access to the nutritious sap beneath.

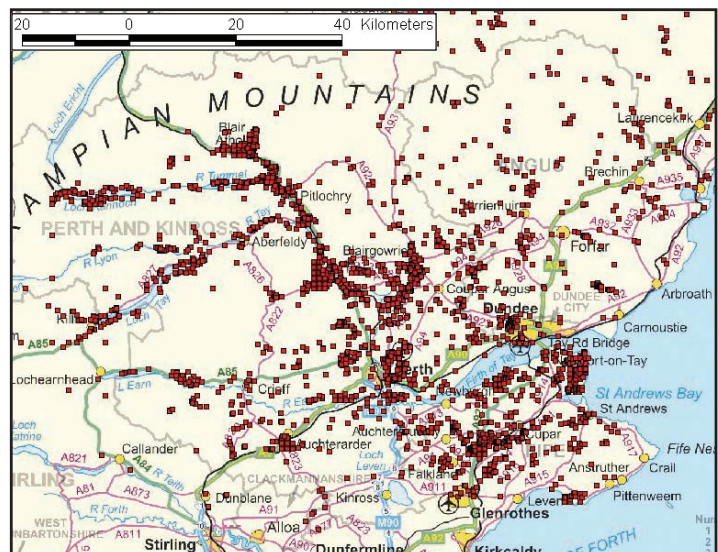
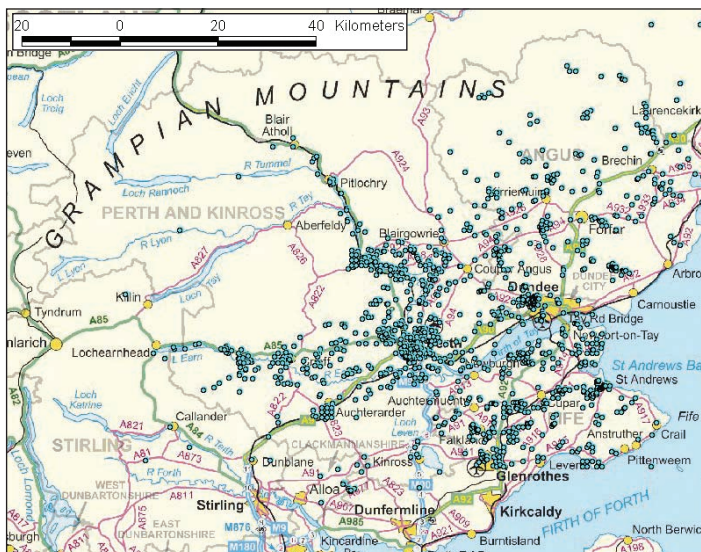


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	GREY SQUIRREL	RED SQUIRREL
Body length	25-27cm	20-22cm
Tail length	21-22cm	17-18cm
Tail colour	Look for white hairs on the edge of the tail	Tail may go pale all over
Ears	Never prominently tufted	Tufted, especially in winter
Body weight	540-660g	275-305g
Shape	Stocky	Slender
Habits	Quite bold; frequently seen on ground	Spends most of time high in trees
Food	Seeds and nuts, eggs, young birds and insects.	Conifer cones (plus fungi and fruit)
Breeding	2 litters of up to 7 young (only 3 or 4 usually survive).	Up to 2 litters of 3 young



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

Squirrel Rope Bridge for Angus

Angus Council Parks Arborists have recently been involved in the installation of a squirrel bridge over a busy 'A' class road north of Arbroath. Residents were delighted to report to the Angus Squirrel Group that they had a family of Red squirrels feeding and living in their area, but were concerned that they would be easily killed crossing the A933 Arbroath/ Friockheim road.

The suggestion of a Red squirrel rope bridge over the road was taken up by the quickly formed Arbroath Squirrel Group. The local Council's Tree Officer, Fred Conacher, was asked to help identify suitable trees and compile a bridge installation specification. After a protracted period of sorting out who was liable for maintenance, who owned the land and trees, who would pay, and which appropriate signs to put up, the bridge was finally installed in the autumn of 2006. Motorists will soon notice the Squirrel warning road signs which are to follow. Permission for permanent road signs has to be granted from the

Scottish Executive through the local Roads Department. The tree climbing and 17m span rope-bridge installation work itself was relatively easy - the road traffic was stopped briefly and a single rope strung between two tree canopies 7m above the traffic either side of the road. The 20mm thick rope is not under tension so requires minimal maintenance attention.

Fred Conacher said "it was fortunate there were two large healthy trees - a Lime and a Beech - with canopies meeting close by the squirrels' feeding area and favoured crossing point. Without that, the project would have been much harder to achieve. I hope they learn to rope walk soon!"



*Arbroath Squirrel Group
Members at the site of the rope
bridge*

Perth and Kinross Council's Support for Red Squirrels

Perth and Kinross has the only Red Squirrel Group totally run by volunteers. It is supported by Perth and Kinross Council, Forestry Commission Scotland and Atholl Estates. The Council's Ranger Service is represented on the committee; the rangers offer advice and give talks for the group and its membership, and training when required.

Although the Ranger Service within Perth and Kinross Council does not run its own group, the Countryside Section supports Red squirrel conservation in a number of ways. Staff are encouraged to make records of both live and dead sightings, including those of Grey squirrels. When it is safe to do so, and when a carcass is fresh, dead squirrels are sent to the Vet School in Edinburgh for a variety of tests. Rangers have also been collating road black spot deaths and working closely with the Roads Department to move signs if they prove to be ineffective. This has resulted in fewer squirrels being killed.

On Council-owned sites, management is carried out sensitively and, where appropriate, beneficially for Red squirrels. This has been done, for example, with the planting of Scots pine at the Knock, near Crieff, and in Black Spout Wood at Pitlochry to manage hazel coppice.

The Knock at Crieff has both Red and Grey squirrels. Red squirrel feeders have been in place for two years and are well used (including by Greys). Although recent advice suggests not feeding squirrels when both species are present, the Rangers meticulously clean the feeder at every refill. The Ranger Service plans to put a system in place to record the amount of use by both Reds and Greys, as well as other wildlife.

During the 1990's a number of 1km transects were put in place throughout the area. Some of these transects are being re-visited, namely, the Birks of Aberfeldy, and the two on Kinnoull Hill. These are being monitored by volunteers and Rangers. The results will be used to see if there has been an increase in Grey activity and to calculate the approximate population size of the Reds.

Creating a "Natural Larder" in Backmuir Wood

This wood, which lies between the villages of Muirhead and Liff to the north west of Dundee, has been managed for over 10 years by a partnership between the Woodland Trust and Backmuir Community Woodland Group. A small area is under private ownership.

Backmuir Wood is very varied in character with a mix of different tree species, ages, structures, and density of cover, along with some areas of open ground. This has encouraged a wide variety of biodiversity within the woodland and the habitat is suitable for both Red and Grey squirrels. The threat of Grey incursion has been kept at bay by an established programme of trapping by Community Group members. In addition to trialling Red feeder provision, the development of a 'natural larder' for Reds is also being undertaken - Scots Pines are being thinned to encourage top growth and open up the canopy to allow natural

regeneration. Native seed-bearing trees are also being encouraged to grow as part of the broad-leaved mix within the wood.

Red squirrel monitoring has been undertaken informally for years with local people noting the increase in Reds following their own successes in controlling Grey squirrels. Current concerns about suburban sprawl and the consequent threat to habitat by housing development have brought this up a level. With the support of the Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel Group, four transects have been mapped out through the woodland and volunteers will undertake regular surveying. The data collected will be channelled through the Scottish Squirrel Survey, hopefully establishing the importance of Backmuir as a significant Red squirrel habitat.

One of the volunteers, a keen photographer, published a very attractive calendar featuring local Red squirrels and other wildlife. Funds raised from the sale of the calendars will buy Red squirrel food and maintain feeders in the area. Further details are available from rosieandjim@tinyworld.co.uk

Dundee's Success Story



Signs are good that Red squirrel conservation efforts have been successful in Dundee. Current population figures indicate that, for the first time in some years, there is a stabilisation of numbers. Further observations have noted Red squirrels revisiting areas that had once harboured Greys exclusively. We now know that there are approximately one hundred Red squirrels in the City: this makes Dundee one of the only urban areas in the UK to have a stable population.

The efforts of the City's gamekeeper and pest control officers have brought about a significant reduction in Grey squirrels and have relieved the pressure on some of the more threatened Red strongholds. Buffer zones are being established around the areas of Caird Park, Camperdown Park, Templeton Woods and Liff Hospital (West Green Park) to help safeguard these Red strongholds.

The Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel Project has recruited a project officer for the second year running thanks to a Biodiversity Action Grant Scheme award from the Scottish Executive. The project officer has a wide-ranging remit including monitoring the population, supporting volunteers, working with partners, advising residents and promoting awareness through talks, school visits and events.

Further funding from the SITA Tayside Biodiversity Action Fund will allow the Project to undertake practical work such as Grey control, maintaining

the volunteer programme and delivering input to the Scottish Squirrel Survey database. It will also allow an expansion of installation and maintenance of Red squirrel-specific feeders throughout their territories. The BBC Breathing Places Big Lottery Fund awarded a grant to raise public support for conservation work within the buffer zones. Plans are underway to produce a Householder Pack, an Education Pack for Dundee schools, and standing displays that will feature in libraries throughout the city and be used at events held by the Project and Dundee Countryside Rangers.

The Project has come on in leaps and bounds since its inception in 2002. None of it would have been possible without the continuing support of dedicated volunteers and partners. This year the volunteers have been rewarded for enthusiasm and diligence by the provision of protective winter wear sporting the Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel Project logo. Not only will this keep them warm, but it will help to advertise their presence in the woodlands and raise public awareness.

The list of partners involved with the Project continues to grow: NHS Tayside, Downfield Golf Course, Dundee University, Duncarse Developments, SCRI, Scottish Enterprise Tayside, and D.C. Thomson have all assisted lately. Support has also been provided to the efforts of other groups at Backmuir Woods and Dronley Wood, and the fledgling Angus Squirrel Group.

The Project is confident that the funding and support it enjoys will enable it to achieve its aim of protecting and enhancing the Red squirrel population and its associated habitats for the benefit and pleasure of the community and the overall environmental credentials of the City.

Auchterhouse Squirrel Watch

The Squirrel Watch Group Shares its Experience

Do you live near woodland which might be home to squirrels? We do and two years ago we decided to survey the squirrel population in our small, local wood.

Dronley Wood consists of about 50 hectares of mixed conifers with some beech and birch. It is located just outside Auchterhouse village in Angus, five miles north of Dundee. It is owned by Forestry Commission Scotland and must be one of their smallest woodlands. Commercial activity has been limited and the wood is now a favourite place for locals to walk.

A Community Woodland Users Group was set up six years ago to work with Forestry Commission Scotland to maintain and clear paths, create new paths, and highlight the benefits of the wood as a local amenity and wildlife haven. There are resident herons, a pair of buzzards, deer and, of course, squirrels. A broad woodland wildlife survey was decided against to focus initially on the squirrels.

Dr Mel Tonkin, Survey Co-ordinator of the Scottish Squirrel Survey, came to talk to us and show us how to undertake a survey. It was the biggest audience in Auchterhouse for ages! Duly inspired and instructed, a core group (some from the community woodland group, some solely with an interest in squirrels) set up the surveys. The local Forestry Commission office was very supportive, allowing us to mark the survey transects in the wood with tape and posts. The transects were set up away from paths. Each of the four transects was only 500 metres long, taking about an hour to do (allowing the really enthusiastic volunteer to do a transect before going to work). The collated results are being sent to the Scottish Squirrel Survey.

Creeping through the undergrowth at dawn might not be some people's idea of fun, but we think that being down in the wood at

first light when it's quiet, with a real purpose for being there and the possibility of seeing Red squirrels is really rewarding.

The results have been interesting - it's been good to contribute data to the Scottish Squirrel Survey, but we are sufficiently interested now to continue surveying for our own information. The results have confirmed that, despite the mixed populations around us, only Red squirrels have been seen in Dronley. We don't know why, so we are now asking for any sightings of Greys in the hope of spotting the first incursions. Maybe it will remain a Red squirrel haven - at least we'll have the data to know.

In the meantime, the Forestry Commission's plans to clear fell three areas of the wood have been shelved in the light of the results and Red squirrel conservation will now figure largely in the management plans for the wood.

There has been a lot of interest locally and individuals in the village have set up their own Red squirrel conservation measures. Regular Squirrel Watch updates appear in the Auchterhouse Newsletter and there is a representative from the group attending Angus Squirrel Group meetings.

Setting up a Red Squirrel survey may be easier than you think. People are interested and motivated because it is local - it just needs someone, or just a small group, to get it started. Local squirrel surveys will be helpful to the Tayside Red Squirrel Forum which brings together all the local groups - and all the information will go towards compiling the Scottish Squirrel map.



A dark red squirrel on a branch
©Eric McCabe, Wildscot Photos

News from the Scottish Squirrel Survey

SURVEY SUCCESS

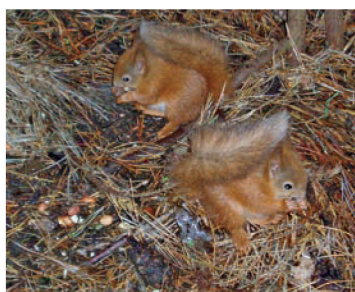
During 2006 people from all over Scotland contributed more than 700 new records to the Scottish Squirrel Database (310 from Tayside). Together with the online recording facility on the Survey's new website at www.scottishsquirrelsurvey.co.uk, this has given a significant boost to Scottish squirrel recording, as well as highlighting the issues of Red squirrel conservation to many new people. Local squirrel groups, records centres and other public records have contributed a further 2,666 records during the past year. It is hoped new records will be received for years to come.

Local groups have also started to undertake standard surveys of forest areas that might be suitable for earmarking as Red Squirrel Conservation Areas. Two of the first forest surveys to be completed in Perthshire were Baluain Forest on the Blair Atholl Estate and Craigvinean Forest near Dunkeld, thanks to the efforts of Blair Atholl Estate Ranger, Polly Freeman, volunteer Bill Melville and his group of helpers. They used standard walked routes from which to count squirrels and provided 43 new Red squirrel records from Baluain and 34 from Craigvinean; no Greys were seen at either forest during sampling. A notable surveying success was achieved by the Dronley Wood volunteers whose standard surveys produced 48 new Red squirrel records (and no Greys) in an area of just 50 hectares. The group plans to repeat the surveys each year to monitor changing trends in squirrel fortunes. Their findings have already managed to produce significant changes to the forest design plan at Dronley to favour the Red squirrels.

The Scottish Squirrel Survey is to host a conference to report on the survey's progress and developments in Red squirrel conservation in Scotland. It promises to be a useful forum for the exchange of practical ideas for Red squirrel conservation that can be implemented by local squirrel groups, conservation bodies, local authorities and others. Further details are available from Dr Mel Tonkin: mtonkin@swt.org.uk.

News from Elsewhere in Scotland

A new squirrel group has been established on the Cowal Peninsula in Argyll. This should cover the most likely invasion route of Greys into the area which currently only has a Red squirrel population. In Fife, where another group has been set up, there are Grey squirrels in most areas, but also healthy and widespread populations of Reds on the doorsteps of large human populations. This makes it an excellent area for developing public involvement in the conservation of the species. In South West Scotland a new Red Squirrel Conservation Officer has been appointed by the Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group to alert the public to the need to stop the ever-spreading Greys from displacing Ayrshire's remaining Red squirrels.



Kits just out of the drey
©Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group

In the Scottish Borders and Dumfries & Galloway, squirrelpox-carrying Grey squirrels have continued to be identified by the

monitoring programme set up by the Red Squirrels in South Scotland Project. The disease, which is fatal to Reds, is carried harmlessly by Greys moving over the border from Cumbria. Blood tests have revealed 39 instances of Grey squirrels with antibodies to the virus, although so far no outbreaks of disease among Red squirrels have been spotted. The Project has appointed two Grey Squirrel Control Officers to help prevent the further spread of the disease to Scotland's Greys, from which it would be impossible to prevent the spread of disease to Red squirrels over large areas of Scotland.

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