



Westmorland Red Squirrels

making the future safe for our red squirrels

Newsletter

Issue 13, Autumn 2016

The unexpectedly low number of greys this year is very welcome, but presents us with our next challenge which is to keep it that way—by stopping any remaining greys from breeding back to their previous levels. I can't emphasise enough how important it is that we all act together to take advantage of this unique opportunity to further safeguard our reds and give them the space to expand. If you know of others who might be encouraged to carry out grey control on their property, now couldn't be a better time for them to join the fight to protect our reds.

Adrian Vass, Director of the UK Squirrel Accord (UKSA), spoke at our AGM about a pilot scheme in the National Forest to put woodland owners in touch with volunteer shooters. In this issue, the article by Steve Bloomfield describes the scheme in more detail. If there's sufficient interest in the scheme from local landowners we can take this further, so please get in touch to let me know your views.

The examples of bark-stripping and nest predation so close to home in Windermere and Kentmere show that grey squirrels are not just a threat to red squirrels, they can cause devastating and expensive setbacks for those managing woodland for timber and wildlife.

In their Spring monitoring report, RSNE refer to "*uncertainties over future funding, including the value of Countryside Stewardship to red squirrel conservation.*" This has already hit us hard at a critical time – we find that Mike Green, RSNE's Ranger for the Rydal/Loughrigg area, is not being replaced because there's no immediate prospect of the post's current funding being continued under the new Countryside Stewardship scheme. Red squirrel conservation can't be turned off and on like a tap to accommodate these gaps in funding provision, and we fully support RSNE's intention to inform DEFRA that the Countryside Stewardship scheme is failing to deliver vital grey control where and when it's needed.

I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to Peter Naylor, who was elected at our AGM as the first President of Westmorland Red Squirrels. Peter has been an active supporter of red squirrel conservation for many, many years. Finally, and once again, I'd like to thank all those who give us their generous and continuing support, both financial and practical. We couldn't do any of this without your help.

Geoff Hetherington, Chairman

Rusland's Reds

Rusland's Reds, our project to restore red squirrel populations in the Rusland Valley and surrounding areas as part of the Rusland Horizons Scheme, is now up and running. Our inaugural meeting at Hay Bridge Nature Reserve in September attracted many local people who are enthusiastically behind the project. We now have an active group who will coordinate actions in the area, monitor several locations and prepare for next season's programme of grey control.

There will be loads of opportunities for more people to learn about what's involved and get actively en-

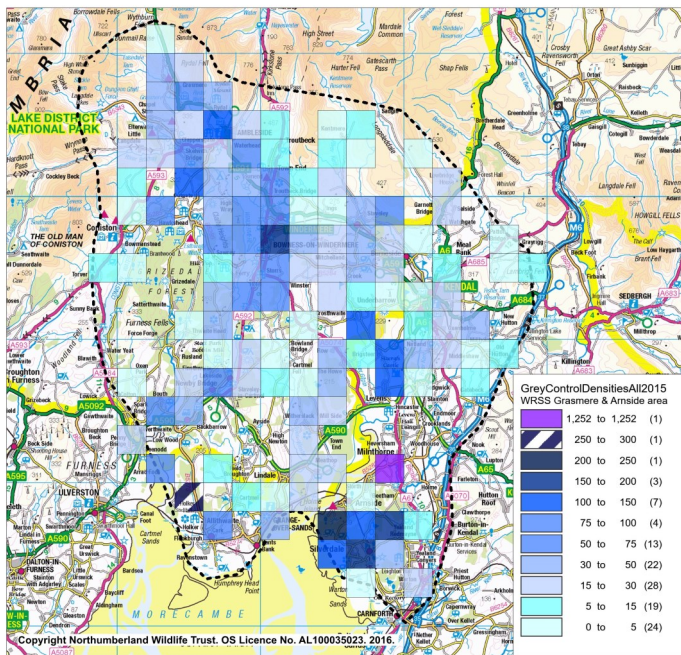
gaged as this three year project gathers pace. If you're interested, or know someone who might be, our next training and familiarisation day will be at Colton Village Hall on 3 November. For more details contact me at:

secretary@westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk

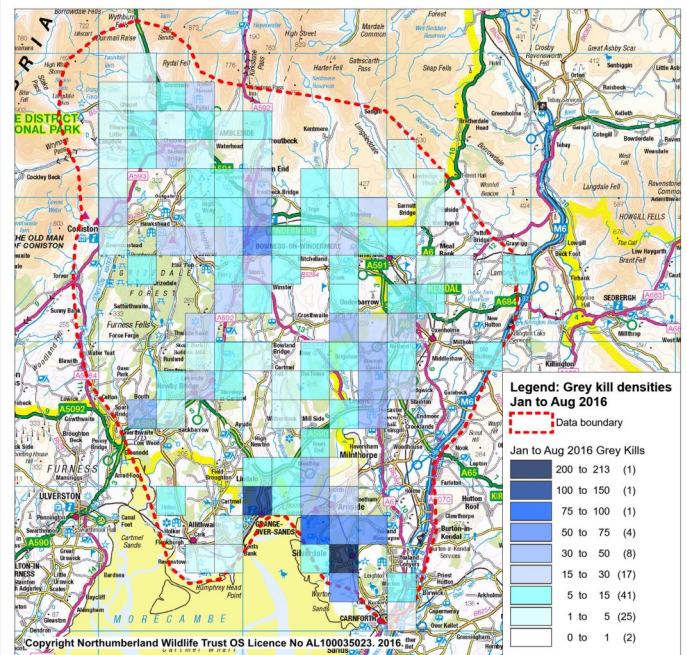


Inaugural meeting at Hay Bridge Nature Reserve





Grey Cull Densities—All 2015



Grey Cull Densities—2016 January-August

The coloured 2km squares show where we had reports of grey squirrels culled in the areas covered by Westmorland Red Squirrels and Grasmere Red Squirrel Group. The shading of the squares indicates the numbers caught—see key. WRS supply cull data to Red Squirrels Northern England and they combine it with data from their own rangers and data supplied by the Grasmere Red Squirrel Group to produce the maps.

Grey squirrel control

The big story in 2016 has been how few greys there were about, hardly making an appearance until June in some areas, and then in lower numbers than we'd usually expect to see. Because of year-on-year variables, we're very cautious about comparing one year's cull figures with the next, particularly as with the maps above, where we're looking at full year's figures for 2015 next to an interim part-year map for 2016—there are still some figures to come in for Jan-Aug. Generally speaking, though, we do get the bulk of our cull figures in the period up to August.

We're making this map comparison now to see if the cull figures bear out the anecdotal reports we've had of fewer greys, and from the far lighter shading on the 2016 map it's certainly looking that

way. RSNE have given our total cull figure for Jan to Aug 2015 as 3605, and our (interim) figure for Jan to Aug in 2016 as 1742. They also say that the overall cull figure for northern England to date in 2016 is around half that of the previous year.

Environmental factors could still work against us—there are some reports of a large acorn crop this year, and if the weather's favourable for greys we know they can carry on breeding well into the winter months. But if these low grey numbers do carry through to next year, we need to be prepared well in advance and have adapted our tactics to deal with this new situation—for example, we would expect a much greater focus on monitoring than before. Meanwhile we know there are definitely still some greys at large, so we can't afford to relax our vigilance.

Can you help?

We're looking for people to help us with monitoring all over our area. At its simplest, all this involves is from time to time placing bird-feeders in woodland near where you live, and then checking them a few days later—full instructions will be given. Or could you let us have your details so that we can contact you occasionally if we need an update on

the squirrel situation in your area?

We also need volunteers for next year who can spare the odd half day helping our team to man the Westmorland Red Squirrels stand at local shows—no prior squirrel knowledge is necessary.

Please get in touch with Bob if you can help or if you'd like to know about other ways to volunteer:

secretary@westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk

RSNE Spring monitoring report

Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE) provide an invaluable service in recording all of our reported red sightings and grey cull records and then collating them with those from their own rangers and other volunteer groups across the north of England. Their annual Spring survey, now in its fifth year, provides the science that justifies our continued efforts and influences the approach we need to adopt to continue to protect our red squirrels. This is an extract from page 20 of RSNE's report, **Results of the squirrel monitoring programme, spring 2016:**

There were almost universal reports of poor natural food sources in autumn 2015, in particular of oak and beech. This, coupled with extremely wet weather, may have influenced over-winter survival rates in grey squirrels, and is certainly likely to have impacted on their ability to successfully breed in some areas. The results imply that red squirrels have not been affected to the same extent, although one important additional factor - the suppression of grey squirrel numbers through control - is likely to have contributed towards the results.

Many anecdotal reports suggest that grey squirrels have been harder than usual to find in many woodlands in the first half of 2016. Results showed an increase in the number of sites where no squirrels of either species were detected, up to 27.6% of sites compared to 22.4% in 2015. There were numerous blanks in woodlands that last year



were occupied by high numbers of greys, for example in areas of south Cumbria. Environmental factors, as well as consistent local grey squirrel management may well have influenced this result.

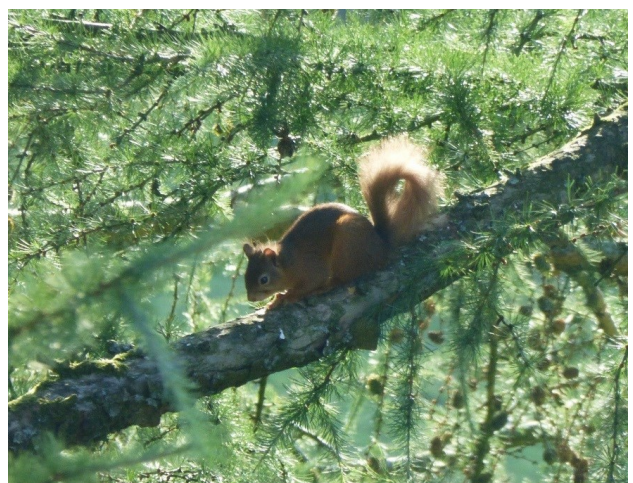
The RSNE survey report makes for encouraging reading, with real evidence that vindicates our faith – when many others doubted it – that with our help the reds can survive and thrive in south Cumbria and beyond. Nonetheless, we can't be complacent or drop our guard—our conservation work must continue and we are reviewing our control tactics as the greys become more elusive.

The full RSNE 2016 survey report is can be downloaded from RSNE's website or by following this [link>>](#).

What's happening to the reds?

We've had fewer red squirrel sightings reported this year, indicating that reds may also have suffered in the adverse conditions over last autumn/winter. The good news is that their range hasn't been affected in the areas where red populations are established, and we're now beginning to get more of the sightings which show that there are still small numbers of reds present across much of our area, ready to re-establish when the greys are no longer a threat. Reds have been seen in: Levens, Endmoor, Grange-over-Sands, Backbarrow and very recently in Windermere, Winster, Holker, Brockhole and Grizedale. The Troutbeck reds are still thriving, and there's been a very welcome return of reds to Tarn Hows. You can keep up to date with our latest red sightings on our online map at:

www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk/squirrels/maps/



Red squirrel seen in Endmoor in July 2016
Photo by Linda Sinfield

Please do what you can to encourage people to report any red squirrels they see—reds are not easy to spot in the wild, so each sighting is important.

Arnside and Silverdale

Volunteers and contractors culled 541 greys up to the end of June. Activity was purposely targeted in an area west of the railway line as part of a strategy to progressively reduce grey populations through coordinated trapping and shooting. Control by the Dallam Tower, Levens Hall and Leighton Hall Estates as well as a growing number of caravan sites seem to be contributing to a dramatic drop in grey sightings. While more than 90 per cent of the area's woodland is



Checking feeder and trap in Silverdale © David Talbot

now under active control, we continue to encourage remaining woodland owners, including the RSPB and Lancashire Wildlife Trust, to join our collaborative approach. We are very grateful for support from Holgates caravan parks, the John Barnes Charitable Trust and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty's Landscape Trust.

Our strategy for 2017 is to consolidate control in the 'northern corridor' between Silverdale and Levens Bridge to encourage red repopulation from known red colonies to the north and east.

Troutbeck tails

Enjoying a few spring rays, 10/4/2016.
It doesn't always rain in Troutbeck!



A family outing in front of the camera at High Kingate 23/04/2016



We continued to feed the reds daily all summer, never sure how many reds in total, at least two! Mrs K produced a second litter.

By July, red sightings were being reported lower down the valley, this one on the left visited every Tuesday for 3 weeks!

AGM

These are not always the most eventful dates in the calendar but on this well-attended occasion there were several memorable moments. We elected our first President, Peter Naylor who has the Bryerswood Estate at Far Sawrey. Peter has been a stalwart of the Society since its earliest days and provides us with great expertise and influence as a highly respected landowner in the heart of our area. We al-

so welcomed Kath Edwards of Crosthwaite as a new trustee, replacing Steph McIvor. Finally, we enjoyed an excellent presentation by Adrian Vass, Director of the UK Squirrel Accord on securing existing red squirrel populations, particularly in northern Britain, and reversing the damage caused by grey squirrels to broadleaved woodlands. Adrian also explained UKSA's role in encouraging scientific research into vaccines for grey squirrel control and to combat squirrel pox virus in reds.

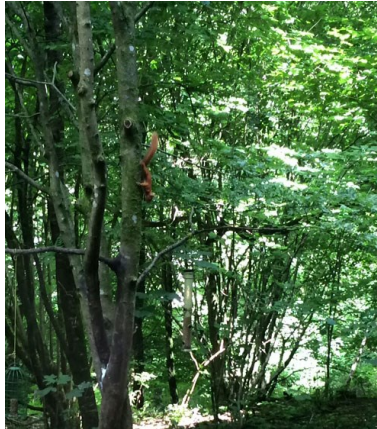
Mike Green

Mike Green has very recently left to become the RSNE Ranger for the North Lakes area. Mike has been the RSNE Ranger working to the south of Grasmere since the start of the RSNE project, becoming a valued and much respected member of our team. In 2012 there were no reds at all being seen in Rydal and Mike made it his personal goal to en-

sure that they returned there. One of our most recent sightings this year was from someone who watched 2 red squirrels playing for 20 minutes. They were viewing from the hide that Mike had helped to set up with the staff at Rydal Hall. Needless to say, Mike will be very much missed. We wish him well in his new position and we'll hold him to his promise to stay in touch.

Brockhole

Three years ago we successfully negotiated a licence with the Lake District National Park Authority to control grey squirrels at the Lake District Visitor Centre at Brockhole on Windermere. We and the Authority recognised the risk of the site's woodland and bird feeders becoming a haven for grey squirrels at a time when they were making red squirrel protection a priority in the National Park's Biodiversity Action Plan. With the licence in place, a small but skilled group of our volunteers has



Red squirrel at Brockhole.
Image courtesy of
Wendy Carroll

provided sensitive, humane and sustained grey control. Meanwhile, similar work in the surrounding area has seen the recovery of red squirrels, offering further cause for optimism that Brockhole might become *the* place in our area for the public to see reds.

Great joy, then, when at the end of July one of the National Park's own volunteers spotted a red heading for the bird feeders at the bird hide!

We're now re-doubling our efforts to encourage the reds to take up permanent residence. Let us know if you see one there or nearby.

Kentmere/Longsleddale to Sizergh area

This year I've increased the area I cover to include all of Kentmere and Longsleddale as well as Barrowfield Wood. There are now very few gaps in the grey squirrel control that I'm undertaking along with those people who are either shooting or trapping. From the start of the season it was clear that there were a lot less greys around, everyone I spoke with was commenting on this. Unfortunately there were also less red squirrels being seen, possibly as a result of the squirrelpox outbreak last autumn.

During the course of the season the work has gone well, I've caught nearly 230 grey squirrels and believe that relatively few remain in the area. Kentmere still has some red squirrels and there are no recent reports of greys being seen. Similarly Longsleddale has a growing population of red squirrels

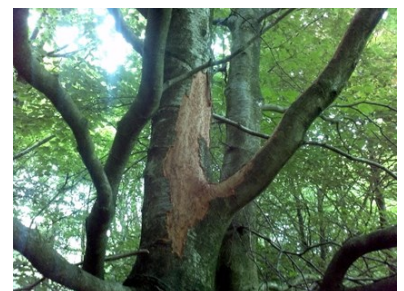
with only a few greys and luckily appears to have avoided squirrelpox over the past year, all thanks to those people who have taken action to help their local reds. Further south, although the grey squirrel population has been greatly reduced and there have been a few promising sightings of reds, it could take several years for red squirrels to return to all their old woodlands.

What happens next year will depend upon food supplies and breeding conditions for both reds and greys and whether significant numbers of grey squirrels move into the area from outside, hopefully not with all the excellent work being done further south. Thank you to everyone who has helped with moving traps and provided me with very welcome cups of tea and coffee and of course biscuits, much appreciated.

Jeff Scovell

Woodland trees - Windermere

In June, a Windermere landowner returned from a fortnight away to find 20 of his trees badly damaged by bark-stripping caused by grey squirrels – shown in the photo to the right. All the affected trees were about 30 years old. This tree damage is typical of grey squirrels everywhere and has implications for all who are managing woodlands, both for the trees they've planted and the wildlife the trees support.



The grey menace

STEVE BLOOMFIELD reports on a new pilot scheme using volunteers with air rifles to control grey squirrels in the National Forest.

I doubt that I am alone in stating that there has been a dramatic increase in grey squirrel numbers recently. Certainly 2015 seems to have been a bumper year for breeding and just about every landowner, manager or keeper that I have spoken to has confirmed this impression. Now, anyone who manages our woodland understands the damage that squirrels can do to growing timber. A DEFRA commissioned study (2010) estimated that grey squirrels cost the British economy £14m per annum but there are deeper issues for the native red squirrel and conservation in general.

As a gamekeeper, grey squirrel control was always a priority from the estate forestry perspective but it always amazes me the number of people who don't realise that grey squirrels also take eggs and fledglings and are a serious menace to breeding song birds.

The National Forest in the Midlands covers some 200

importance to protect young woodlands in the forest; however, we also know that it is a time-consuming and costly operation to undertake.

"We were looking for ways to reduce this burden while still affording maximum protection to vulnerable trees and this project could provide the answer. We have used the pilot to gather data on the effectiveness of this control method, so that we may compare this against more conventional trapping methods. With BASC, we will collate this data to understand if this is a robust, effective and humane method to control grey squirrels within woodland."

We need a safe, humane and effective control tool

Knowing how grey squirrels target game feeders we have installed bait stations and have recruited a small group of experienced volunteers equipped with suitable air rifles. For the land owner or manager this approach has advantages over relying totally on cage or spring traps. It eliminates the responsibility of having to check traps which can be time-consuming for busy or part-time land managers. It is safe and humane – bait stations are positioned so that range and back-stops can be

guaranteed and directed away from public footpaths. Shooters on the pilot scheme underwent an awareness day designed at covering all aspects of responsible shooting and will take an accuracy assessment and receive a certificate. The other important element is that, as BASC members, they will all be covered by quality insurance.

David Burchell, a National Forest scheme landowner, forestry consultant and pilot scheme host, said; "We planted 60,000 hardwood trees in 2001/2002 to increase sporting potential while creating a long-term commercial

timber asset and it was alarming to see how much damage was caused by grey squirrels. We have always controlled grey squirrels as part of our shoot management plan and therefore decided it was a good idea to record the numbers killed through different methods; the results have proved very interesting."



square miles stretching from Leicester in the east to beyond Burton on Trent in the west. Within this area, BASC and the National Forest Company have been working together on a pilot scheme to establish the effectiveness of establishing control groups to reduce grey squirrel numbers.

Charles Robinson from the National Forest Company said; "Grey squirrel control is of paramount

Landowners need to take responsibility and face facts

Without a landscape-scale solution to the problem of grey squirrel population and distribution we will fail to protect valuable timber resources. Equally importantly we will never get to a situation where our native red squirrel successfully re-establishes and is able to re-populate more widely.

Without doubt, many landowners take this responsibility seriously and have a robust programme of control, but what about the areas of forestry and landowner's in-between these where little or no control takes place? All that happens is that a sanctuary is created where grey squirrels can breed and then re-populate the surrounding areas, frustrating the hard work and expense already undertaken. This is where the control groups come into operation allowing landowners to contact BASC through the scheme, and register an interest in receiving help with their control. BASC members, who live locally and have undergone the required training and assessment, will be introduced to the landowner. There will be club rules in place and an agreement between the landowner and control group members will ensure accountability and scrutiny. The idea is to provide a free control solution to those who don't have the time or resources on their land and to link these areas together with those who are engaged in control. This will establish a landscape-scale control area allowing a rapid reduction in population (and possible eradication in red squirrel zones) and then maintain sufficiently low densities.

The BASC/National Forest grey squirrel control scheme, if successful, could lead the way to a sustainable, inexpensive and humane long-term solution to the problem of overpopulation, damage to growing timber and conservation of our native species. Similar projects are being trialled in the south west of England and a number of red squirrel



Evidence of damage caused to trees by grey squirrels



A grey squirrel bait station

groups have expressed an interest in hearing the results.

Anyone wishing to know more about the scheme should contact the BASC Central England centre.

Steve Bloomfield is BASC Director England

This article first appeared in the March/April 2016 issue of **Shooting And Conservation**, the BASC magazine, and has been reproduced here with their kind permission.

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Woodland birds - Kentmere

A Kentmere landowner has been encouraging wild birds by placing nest boxes in his woodland. He and his bird-expert, Paul, had been worried about nest predation by grey squirrels and its effects on breeding success. Looking at the meticulous records that Paul's kept over the years, we can understand why.

Paul's records showing nest box performance are broken down into 4 different woodland areas, and each gives data for up to 5 species of bird: Blue Tit, Great Tit, Pied Flycatcher, Nuthatch and Redstart. Some of the records go back as far as 2008 and make fascinating reading. **Table 1** gives a summary of all 5 bird species for all 4 woodlands from 2011-2016 (2014 is not included). Pulli are birds ringed in the nest.

Table 1

All Birds for Year	No. Boxes	% Used	Failures	Nests	Eggs	Pulli	Fledged
2011	108	76.8	18	83	602	466	369
2012	108	75.9	21	82	534	423	320
2013	118	66.4	16	73	494	381	321
2015	138	79.7	60	110	703	354	257
2016	138	61.6	15	85	588	473	433

2015 stands out as a year that started very well with record numbers of nests and eggs, but which then crashed spectacularly, recording the lowest number to fledge. In contrast, while 2016 doesn't hold the record for the number of nests or eggs, it comes out as the top year in terms of the number of nestlings to fledge. What went wrong in 2015, and why was 2016 so much better?

From a squirrel perspective there's one very obvious 'coincidence'. In 2015 there was an explosion in grey squirrel population numbers, followed in 2016 by an equally dramatic decline. Our grey squirrel cull records show the Kentmere valley was no exception to this trend, with a spike in culls in 2015 and then some woods in 2016 recording no squirrel presence at all. There's absolutely no doubt that grey

squirrels will raid birds' nests and take both eggs and live nestlings, making them prime suspects for the poor breeding results in 2015. If we can keep the grey squirrel numbers in Kentmere down to 2016 levels or below, we can hope for another good year for Kentmere's wild birds in 2017.

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Enquiries to Bob Bradley. Tel: 015395 52340

Email: nestbox@westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk



Westmorland Red Squirrels

making the future safe for our red squirrels

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