

WESTMORLAND RED SQUIRREL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Issue 5 Autumn 2012

The determination of our ever increasing number of volunteers never ceases to amaze me - they all deserve a medal for their sheer hard work, all done for little or no reward, but, as they point out, their reward is the continuing successful survival of the red squirrel. Without their dedicated efforts over the years, red squirrels could have already disappeared from Cumbria and perhaps from the rest of the North of England, too.

As you will read in this newsletter, because of our efforts, the reds are returning, and we are working hard to ensure they will continue to do so. Unfortunately, we occasionally come across people who insist on feeding grey squirrels because they don't have any reds nearby - this is basically the same misguided attitude that created the problem in the first place. For too long now people have been either deliberately or inadvertently feeding greys, and in doing so are effectively killing off the reds. It must be one of our top priorities to ensure that people are made aware of the consequences of feeding grey squirrels so that this unnecessary threat to our reds can be reduced and eventually stopped.

It is not just the red squirrel that the greys threaten - they decimate bird populations and cause severe damage to trees and property, which is outlined in previous issues of the newsletter. People feeding grey squirrels make our job harder and prolong the job in hand. However, we are confident that the determination of the rapidly increasing number of members and volunteers will ensure that we achieve our goal in Cumbria and across the North of England.

Check out the very exciting news in this edition regarding reds returning to Betty Fold and sightings near Brockhole Visitor Centre.

Geoff Hetherington, Chairman

Red Squirrels Return to Betty Fold

By Neil Salisbury

Tarn Hows and its surrounding area has traditionally been a stronghold for our native Red Squirrels. We bought Betty Fold at Hawkshead Hill almost 10 years ago and reds were common visitors to the garden. We opened Betty Fold Tea Room and Gallery some seven years ago and visitors were delighted to be able to view the squirrels routinely on the feeders.



About five years ago our local population were devastated with Squirrel Pox and apart from an odd visitor about three years ago, the only squirrels we were seeing were greys and though we were trying to control their numbers, we felt we were fighting an uphill battle.

Earlier this year we began to get reports that there were odd reds still about, so with the help of the Westmorland Red Squirrel Society we had a concerted effort to rid our area of greys, hoping that reds would eventually re-establish themselves

Continued over

Red Squirrels Return to Betty Fold *continued*

The results have been staggering. By setting a number of traps around the three acre garden at Betty Fold we have accounted for a huge number of grey squirrels in the last few months, twenty in June alone, and we are pleased to report that there have been no grey sightings now for over three weeks.



What has happened, however, is that we now have at least five red squirrels visiting the garden and the feeders every day. We have established a number of squirrel feeders around the garden and visitors to the Tea Room are delighted by their antics. As a wildlife photographer, this has been a fantastic opportunity to view and record these beautiful little creatures close up and some of the photographs I have taken can be seen on the Wildlife and Nature section of my website www.bettyfold.co.uk and I also keep updating the Facebook Page which is accessible from the website.

Kentmere

The current situation in Kentmere is that very few greys are being seen – people living and working in the valley are keeping us regularly informed, and action is being targeted where necessary. There was a virtually grey-free spell over the winter, followed by a few grey sightings in spring. Not all of these can have been accounted for, as this was followed by a minor explosion of young greys in June. At the beginning of August the situation is back again to no greys being seen, although vigilance and monitoring with trail cameras continues. This is a very far cry from the situation pre-2010 where greys were being seen in the valley in ever-increasing numbers.

The decline in grey numbers has brought with it a very welcome return of the reds. Reds are being seen throughout the length of the valley this year, as they were in 2011, with the furthest south being nearly in Staveley itself. In April we had a report of 5 reds being seen together and in June one was spotted in the Green Quarter, a new location for recent red sightings. Nick Mason, the head of the Red Squirrels Northern England project, visited the valley in April and we were very pleased to record his sighting of a Kentmere red squirrel seen on the top of a wall by the side of the road.

Greys are not the only problem for the Kentmere reds – there is a very efficient family of buzzards living in the crags towards the top of the valley. Possibly owing to fluctuations in the rabbit population, the buzzards have been less obvious towards the middle of the valley over the last two years, the area where most reds are being seen, but since spring this year they are starting to be seen in greater numbers again, which is not good news for the reds.

Reds Getting Close to Brockhole Visitor Centre

The very exciting news has come in late July of a red squirrel seen in Newclose Wood, to the south of Ambleside. This is the furthest south in the Ambleside/Windermere corridor that a red has been spotted in recent times – and it means that reds are now within a stone's throw of the LDNPA Brockhole Visitor Centre.

Our volunteers Jeff Scovell & Mike have put in a lot of hours clearing this corridor of greys over the last years and this is not only a vindication of their effort there, but it also shows the effectiveness of their trapping method. The 3 annual red sightings maps available on the WRSS website (www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk) back this up - reds have now re-established in Skelghyll Wood and are recorded there for the second consecutive year, as well as red sightings now being reported all around Ambleside itself, including sightings of young red squirrels this year. A very recent red sighting has been recorded in August at The Samling – the staff there are surprised that a red has returned so quickly after control work was carried out. Two more red sightings have since been recorded in August – another at The Samling and one to just north of Brockhole.

Mike & Jeff have identified this Ambleside/Windermere corridor as an incursion route for greys moving north into the stronghold area around Rydal/Grasmere, so this focus brings the added benefit of providing protection for the reds within the stronghold itself. WRSS are very grateful for Mike & Jeff's hard work and dedication, both here and elsewhere in the WRSS area, and are delighted to be able to announce this successful outcome on their behalf – very well done!

Since this was written there have been two so-far-unconfirmed reports of a red seen at Brockhole itself...



Ings Sheepdog Trials

WRSS at the local shows in 2012



Damson Day

WRSS Underbarrow Initiative

By Ian Hackett, Underbarrow

A notice was placed in the Parish Magazine and a small poster pinned on the village notice board inviting people with an interest in grey squirrel control to attend a meeting in the Underbarrow Punch Bowl Inn on 14th June 2012, the function room being kindly provided at no cost to the society.

Our Chairman, Geoff Hetherington, gave a very interesting and informative talk to an audience of approximately 30 members and non-members, a good turnout for a small village! Geoff explained the aims of the society, the spread of grey squirrels and the parapox virus, the need for grey squirrel control and showed, with the aid of maps and diagrams, how and where red squirrels are moving back into areas cleared of greys. This was then linked into a view of how this work will hopefully lead to red squirrels being sighted once again in the Underbarrow area in the not too distant future. Geoff then went on to show a range of traps describing their uses and methods of deployment, this was followed by a lively question and answer session.

Following the meeting those who left details have been contacted along with some local landowners and this has led to a number of grey squirrel control projects taking place. It should perhaps be noted that a number of WRSS members in this area are doing exceptional work in grey squirrel control. The numbers on the return sheets are very encouraging.

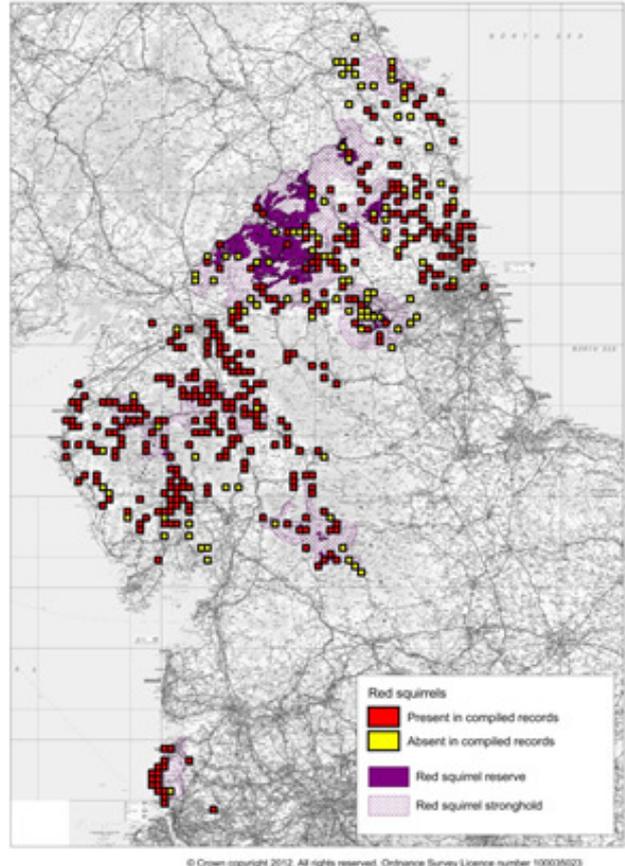
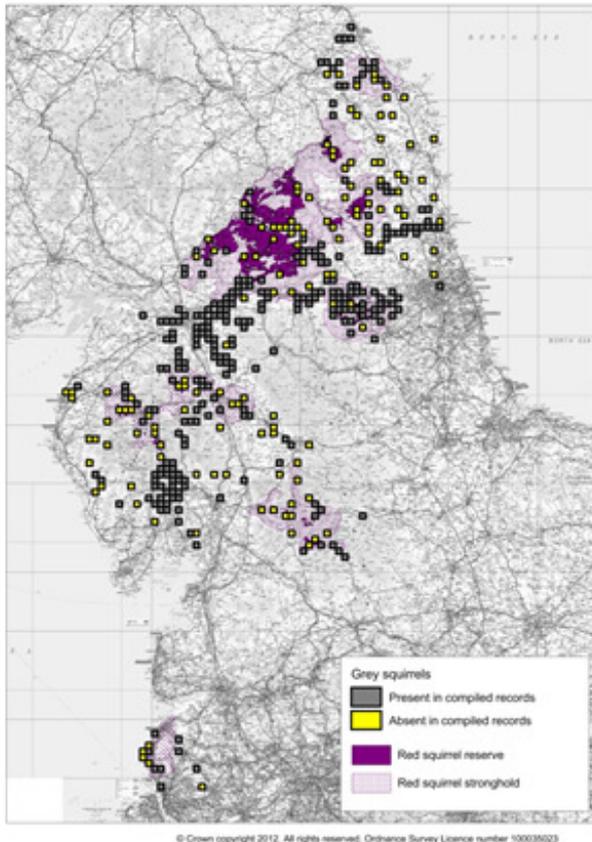
Following the success of the Underbarrow meeting we hope that other local groups or communities will be suitably inspired to put their own WRSS backed grey squirrel control plan into action, we think that you may be pleasantly surprised by the amount of grass roots support there is for red squirrels.

Squirrel monitoring by RSNE

Between March and May 2012, woodlands across northern England were surveyed for the presence of red and grey squirrels, with encouraging results. In all, 248 2x2km squares (“tetrads”) were visited to establish what kind of squirrels were living there. This number was approximately doubled by including the records of sightings and captures submitted to us at RSNE directly and via the NRS local groups.

The map of these compiled records (right) for red squirrels shows that the species is still widespread across Northumberland, Cumbria, the Yorkshire Dales and the Sefton Coast.

The extent of this range goes far beyond the scale of the seventeen designated red squirrel Reserve woodlands and associated Stronghold zones, with red squirrels still found from the coastal woodland fringing the Irish Sea on the west coast right across to woodlands along the Northumberland coastal plain.

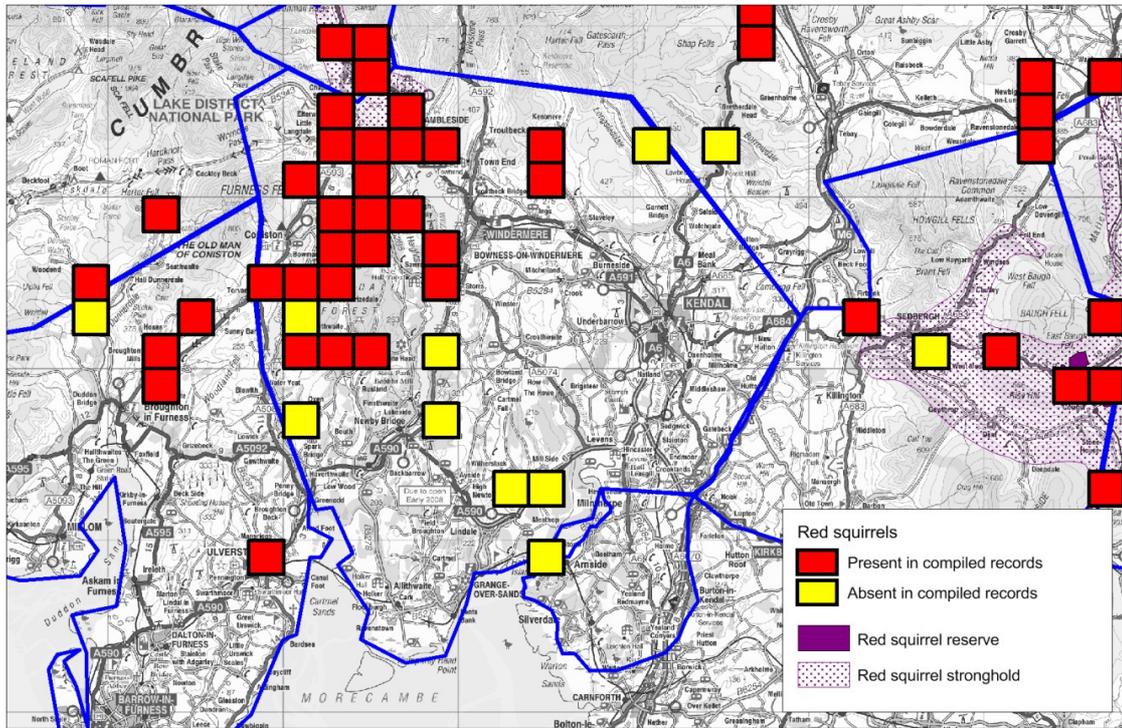


The equivalent map for grey squirrels (left), shows that despite these positive results for red squirrels, there is no room for complacency.

The purpose of the RSNE monitoring programme is to understand the impact of grey squirrel control on the distribution of both red and grey squirrels. In order to justify the amount of effort and funding that goes into grey squirrel control, it is important to demonstrate that it has real benefits for red squirrel conservation.

The standardised monitoring tetrads enable surveys to be repeated twice a year in exactly the same way – essential for proper scientific analysis. Three different methods are used (observing squirrels on trails, watching feeding stations and using camera traps), but within any one site, the same method is used each time.

Watching feeders has been a great way of involving volunteers in our data-gathering effort. The observer sits in a vantage point – typically a comfy chair accompanied by a cup of coffee – and writes down all the squirrels seen visiting the feeder (or spotted nearby) over a one and a half hour period, three times over one week. Sticky pads attached to the underside of the feeder lid trap hairs and ensure that even if squirrels visited outside of these times, they do not go unrecorded.



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The map above shows that there are red squirrels throughout the north west of the WRSS area, but appear to be absent in the south east half. This probably reflects the grey squirrel control effort around Grizedale, which would be less effective if spread too thinly.

The camera traps have taken many delightful images of red squirrels taking advantage of the feeders appearing temporarily. It doesn't take them long to discover how to get at the squirrel mix inside.



KeepGuard 04-13-2012 11:26:52



KeepGuard 05-05-2012 08:06:34

Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE) is a red squirrel conservation partnership working right across northern England. Their work is principally based in Cumbria, Northumberland, Merseyside, Lancashire, north-west Durham and the Yorkshire Dales, in and close to areas where red squirrels are still living free in the landscape.

See: <http://www.rsne.org.uk/>



Cumbria Community Foundation

Cumbria Community Foundation really is making a difference to red squirrel conservation in SE Cumbria by providing WRSS with funding for volunteer expenses for a second year running. This funding has proved to be a lifeline, and we are now beginning to see the rewards, with mounting evidence of reds returning to reclaim their old territories.

Additional funding for 2012 has also allowed for the renewal of the WRSS stand equipment and for the purchase of a very smart red squirrel banner – this makes the WRSS stand hard to miss at the local shows and events that WRSS attends in order to educate the public in red squirrel conservation and to gain support for its work.

The CCF funding has also allowed for the purchase of 3 trail cameras which are increasingly being utilised in conservation work for monitoring purposes. These infra-red cameras allow 24 hour surveillance and are particularly useful to establish what is happening where squirrels are present in low numbers, or at remote locations, and they save a lot of manpower in the process. Activated by passive sensors, each camera shot records the date and time it was taken, providing very useful information about squirrel habits and movement patterns.



The new WRS banner



Trail camera being positioned



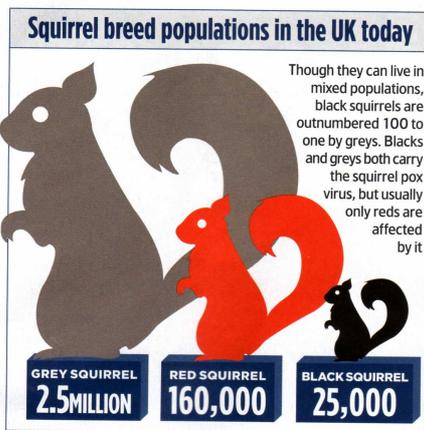
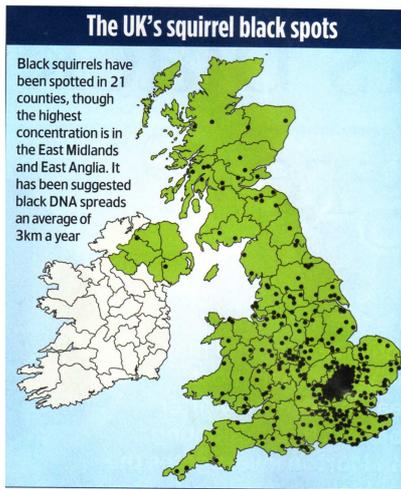
And the result!

Is Black the New Grey?

The scenario is all too familiar. The UK is today home to around 2.5million grey squirrels, descendants of North American rodents brought here by Victorian landowners gripped by Darwinism, curious about the potential survival of foreign species here, and fuelled by the public's appetite for zoos. After being introduced to 30 sites in England and three in Scotland from 1876 onwards, there were escapes and releases, and the greys have since steadily driven the reds into a few defined areas, reducing their numbers to a woeful 160,000.

The most notorious place for the introduction of foreign animals was Woburn Park in Bedfordshire, whose ducal owner was also responsible for the disastrous muntjac releases between 1894 and 1905. Less well known is the escape from the Bedfordshire estate in 1880 of 12 black squirrels. Nothing was seen of them for years, and it was assumed that they had all perished. Then, exactly a century ago, a feral black squirrel reappeared at Woburn.

Since then, the black variant has spread to many parts of the country. In the main it is thinly dispersed — reported sightings range across 21 counties — but the population is concentrated in the East Midlands and East Anglia, with reported sightings in 49 Cambridgeshire communities, 22 in Bedfordshire and 17 in Hertfordshire. The greatest densities are found around Letchworth (the town at one time had a pub called The Black Squirrel, and the council has adopted the animal as its mascot), Stevenage, Hitchin and parts of Cambridgeshire. As many as three in four squirrels in Girton village, near Cambridge, are reported to be black.



Despite these localised successes and the alarming nature of the latest distribution map, the national population of blacks is thought to number no more than 25,000, but the animal has become the subject of research by scientists at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.

Logic suggests that the black has a greater tolerance to cold than its cousins, and that it enjoys easier concealment in pine canopies — one student noted that blacks spend more time in shaded areas. Anecdotal observations vary — some judging it to be more aggressive than the grey and others less aggressive. It may be slightly larger than the grey, with a higher testosterone level, suggesting that it is capable of displacing the grey either by aggression or by forceful interbreeding. It has been noted that blacks and greys can live and interbreed in mixed populations, producing mixed litters. Like greys, blacks carry the squirrel pox virus, to which they are usually immune but which kills reds.

Though blacks are outnumbered 100 to one by greys, it is worth remembering that a handful of grey releases and escapees in Bedfordshire generated a nationwide population of 2.5million within 130 years, so blacks could spark a similar population surge. The reported sightings of black squirrels furthest from Woburn, in Scotland, suggest an average black DNA spread rate of 3km a year, according to lead researcher Helen McRobie, lecturer in biomedical science and molecular biology at Anglia Ruskin. “There are black hot spots in seas of grey, and no clear pattern to explain it,” says Helen. “I also hope to find out if the genetic difference that causes melanism (the darkening of body tissue caused by excessive production of melanin) has any other effects, though there does not seem to be a difference in behaviour between greys and blacks. I am also investigating whether blacks have more or less squirrel pox virus than greys.”

The origins of the black squirrel

Melanism is not uncommon among vertebrates, nor is albinism — white squirrels occur too, though they rarely survive attacks by greys. DNA research based mainly on roadkills has shown that the black is the same North American species (*Sciurus carolinensis*) as the grey, but a piece of pigment gene is missing, causing only black fur to grow. The grey squirrel will have its familiar colour if both parents have the normal pigment gene. If one parent is missing the piece of pigment gene, the result will be offspring with brown-black fur, and if both parents lack the genetic element, their offspring will have black fur.



Photo by D Mason
In the US, black squirrels are described as a melanistic subspecies of the grey

On close examination, the hairs on the grey actually appear to be stripey. The cells at the root initially produce no pigment, giving a white tip, and thereafter introduce black and orange pigment alternately every few days as the hair grows, resulting in the overall grey appearance. The black-brown variant produces small amounts of orange pigment, and the black produces no orange at all.

In its homeland, the black squirrel is described as a melanistic subspecies of the grey, and is common in the Midwest US, and the Ontario and Quebec provinces of Canada. It is proudly presented by a dozen communities as a city and college symbol. Ironically, Victorian aristocrats were not the only people to indulge in zoological interference, for the black was introduced to the US by the Kellogg family (of breakfast cereal fame) in order to kill off — for what reason is not clear — the native reds in Battle Creek, Michigan, and on the Michigan State University campus.

British affection for the tufty-eared native red was focused by Beatrix Potter’s character Squirrel Nutkin. Generally forgotten is her attempt — urged upon her by her publisher in order to crack the US market — to personify the grey, which she called Timmy Tiptoes. He was portrayed as a thief who was imprisoned in a hollow tree from which he could not escape because he grew too fat on nuts. This uncharming image deservedly failed to endear him to a sentimental public. Does the black squirrel deserve the anthropomorphic softening treatment? Some might think that the name “Black Tree Rat” would do.

This article by Ian Morton first appeared in the 4 July 2012 edition of the Shooting Times & Country Magazine and is reproduced here with their kind permission.

Ways You Can Help

- Report your red and grey sightings via the online form on the WRSS website (or by phoning 01539 821714)
- Use squirrel-proof bird feeders to avoid feeding grey squirrels (even if there are no reds nearby yet)
- Make a donation
- Become a WRSS member
- Control your greys – for information and advice please telephone 07836 584201
- Volunteer – there are many ways you can make a difference – please telephone 01539 821714 to find out more

Website: www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk Email: admin@westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk

Westmorland Red Squirrel Society Membership Application - Donation Form

Charity Registration No. 1144416

Title _____

Initial/first name(s) _____

Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Tel _____

Email _____

Company _____

Please tick your selected options £

Individual membership @ £15 per annum* _____

Family membership @ £25 per annum* _____

Corporate membership @ £50 per annum* _____

I/we enclose a donation of _____

Total amount enclosed _____

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Please tick this box if you are a UK taxpayer and would like WRSS to claim Gift Aid on your subscriptions and donations.

I would like the tax reclaimed on any eligible donations and subscriptions that I have ever made or will make to WRSS until I notify you otherwise. I confirm that I pay an amount of UK income or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that WRSS will reclaim in any tax year.

Signed _____ Date _____

Please return this form with your cheque made payable to:

**Westmorland Red Squirrel Society, Side House Farm, Staveley,
Kendal, Cumbria, LA8 9AA**

*Membership renewal is 1st April. The following rates apply when joining later in the year:

Joining	Individual	Family	Corporate
Apr-Jul	£15	£25	£50
Aug-Nov	£10	£15	£30
Dec-Mar	£5	£10	£20

Do you know of a business that would be willing to host a WRSS charity collection box?

If so, please telephone:
01539 821714



The Birds' Bistro, Cumbria's red squirrel and wild bird food specialist based in Penruddock previously owned by Richard Dyke, Secretary of the Penrith Group, has been bought by Group Members and Corporate sponsors Jonathan and Jackie Ashton-Taylor.

The company has a long history of supporting red squirrel conservation and this will continue under the new ownership. 'We have been customers of the Birds' Bistro since we moved to Cumbria 7 years ago,' said Jonathan 'and when we heard the business was for sale we believed this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to work in something we are passionate about!'. Jonathan and Jackie currently have a Training and Management Consultancy business which they are winding down in order to concentrate fully on the new business.

As well as extending the range of squirrel, bird and wildlife products stocked in their shop which now opens 7 days a week, Jonathan and Jackie have also introduced additional free delivery rounds in the Westmorland area.

Further information can be found on line at www.thebirds Bistro.co.uk or by telephoning 017684 83100.