

# WESTMORLAND RED SQUIRREL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

Issue 1 Summer 2010

### First Issue

Welcome to the first issue of the WRSS newsletter – we hope to make it as interesting and informative as possible. As well as news and updates, going forward we are planning to give an in-depth coverage to specific issues, such as progress with a vaccine for SQPV and other relevant topics. In this issue, Alex Todd describes the problem of grey squirrel damage for the Lake District National Park Authority's native forest restoration project at Haverthwaite Heights.

Geoff Hetherington – Chairman

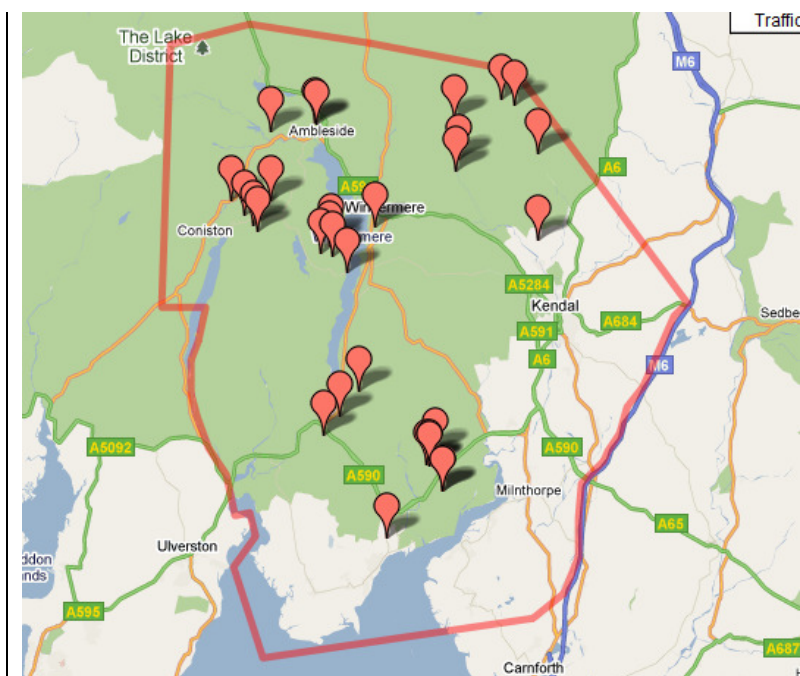
### Funding success

The year started well with WRSS receiving grant funding from the Red Squirrel Survival Trust application to the Natural England / Forestry Commission Fund.

We were able to use this funding to concentrate our efforts in our 3 target areas of: Ambleside & Langdale; Kentmere, Staveley & Longsleddale; and Witherslack & Grange.

Thanks to the hard work of our WRSS coordinators and volunteers throughout the Spring and early Summer, we have been rewarded by our 2010 Red Sightings Map showing an increase in recorded red sightings in these areas.

The map can be seen in more detail online at: [www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk](http://www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk)



WRSS 2010 Red Sightings Map



A red squirrel seen in Kentmere – May 2010

### Outbreak of squirrel pox virus

This year has seen a serious outbreak of the squirrel pox virus in the area covered by our neighbours, the Penrith & District Red Squirrel Group.

The disease is carried by grey squirrels (who are unaffected) and passed to red squirrels, for whom it is fatal. Fortunately, as far as we know, there have been no instances of the disease within our own WRSS area, and we understand that the current outbreak is now coming to an end.

## Action across the region

Northern Red Squirrels (NRS), our 'umbrella' group, is currently active in consultations for the proposed North of England Red Squirrel Conservation Project which intends to unite the 'big players', such as Natural England, the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, the Wildlife Trusts/SOS and the Forestry Commission, whilst recognising the importance of local groups and landowners in landscape-based grey control. There will be more news on this topic as the project develops

Meanwhile, NRS in Cumbria is concentrating on 'community involvement and support for Red Squirrel conservation'. Two direct results of this so far are the Squirrel Fest event in September and a press release from the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) showing their commitment.

Squirrel Fest is to be held on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> September from 12 noon at Brockhole, the Lake District Visitor Centre on the shores of Windermere, and is billed as 'a day of family fun celebrating the red squirrel'. The Westmorland Red Squirrel Society will be having a stand at Squirrel Fest, and we will be delighted to talk to you if you can come along.

In the LDNPA press release titled, '*Reds' protection call to county landowners*', dated 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2010, Park Services Director Bob Cartwright said the National Park "wholeheartedly supported" the development of a co-ordinated approach to protect the red squirrel. Conservation leaders in the Lake District, including the Lake District National Park, Northern Red Squirrels, Natural England, Red Squirrel Survival Trust, National Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, the Forestry Commission and Friends of the Lake District, have reaffirmed their commitment to protecting native red squirrel colonies throughout Cumbria while still continuing to control and manage the unwanted spread of the grey squirrel population. It was agreed by these conservationist groups that an "integrated strategy" was needed to promote awareness and understanding regarding the environmental importance and financial value of red



*Using a squirrel feeder*

squirrels to the county. The full press release can be viewed online via the LDNPA news archive.

Northern Red Squirrels acts as an 'umbrella' organisation, providing information, communications and representation for local red squirrel groups (including WRSS) and independent red squirrel conservationists in the UK. For more information on NRS, please see: [www.northernredsquirrels.org.uk](http://www.northernredsquirrels.org.uk).



*Damson Day 2010*

## Events

To raise awareness of the plight of the red squirrel and to publicise our work in protecting them, WRSS has had stands at local events across the county this year, including Damson Day, Langdale Gala and Country Fest.

We find that these local events are an ideal opportunity for us to meet both local people and visitors to the area, and we are planning to increase the number of shows in 2011.

Still to come this year are the Westmorland County Show on September 9<sup>th</sup> and Squirrel Fest at Brockhole on 26<sup>th</sup> September - we hope to see you there!



## Grey squirrel damage in LDNPA woodland at Haverthwaite Heights

by Alex Todd

Haverthwaite Heights is an ancient oak and yew woodland which covers 75 hectares (188 acres) of the prominent wooded spur of land between the Leven and Rusland Valleys in the South Lakes. It is owned and managed by the Lake District National Park Authority, and was purchased in 1987 from Pennybridge Estate with financial help from the World Wildlife Fund and the Countryside Commission with the condition that the areas of exotic conifer plantation, covering a quarter of the area, were converted back to native broadleaves over a 30-40 year period.

The restoration back to native forest stand types is converting the exotic conifer plantations of European and Japanese larch, Western hemlock and Sitka spruce back to high quality native hardwoods – with the main species being sessile oak. Grey squirrels are a major threat to the success of this and a great number of similar projects to conserve our native oakwoods all over Britain.

The gradual restoration is set out in a Forest Design Plan agreed with the Forestry Commission, and uses a combination of small clearfell areas on the windward slopes where thinning is impractical due to ongoing progressive windblow, and continuous cover systems on the more sheltered compartments of the forest. The aim is an attractive multi-purpose, timber-producing native forest, with good public access, and rich in wildlife; a few select areas within the wood are managed just for wildlife habitat as 'Forest Reserves'.

A standing timber sale in 1997 financed the deer-fencing of a large section (13 hectares) in the western end of the woodland, which has allowed successive small selective and clear felling to be protected from deer (and stock trespass) and for the planted oak, ash, wild cherry and hazel to be supplemented by natural regeneration of these and other native species. It has also allowed advanced natural regeneration of native tree, shrub and ground layer species to grow under the thinned canopy of the larch in particular, helping further diversify the age structure of the forest.

In May and June this year grey squirrels had started causing bark stripping damage to an area of 10- 12 year old silver birch trees and several oaks in an area replanted after clearfelling in 1997; the birch was not planted but has seeded in and helps as a 'nurse' to force the oaks to grow up straighter and provide some side shelter for it. I cannot ever remember seeing grey squirrel damage to silver birch, and certainly not in preference to its usual favourites of sycamore, beech and oak, despite having worked in the Chiltern Hills many years ago where there were so many greys about that they were just about falling out of the trees as you felled them.



*Part of the promising young stand of oak referred to; recently respaced, pruned and vulnerable to grey squirrel bark stripping damage... not a good prospect after all the work to get the trees to this stage and their importance for future generations. Mature Japanese larch crop of another compartment visible in the background. (The short tree shelters have since been removed).*



*Close up of fatal birch bark damage*



This last winter the young oak stand had been very carefully respaced (selectively thinned to the best stems), brashed (removal of the lower branches), and formative pruned (to favour and encourage a straight main stem and fine-branching). This sheltered area is on some of the most productive soil in the forest, and the Sitka spruce crop that was clearfelled off from it had grown exceptionally fast. It has the potential to one day form a very fine oak timber stand *if protected from grey squirrel damage!*

The menace of grey squirrels to our native hardwood timber crops and forest health is not often discussed, with, understandably, the plight of the red squirrel taking precedence. I think it's an important issue in its own right; foresters in other parts of the country already overrun with greys are sometimes driven to dismissing growing hardwoods for timber just as so much 'squirrel food'.

Thinning operations often seem to trigger grey squirrel damage through increased growth rates of the remaining trees then producing a thicker, sappier growth ring that grey squirrels seem to appreciate peeling the bark off! There is also a nearby stand of fine sycamore timber that is also very vulnerable to bark stripping damage.

In this case Geoff Hetherington suggested that one of the WRSS volunteers might be able to help with grey squirrel control, and after meeting him on site he has since trapped and shot 17 greys in and around these stands, so providing a great help in reducing and preventing damage to the young, vulnerable oak crop there. It will be an ongoing task.

I am very grateful to the volunteers from The Westmorland Red Squirrel Society who are, and have been, helping to control greys in National Park Authority woodlands this spring and summer, to the WRSS volunteer, Mick Turner, in particular for his work at Haverthwaite Heights, and to Geoff for his help and enthusiasm in all these matters.

Alex Todd is a Forester with the Lake District  
National Park Authority

*Continuous cover forestry; sessile oak and wild cherry planted under a light canopy of heavily thinned Japanese larch. Continuous cover forestry avoids the sudden changes to the forest ecosystem that clearfelling can have on the landscape, wildlife and soil.*

*These three year old oaks will also require protection from grey squirrels in the future.*



*10 year old silver birch killed by bark stripping in amongst the young planted oak*



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To join our group, to report your sightings of red or grey squirrels, or to find out more about the Westmorland Red Squirrel Society, visit our website at: [www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk](http://www.westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk)

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