

WESTMORLAND RED SQUIRREL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Issue 8, Spring 2014

The Lake District National Park's decision to select the Red Squirrel as a species with a high priority for action is very welcome indeed. This puts the Red Squirrel firmly at the top table where it belongs as the public's favourite wild mammal. Yet the situation in the Kentmere valley shows there are still causes for concern as we fight hard for the reds' survival.

While red populations are still recovering, they need help from all the organisations involved in managing our woodlands and landscape. The first priority must be to ensure that there are safe, grey-free areas for reds to occupy, but there are other sensible compromises to be explored and applied – both during felling operations and in the timing and sequencing of the transition from conifer plantations to native mixed and broadleaf woodland. Dr Peter Lurz's article describes his work on Arran, where red squirrels are being factored into plans for forest restructuring – and this is on an island with no greys.

Also in this issue, Bob describes the Forestry Commission's consultation to review policy towards grey squirrels. At long last it is being recognised just how much damage grey squirrels are causing to trees by bark stripping, and the drastic effect this is having on the long-term health of our woodlands. If the final outcome is a big step up in efforts to remove greys, this can only be good news for red squirrels, trees, and woodland birds – including the Sizergb Hornbeams and Hawfinches.

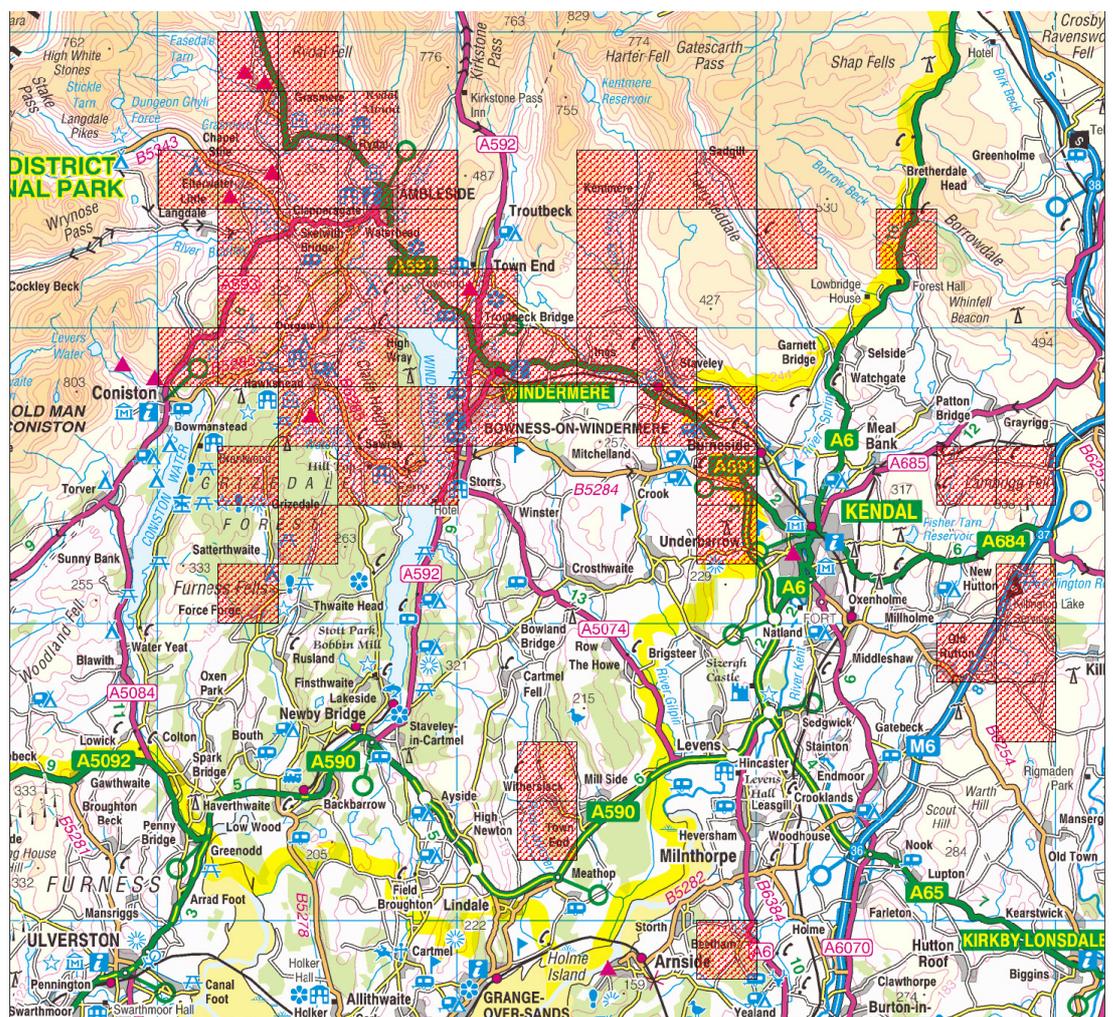
Geoff Hetherington, Chairman

Westmorland Red Squirrel Society area

RSNE map showing Red Squirrel presence in 2km squares from 2013 data

The map is based on RSNE's own data combined with sightings data supplied by WRSS.

Thank you for reporting your red sightings via the WRSS website – these maps would not be possible without your help.



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“Happy to help”

This was the mantra when, in my youth, I was stocking Asda’s wines and spirits shelves. And “happy to help” was my response when Geoff, our Chairman, asked me to become a trustee - as it was when Steph pleaded with me to take on part of her role as secretary, membership secretary, newsletter editor, fundraiser-in-chief...(I’m doing the first bit).

Mine is a privileged position. I get to know about our volunteers’ many and varied activities, which are saving our red squirrels from extinction, increasing their range throughout Westmorland and spreading the word about the importance of what we do. I’m thinking of new ways to keep you in the picture too. Let me know how I can best do that.



Bob Cartwright – our new Secretary

Since getting involved I’ve worked with trustees to develop relationships with many landowners, local residents and other red squirrel groups to support their grey squirrel control and to explain the vital importance of our work as a charity. We’re adopting this approach in the Cartmel peninsula, focussing on the Holker Estate; and in the Rusland Valley and Grizedale Forest, where we’re building on the success of the Heritage Lottery Funded Grizedale Project. I’m also working on a strategy for the Arnside and Silverdale area, which we hope will coordinate the actions of small and larger landowners alike, including the National Trust, Natural England, Leighton Hall, Dallam Towers and the RSPB at Leighton Moss. Success will depend on the skills and commitment of contractors and volunteers to reduce the damage greys cause to trees and birds and provide safe habitats for red squirrels. In considering shared action, we also made comments on the emerging Management Plan for the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which we hope will prioritise effective woodland management.

I’ve also assembled our response to the Forestry Commission’s recent review of grey squirrel policy – more on this later in this Newsletter.

We now have a licence with the Lake District National Park Authority to monitor, shoot and trap greys at the Lake District Visitor Centre at Brockhole on the shore of Windermere – an important breakthrough following red sightings at the Centre and nearby, but also a recently confirmed and fatal case of squirrel pox virus (see below). I hope this will be just the start of a fruitful partnership for us with the National Park in managing squirrels in its other woodlands in our area. I’m tremendously optimistic since the National Park has just approved its new Biodiversity Strategy, with red squirrels as a top priority species. The Strategy’s Priorities for Action give the highest priority to red squirrel conservation and emphasise the importance of reducing grey squirrel populations if reds are to flourish.

Meanwhile, we’re working hard to find new members, new funds and new ways to promote our role in conserving our iconic red squirrel. Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will read about our Fundraising Dinner and Reception at Kendal College when nearly one hundred members and guests raised a lot of money for our work. The College is another ‘recent recruit’, offering staff and students’ help in all sorts of ways. In return I have helped them create a management plan for their college woodland. Their hope – and mine - is that this will eventually become a haven for red squirrels but from Day One it will become a great teaching resource for children at the neighbouring primary schools as well as the college’s students.

Plenty to do, then: happy to help!

And if you’d like to know more about any of the developments I’ve mentioned please call me on 015395 61514 or email secretary@westmorlandredsquirrels.org.uk

Bob Cartwright, Secretary

The dreaded squirrel pox virus

Receiving news of red sightings is always exciting but there can be distressing news to alarm us also. At the turn of the year reports started coming in of a young red squirrel looking decidedly unwell. A fortnight later this little animal lost its battle against the fatal squirrel pox virus which greys are known to carry and transmit.

Whilst greys remain unaffected by the virus an infected red will quickly become lethargic and develop painful skin ulcers and lesions on paws, mouth and eyes and eventually go blind. Death comes within two weeks. Currently the only way to avoid the spread of this deadly virus is to remove greys and thus the source of the infection.



Red with SQPV found near Brockhole

This is the young female as she was found in early January just south of Ambleside. Signs of the disease are very evident and she had obviously undergone much suffering during her final days. The virus can spread quickly so our volunteers quickly disinfected all feeders and equipment to which squirrels come into contact. Hopefully there will be no more cases but only time will tell.

We cannot afford to lose our red squirrels to this dreadful virus and seeing pictures like this reinforces our resolve to continue our programme of grey control.

Ways to help

We feel we owe it to our native red squirrels to do as much as we can to prevent the spread of squirrel pox.

Tell us about greys

Please notify the Society if you know of places where greys are regularly seen. Contacting the land owner and obtaining permission to trap the greys might not always be possible but we make every effort to do this.

Traps in gardens

An increasing number of people are becoming interested in red squirrel conservation. If you live locally and have greys running around in your trees at home then perhaps you would consider allowing the Society to place one of its traps in your garden. All you are asked to do is keep your eye on the trap door and let us know when it closes. A number of people are doing this and it is definitely paying dividends. Alternatively, if you know of any friends or neighbours who might be able to help in this way then please encourage them to get in touch with us.

Your co-operation is invaluable. . . . Thank you.



A Troutbeck collection/leaflet box in situ

Help us see red in Troutbeck

We became involved in WRSS in May 2013. Since then we have managed to raise just over £600 for a Troutbeck Valley sub group and beyond. This has been achieved with collection/leaflet boxes - kindly made by Ed Watson, these are sited on popular footpaths in the village. We also have a Wayside Stall selling plants, garden produce, logs - all grown in Troutbeck. The stall works on a honesty box system. All the produce is donated from the village.

Hopefully our reward will be reds returning to The Troutbeck Valley.

Jayne and Mike - 'Milkmen'

Windermere

If you'd mentioned red squirrels to Windermere residents during 2012, you would have received the same response. "You're fifteen years too late!"

Although WRSS had been controlling greys in woodland just outside the town for some years the hope that numbers could be reduced sufficiently to allow reds to return to gardens within the town had always remained a dream.

During the late spring and early summer of 2013 more intensive grey control took place in woodland adjacent to the busy Rayrigg Road and this quickly brought results. As can often happen, as soon as grey numbers are drastically reduced a lone red might venture into the area to take a look around. During the summer we received the first report of a red being spotted opposite the Steamboat Museum, very close to the centre of Bowness. We were delighted but obviously sceptical as a red hadn't been seen there for 15 years. Then came a second report followed quickly by a third from nearby residents who had spotted a red on their bird feeders. These Bowness gardens are close to Rayrigg Wood where grey control had been taking place so hopefully the new arrival(s) would have been able to take up residence although there have been no further reported sightings in that area to date.



*After an absence of 15 years red squirrels are returning to Windermere.
This photograph was taken in summer 2013 at Windermere Common.
(Bird feeders are a big attraction)*

During the year reds have been seen for the first time at Windermere Common and Heathwaite and then later in the year in fields and woodland opposite St Mary's Church. These sightings are very encouraging but of course there is still much work to be done in the Windermere area

Westmorland Red Squirrel Society
Public meeting in Windermere
Thursday 3rd April 2014 commencing 7.30pm
Phoenix Centre
Phoenix Way, Windermere

The Westmorland Red Squirrel Society will be holding a public meeting at the Phoenix Centre in Windermere on 3rd April at 7.30pm. The guest speaker will be Nick Mason who is project manager for Red Squirrels Northern England. Nick will explain the work being done right across northern England and locally by our own volunteers. We'd love to see you there.

Kentmere

Red squirrels were spotted at several locations throughout the Kentmere valley in 2013, and are still being seen regularly around the centre of the valley, near to the large conifer plantation. The number of grey squirrel sightings is still low, and action is continuing to keep it that way. But in spite of this good news, the future for red squirrels in Kentmere looks very bleak indeed. A felling licence has been granted for approximately one third of the large conifer plantation, which as a whole forms a major part of Kentmere's woodland. The remaining two-thirds of this plantation were recently sold, with rumours that those trees will also be felled. It is not certain whether red squirrels were considered at all during the granting of this first licence, or in the re-planting scheme, but informal enquiries suggest they were not. After the licence had been granted and following discussion, the Forestry Commission has approached the land agents to request that felling takes place at a time to avoid the red squirrels' breeding season – but this apparently can't be enforced except by the public calling the police if they think red squirrels are being disturbed in a way that breaks the law.

Grey squirrel policy in England

The Government's forestry policy is to protect, improve and expand England's woodland. It says:

"Unsustainable populations of ... grey squirrels have a significant impact on the successful establishment and regeneration of new woodland, woodland management, the quality of timber and the quality of woodland habitat. We will continue to support landowners' collaboration to ... control invasive species and encourage natural regeneration."

Defra and Forestry Commission England first published a grey squirrel policy in 2006 but at the end of 2013 decided on a review as many people said it wasn't working. Working with Defra and Natural England, the Commission's consultation invited evidence from many interested organisations, including the Westmorland Red Squirrel Society.

In summary, our view was that grey squirrel control remains a high priority to save red squirrels from extinction. Landowners need incentives to ensure effective grey squirrel control as part of their woodland management programmes. We know a combination of shooting and trapping effectively stems the spread of greys, minimises the risk of squirrel pox virus and protects trees and birds. We encouraged Government to support partnership working and volunteer action such as ours, and continue research into other grey control measures. We will report the Secretary of State's decision on a new policy in our next Newsletter.

News from Sizergh

National Trust's Sizergh Castle estate lies 5 miles to the south of Kendal. It is 1600 acres in size of which 700 acres are mixed deciduous woodland (mainly Ash, Beech, Larch and Oak). The last Red Squirrel(s) to be seen was in Brigsteer back in around 2002. Since then greys have increased in number/taken over and have become a nuisance in areas of woodland with the damage they can do. This is drastically noticeable in the Hornbeams at the main car park of the castle. This area is renowned for Hawfinch throughout the year with a winter group of up to 15 birds (mainly Nov – end of April) which are known to have bred locally. The greys do a lot of damage to the Hornbeam trees which are the Hawfinch's prime feeding trees (yew, beech and fruit trees also good). I am very protective of the birds and sick of seeing the squirrels eating their food!! Greys have also been proven to take young Hawfinch from the nest.



Hawfinches – 2 males, 1 female

Since late September I've started to cull the greys and 'caught the bug'. To date (December 2013) 12 greys have been culled around the castle area and 40 in Low Park Wood which always had a nucleus of squirrels. To drive round Low Park and not see a grey feels weird nowadays...I wonder how long it will take for a red to appear, going on the possible theory of them being in the area? Still...we shall wait and see!

In the mean-time feeders have been put up for shooting on a regular basis on the estate, and the squirrel radar is firmly switched on. Trapping of the greys takes up quite a bit of

ranger time, so shooting using hidden feeders is quicker for us and it's nice to be out in the wood at first light and see what else is lurking!! Grey culling is also being carried out in the larger woodlands of the estate (Brigsteer and Backsprings) by other members of the Westmorland group. The Heaves area adjoining the estate is also being taken care of.

Robert Pocklington, National Trust Ranger, Sizergh Castle.

(for more information on the wildlife of Sizergh and help with seeing the Hawfinch contact me on 07795 090539 or robert.pocklington@nationaltrust.org.uk - happy to help. Hawfinch watching days 8 – 10am every Friday and Saturday in March).

Arran Red Squirrel Project

by A. Meredith¹, J. Gurnell² and P. W. W. Lurz¹

¹ Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh

² Queen Mary, University of London

Arran is the only island red squirrel stronghold in Scotland and supports a large thriving population. Few island populations have been studied to date in terms of population size, inbreeding and disease risks. One such study is currently taking place on the Channel Island of Jersey, which has shown the population has a high prevalence of amyloidosis (whereby fibrous protein aggregates in organs and tissues; Simpson et al. 2013). Furthermore, forest cover, connectivity between woodlands, and changes to tree species composition and age structure through harvesting and replanting, all affect how many squirrels the island can support.

To find out more about Arran's squirrels, the Arran Red Squirrel Project was established in 2013, **funded by the People's Trust for Endangered Species and Forestry Commission Scotland** and led by the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, Edinburgh. This project combines health surveillance and genetic studies with squirrel expertise and local forest knowledge to assess disease risk to the island's red squirrels and to develop forest design plans that will ensure the future of this endangered native mammal.

Protocols developed by Prof. Anna Meredith during research at Foulshaw Moss, Cumbria in recent years have enabled red squirrels to be anaesthetised safely and with a minimum of stress. By such means, animals can be given a thorough health examination and blood samples taken. In addition, road kills collected by local volunteers have allowed detailed post-mortem examinations to be carried out and samples taken for DNA analyses. Parasite burdens are also being investigated and compared to parasite burdens from similar European studies. To do this, a member of the veterinary team was trained in red squirrel gastro-intestinal tract examination.

In total 23 individual red squirrels were live-trapped on Arran (of which one pregnant female and one small juvenile were released without examination), and 16 road kills were collected. We were pleased to find that Arran's red squirrels were very healthy, with no evidence of disease. Blood from all 37 animals tested negative for Squirrel pox virus (SQPV) antibodies, confirming that the virus is not present on the island.



Parasite search

Fleas and lice were the most common ecto-parasites found. Four individuals of the live-trapped group had quite heavy lice burdens and gastro-intestinal tract examinations of squirrels from the road-traffic group revealed signs of a few tapeworms (*Hymenolopsis*) in four individuals and a very low levels of a species of nematode worm (*Rodentoxyuris sciuri*). Three worms were found in one squirrel and one worm in each of three others (Lin 2013). The latter result was especially surprising as the reported incidence of this parasite in red squirrels from one study in Europe was about 375 nematodes in each animal (Romeo et al. 2013).



Midge problem

Analyses of variation in MHC class II genes (group of genes in mammals linked to immune system responses) indicated that, like most red squirrel populations in the UK, genotype diversity is low compared to Continental populations, but interestingly it appears that Arran populations also had genotypes not found on the Scottish mainland.

Collaborative efforts with local FCS foresters on Arran have identified the need for permanent red squirrel core areas, particularly in the north and west of the island. These areas would offer red squirrels a refuge when surrounding plantations get harvested and re-planted during the course of future forest operations. These areas would also serve as source areas from which red squirrels can colonise new woodland when it becomes available. Ongoing work this year will examine forest design plans, and, in collaboration with FCS, attempt to ensure that the red squirrel population, which will drop in the short term as a result of forest restructuring, will recover to previous or even higher levels and that red squirrels have a long term future on Arran.



Goat Fell, Arran

While on a field visit on Arran to examine woodland composition and potential options for increasing tree species diversity to help red squirrels, John Gurnell and Peter Lurz saw a red squirrel heading away from the nearby Whisky Distillery close to Lochranza. One cannot help speculate, that perhaps the combination of "Scottish climate, healthy island living and whisky" is the reason for the project's findings and the healthy state of Arran's squirrels!

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Inaugural Fundraising Dinner is a hit!

87 Members and guests raised more than £3300 for red squirrel conservation at the Society's first Fundraising Reception and Dinner on 27 February. Hosted by Kendal College, one of our corporate members, with excellent catering and service by the college's students, the evening proved a great success.

Our guest speaker, Robin Page, the noted writer, conservationist and passionate supporter of red squirrels, amused and entertained us with stories of his skirmishes with governmental and other public bodies in championing the cause of the countryside, its values and its wildlife. "You are the heroes", he said, "You are showing the professional bodies what needs to be done and you're fighting for your culture and your wildlife – and you are winning and setting an example for others."

Our auction, conducted in lively fashion by professional auctioneer Paul Dennis, raised a staggering £1542. Thanks Paul – and to the many individuals, businesses and organisations who gave generously. Raffle prizes were similarly attractive and, as we all drifted off into the night towards midnight, few left without something – even if it was just a good feeling when like-minded people get together for such a worthy cause.



Robin Page, our after dinner speaker



Guests await the raffle...

Westmorland Red Squirrel Society

Registered Charity No: 1144416

To find out more or to join our group – please give us a call or check out our website

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