

Red Squirrel

The Red Squirrel is Britain's only native squirrel. It has a chestnut upper body, with buff to cream underside, noticeable ear tufts and the famous fluffy tail. It is a smaller animal than the introduced grey squirrel.



Current status

North West England is a stronghold for red squirrels but their numbers are declining in many areas. Cumbria still retains red squirrels throughout most of its area but greys are invading from both north and south. Red squirrels are now absent from most of Lancashire apart from a small population that remains in West Lancashire. The areas around Ormskirk & Aughton, Burscough, Rufford, Scarisbrick and Halsall retain small red squirrel populations.

The population of red squirrels in the pinewood plantations on the Sefton Coast is considered to be stable and self-sustaining at present.

The small population of red squirrels in the Winstanley/Billinge area of Wigan is the only presence in Greater Manchester. This remnant population has survived in the area for more than thirty years although no population studies to assess its dynamics have been carried out to date.

Legal protection

Red squirrels are protected under Schedules 5 and 6 of The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and Article III of the Bern Convention. Under this legislation it is illegal to "intentionally kill, injure or take" or "damage, destroy or obstruct" access to any structure or place used for shelter or protection, or to disturb any animal while it is in a drey. The red squirrel is the subject of a Species Action Plan in the UK BAP.

Current Issues

The main causes of decline have been due to pressure from grey squirrels. However, other factors have tended to reduce populations of red squirrels and make them more vulnerable to replacement by greys.

Squirrel Pox is a disease that afflicts red squirrels to a far greater degree than it does grey squirrels. The virus has depleted populations of red squirrels and even caused local extinction but it rarely affects grey squirrels. The origins of the virus are obscure, but it may have been introduced with the grey squirrels from North America. If this were the case, it would not be surprising if grey squirrels have acquired a degree of natural immunity to the disease.

Destruction of hedgerows, loss of woodlands and changes in management of woodland habitat make it more difficult today than in the past for red squirrels to colonise sites. Grey squirrels, being less arboreal than red squirrels, are better able to move through treeless landscapes.

Red squirrels live at low densities (less than two per hectare on average compared with up to nine grey squirrels). When the 'surplus' population disperse they are prone to being killed on roads. The extent of road mortality in Lancashire is however, unknown. During spring 2005 a red squirrel was found dead by the side of the road close to Orrell Post – it was presumed that it was a road kill.

Species needs/management requirements

Current research suggests that the minimum area of woodland required for a colony to be self-sustaining, is 200 ha. This may include adjoining woodlands, but any disruption of these areas could have serious repercussions for the existing population. The small population of red squirrels in Wigan appears to inhabit three relatively small predominately conifer woodlands. All three woodlands are part of the same private land holding and amount to approximately 20 ha.

Grey squirrels are also present in the area and pose a threat to the populations survival.

Current Action

National

A plan to save the native red squirrel from extinction in mainland England was launched in November 2005. The North of England Red Squirrel Conservation Strategy has been developed by a broad partnership of organisations called Red Alert North England, which includes The Wildlife Trusts and the Forestry Commission as well as landowners, businesses, and the local community. Conservation efforts will focus on 16 carefully selected Red Squirrels Reserves which offer the species the best chance of survival. It is the biggest ever commitment to red squirrel conservation and will involve hundreds of people and more than £1 Million.

Regional

The Sefton Coast Woodlands are now designated as a red squirrel refuge and buffer zone and is the only site proposed in Merseyside/West Lancashire. The Sefton coast woodlands have met all the criteria set out and the refuge and buffer zone proposal has received endorsement from the England Squirrel Forum.

Local

A partnership between Wigan Council, Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust, Red Rose Forest, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and private landowners/managers has produced an interim management plan for an area of woodland where red squirrels are present.

Related Action Plans

UKBAPs:

Red Squirrel Species Action Plan

GMBAPs:

None relevant

Wigan BAPs:

No associated BAPs currently developed

Objectives, actions and targets

Primary Objective: Protect and maintain the existing population of Red Squirrels		
Strategic Objective: Determine and assess Red Squirrel population dynamics		
Operational objective	Action Required	Timescale
1. Determine the current population size of Red Squirrels in Wigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect and collate records of red squirrel and produce distribution map to establish accurate baseline 	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with universities and encourage research on red squirrel in Wigan 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research viability of a long-term sustainable population 	2007/2008
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify Action Zones wherein the majority of work will be implemented 	2006
2. Investigate potential benefits by cross-boundary working with St Helen's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create sub-group (of Biodiversity Steering Group) with local authorities, RRF, LWT and other partners 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify possible cross-boundary projects 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate funding sources for cross-boundary projects 	2006/2007
3. Raise community awareness of importance of red squirrel in Wigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop red squirrel awareness campaign 	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use local/Council publications to inform local community of species rarity and importance 	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide e-info to local schools and colleges adjacent to 'Action Zones' via the Biodiversity Partnership web-site 	2007/2008
4. Identify all areas of potential suitable habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As part of woodland strategy identify existing and potential habitats 	2006 - 2008
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate potential for creation of 'continuous cover' links between areas of suitable habitats 	2006 - 2008

Management Objective: Protect existing population and identify opportunities to expand/increase range/numbers.		
Management Objective	Action Required	Timescale
1. Investigate areas for potential woodland creation/improvement for red squirrel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement planting scheme for area of suitable land at Orrell Water Park • Provide 'continuous cover' linkages from existing Action Zone to Orrell Water Park • Apply for biodiversity funding for priority projects 	<p>2007/2008</p> <p>2008 onwards</p> <p>2006 onwards</p>
2. Support landowners with existing red squirrel presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise on species importance and needs • Provide advice on current legislation • Assist in identifying funding opportunities • Provide assistance for woodland management grant 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p>
3. Introduce management measures for grey squirrel in 'Action Zones'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish grey squirrel population status in Action Zones • Control grey squirrel population using most effective and humane methods • Identify funding sources to install red squirrel feeding hoppers 	<p>2006 onwards</p> <p>2006 onwards</p> <p>2006/2007</p>
4. Investigate opportunities to supplement existing population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess potential of captive breeding and release programme • Partner Bolton MBC with existing breeding scheme and investigate species suitability for release 	<p>Long-term</p> <p>Long-term</p>