

## Fifty Shades of Red and Grey

The last article contained information I had discovered about the breeding habits of the red squirrel. Hopefully by now there are many litters being born and thriving in Northumberland. As one of the primary purposes of the Lower Coquetdale Squirrel Group is to monitor and report sightings of squirrels here is a brief guide for identification purposes. Firstly, fur colour is not always the best means of telling reds from greys as the shade in both varies widely. Greys can have very red fur and reds appear quite grey. This is partly due to squirrels changing their coats seasonally, just as we do, although we do not have the advantage of being able to grow our own! Both species moult twice a year. The fur loss begins at the head and moves down the body in spring and reverses direction in the autumn. In the cold weather greys have dense, silver fur with a brown tinge down the spine. As it gets warmer greys are often yellowish brown on their flanks and feet. Black and albino greys are not uncommon. This black melanism is also found in reds. In the winter reds have warm coats, usually deep red, a thick dark red tail, almost as long as their 22cm long bodies and handsome 3cm ear tufts. The tail can wrap around them for warmth, neatly doubling up as a scarf. The tail also acts as a signal as it flicks and twitches communicating with other reds. In summer, after moulting, coats are thinner and often lighter in hue, more chestnut than red and the tail is similarly wispy. The under belly is white. Interestingly, one of the more reliable ways of identifying grey from red is that each hair in the grey's bushy, grizzled tail is tipped with white, giving it a characteristic halo effect. Greys' bodies are 26cm long and they are nearly twice as heavy, and visibly sturdier, than reds. Although grey squirrels do not have ear tufts the reds lose theirs during the autumn moult, which can be misleading.

The Lower Coquetdale Squirrel Group is grateful for the reporting of any descriptive sightings of squirrels, either red or grey.