



Lower Coquetdale Red Squirrels

Newsletter No 3 – June 2020

Welcome to our third newsletter! Any comments/suggestions/contributions are always welcome at the email address at the end.

Red Squirrel Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Sciurus Vulgaris* and they are not always red in colour! – they can also be brown, almost black, or even quite grey, and can become blonde due to bleaching by summer sunlight. Identification is helped by size (they are smaller than greys), they have ear tufts but no “halo” on their tail as greys do.
- Their home is a drey, located high up against a tree trunk, and made from woven twigs, lined with leaves, grass, moss, feathers and fur. Their diet includes seeds, nuts, berries, flowers, buds, shoots, fruit from many trees and shrubs as well as fungi and insects, storing nuts and seeds in the ground in autumn
- They do not hibernate over winter, but do stay put in their dreys during bad weather. They moult twice a year, once after winter and then in late summer to provide a thicker warm coat for winter. They lose their distinctive ear tufts once a year on moulting in the autumn
- They can have two litters of kittens each year, with 3-4 kits in each. After seven weeks, they are ready to leave the drey.
- An adult red squirrel weighs around 275-350 grams. They are about 20-22 cms long and their tail is 17-18 cms long. They have four fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot and are very athletic.
- They can live up to six years of age.

Why are we battling against grey squirrels?

* It is a necessary part of red squirrel conservation

* To prevent the damage to our forests caused by high densities of juvenile grey squirrels who can strip the covering of bark from both main stem and branches of trees between April and September. Species particularly susceptible to damage include high value trees such as oak, beech, maple, hornbeam and sweet chestnut. Greys target young broadleaved trees, mostly 10-40 years of age, and will repeat the damage year after year if the densities are high and unmanaged. This creates open wounds that pathogens can infect and may lead to girdling, which affects tree growth and timber value and may cause broadleaved trees to die.

How are greys controlled:

Currently this is carried out by various methods of culling such as trapping and despatching or shooting. This can be expensive, for instance in 2015, Red Squirrels Northern England culled 21,000 greys in the north of England at an estimated cost of £60 per squirrel. Culling alone has so far failed to control the growth since the reproductive rate of greys far exceeds the numbers culled. Oral contraceptives represent a possible option of grey control and an oral vaccine will be tested in the next few years.

Red Squirrels North East information

RSNE collate all the sightings reports which our group submit, along with all those other voluntary groups in Northumberland. They find this very useful to check the population changes of both reds and greys over time and to enable them to target specific areas. RSNE think that sadly squirrel pox is widespread throughout Northumberland. Testing is expensive and is therefore not considered cost-effective in the present situation. Their suggested response to an outbreak is to remove feeders, disinfect, leave the area for a time, with the aim of reducing greys contact with reds and the risk of cross-contamination. The outbreak of squirrel pox among the reds at West Chevington last autumn has successfully been controlled by RSNE paying to eliminate greys.

Locally what is happening?

- Ron Lightfoot has co-ordinated a number of our volunteers to carry out a monitoring survey (between Oct 2019 & April 2020) of Felton Park Woods, which stands west of Felton, mostly on the northern bank of River Coquet. This is a privately owned woodland managed by Scottish Woodlands, where our group had not previously felt able to trap. It became quickly apparent that there were a large number of greys in the area, and the task became a culling rather than a monitoring exercise, with 51 greys being despatched. Only 3 red squirrels were seen. We now have a much clearer picture of these woods, and of likely trapping points to hopefully inform future grey control. Ron's full report can be obtained upon request.
- LCReds now have the greatest number of volunteers ever who are currently in action. We are taking out large numbers of greys in our area, so greys have obviously had a good winter! However we do still have small, extended pockets of reds around. A huge amount of thanks goes to all of those volunteers, giving up their time on a regular basis, to monitor and respond to sightings where this is deemed appropriate. Action is taken usually only when repeated or numerous sightings are reported, and where we have willing volunteers.
- Rosie Mould has been in touch with forestry managers who were about to carry out felling work where we know a red population exists. This has resulted in them agreeing to delay harvesting until the autumn – to enable reds to finish the breeding cycle. Well done Rosie!
- Our AGM was due in May, but has been postponed indefinitely because of the pandemic.

Where can you see red squirrels?

As well as the stronghold in Wallington, there are also reds in Ponteland, Cramlington, Morpeth (thanks to the efforts of the active local groups there) – also at Woodhorn Museum grounds in Ashington, Kielder Waterside, Howick Hall, Hareshaw Linn, Hauxley Nature Reserve, along the North Tyne and in the Redesdale area. Belsay too has had its fair share of sightings too.

What can you do?

Keep up the good work here in Lower Coquetdale, as research has shown that reds can recover and return to an area, where grey populations are kept low. Do please keep on reporting those sightings of both reds and greys. Become a member (its free!) or we could still use more volunteers. So if you would like to get involved or help in any way (doing admin, delivering leaflets, helping on the ground) – we would love to hear from you – email us on info@lcreds.org.uk or contact me cherryhambrook@gmail.com We also have a Facebook page – Squirrels in Coquetdale. Do please like it and share!

Cherry (Secretary, Lower Coquetdale Red Squirrels – www.lcreds.org.uk)