

RED SQUIRREL *Sciurus vulgaris*

Red Squirrels and their dreys are protected by UK legislation. The greatest threat to Red Squirrels is the spread of the non-native Grey Squirrel which competes for food and carries disease.

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Red Squirrel © David Hickson

Legal and Conservation status

- UK Protected Species
- UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species and Species of Principal Importance in England
- Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan species

Red Squirrels are protected under:

- Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (Schedule 5).

It is an offence to:

- Intentionally kill, injure or take a wild Red Squirrel.
- Have in possession or control any live or dead Red Squirrel or any part of it.
- Intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which Red Squirrels use for shelter or protection.
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb Red Squirrels while they are occupying such a place.

(This summarizes the main points of the law.)

Habitat

Red Squirrels are essentially woodland animals, spending the majority of their lives in the canopy. Although Red Squirrels can live in all types of woodland, they cannot compete against Grey Squirrels in mixed and deciduous woodlands, especially if large-seeded broadleaved trees (oak, beech, hazel) are present. Red Squirrels have more of a competitive advantage against Grey Squirrels in coniferous woodlands and this habitat difference is being used in the strategy for Red Squirrels in England.

Habitat connectivity between woodlands through tree-lines and hedgerows is important for Red Squirrels, as they are more reluctant than grey squirrel to cross large distances of open ground.

Cumbria Key Habitats that are particularly important for Red Squirrels include:

Semi-natural Woodland

Hedgerows

Ecology

Red Squirrels predominantly live on tree seeds but their diet also includes berries, buds, shoots, flowers, lichens, fungi and, occasionally, insects. The autumn and winter seed harvest is extremely important both for over-winter survival and for breeding success the following year. Red Squirrels do not hibernate and need to increase their body weight by 10% in order to survive the winter and maintain good condition for breeding in the spring. The first litter is usually born in March with a second litter, if conditions are right, in July/August. The autumn and winter food runs out by late spring and between April and August natural food becomes scarce.

Red Squirrels build spherical nests in trees using twigs and other material such as mosses, leaves and lichens. These nests are called dreys and a squirrel will use 4 -5 dreys at any time.

Causes of mortality include lack of food, disease, predation and road deaths.

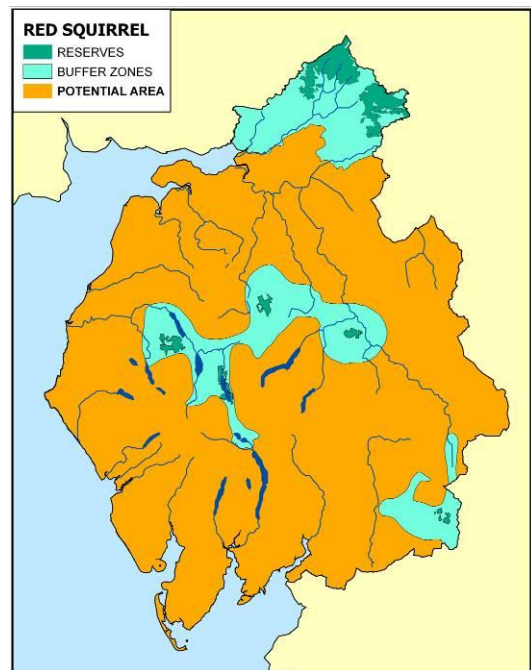
The introduction of Grey Squirrels from North America in the 19th Century has had a devastating impact on Red Squirrels not only through competition for resources, but also through spreading the squirrelpox virus which is nearly always fatal to Red Squirrels.

Distribution

Once ubiquitous in Britain, the species has undergone a drastic decline over the last 50 years and is now essentially restricted to Scotland, Cumbria, Northumberland, County Durham, West Lancashire, Merseyside some parts of Wales, including Angelsey, and island populations such as Brownsea and the Isle of Wight..

Red Squirrels still occur throughout Cumbria but have been declining rapidly in the last 10-15 years. The decline is most advanced in South Cumbria as Grey Squirrels originally colonised Cumbria from Lancashire. It is anticipated that scattered populations in small woods will continue to decline throughout Cumbria within the next 20 years.

The main conservation action in Cumbria is concentrated on Red Squirrel 'reserves' and their buffer zones at Greystoke, Whinfall, Whinlatter and Thirlmere plus Garsdale/Mallerstang on the North Yorkshire border and south west of Kielder.



Conservation Issues

The most important threat to the survival of the Red Squirrel in Cumbria is the spread of the Grey Squirrel. Grey Squirrels compete with Red Squirrels for resources and are also thought to act as a carrier of the squirrelpox virus, which has been identified as one of the main causes of the decline of Red Squirrels in the UK. Red Squirrels also suffer from road mortality and loss, fragmentation and unsympathetic management of woodland habitats.

Planning Considerations

- Part IV of ODPM Circular 06/2005: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation sets out the wide range of legislative provisions for conservation of species protected by national and international law. It emphasizes the need for ecological surveys to establish the presence of protected species and for protection measures to be in place through conditions and/or planning obligations before planning permission is granted. It also advises that local authorities should consult Natural England before the planning decision is made.
- Red Squirrels breed throughout Cumbria and potentially any woodland within Cumbria may contain squirrels and their dreys. Woodlands or individual trees or groups of trees that are used for breeding are also material to planning decisions.
- Red Squirrels may be impacted by development which affects individual or small groups or trees, by poor management, loss of larger areas of woodland, and by the loss of tree lines and hedgerows that link woodland patches.
- Any development that may impact upon Red Squirrels and their habitat would require a Red Squirrel survey with particular focus on their protected dreys and, as necessary, adequate protection and mitigation measures.
- In Red Squirrel reserves and buffer zones the potential for protection and enhancement of habitat should be optimised where ecologically appropriate.

Enhancement Opportunities

- Take opportunities to manage the mix of species required by Red Squirrels in the reserves and buffer zones. This may include planting the correct tree species or retaining conifers within woodlands, avoiding large-seeded broadleaved species such as oak and beech.
- Design layout of developments, including new roads, in such a manner that habitat links are created or maintained.

Further Information

[Disturbance and protected species: understanding and applying the law in England and Wales](#)

[Save Our Squirrels](#)

[Red Squirrel Survival Trust](#)

[Northern Red Squirrels](#)

[Red Squirrel information](#), Forestry Commission

[UK Biodiversity Action Plan](#)

[Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan](#)

Contacts

- **Joint Nature Conservation Committee**, Melanie Hardie, Species Advisor (mammals), Tel: 01733 866912, melanie.hardie@jncc.gov.uk
- **Save our Squirrel Project**, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Gosforth, Newcastle Tel: 0845 3479375
- **Cumbria Save our Squirrels**, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, Gosling Syke Farm, Houghton Road, Houghton, Carlisle, CA3 0LD Tel: 01228 598799, simono@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk
- **Natural England**, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Rd, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 7RL, Tel: 0300 060 2122, cumbriaplanning@naturalengland.org.uk

Current Action in Cumbria

- The main conservation action in Cumbria is concentrated on the Red Squirrel reserves and their buffer zones. The Red Squirrel conservation partnership Red Alert North England launched the 'Save Our Squirrels'(SOS) project to help take forward the conservation of these Reserves and advise landowners and managers on how best to manage their habitat for Red Squirrels.
- A number of Red Alert North England/SOS and independent Red Squirrel volunteer groups collate squirrel sightings and undertake Grey Squirrel control in the reserves and buffer zones. They also take Grey Squirrel blood samples to aid research into the squirrelpox virus.
- Additionally Red Squirrel Survival Trust and Northern Red Squirrels carry out Grey Squirrel control and awareness-raising activities in the areas outside the reserves and buffer zones. They are also actively pursuing the idea to turn Cumbria into a red squirrel county.