

## CATS AND DOGS: THREATENING OUR NATIVE WILDLIFE

Britain is home to between 7 and 9 million cats and approximately 8 million dogs. It is estimated cats hunt more than 188 million wild animals a year; victims include birds, mammals and amphibians. Dogs are also responsible for predating on our wildlife, particularly when left unattended in back gardens and when allowed off their leads during walks through wildlife rich sites.

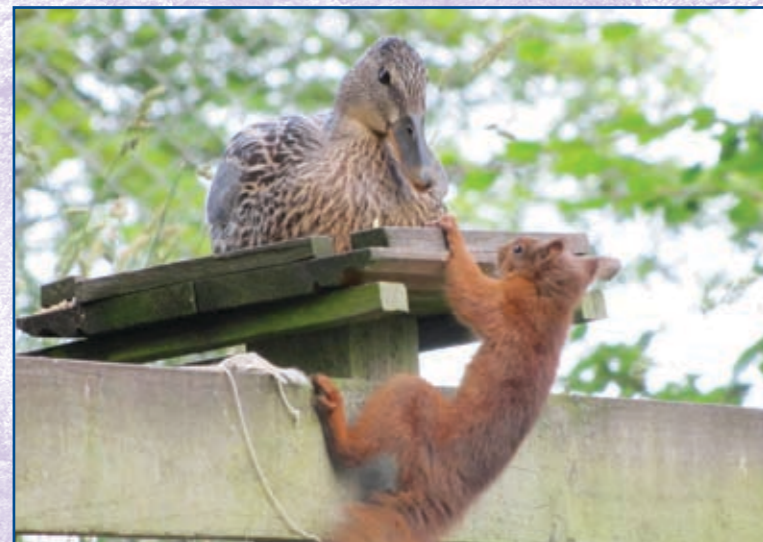
Dogs and cats present a particular threat to young red squirrels during the breeding season. Red squirrels mate when the weather begins to warm in January and often have two litters, in early spring (April) and another in summer, (August). On average they have three kittens, however disruption caused by dogs running out of control, or predation by cats can result in the abandonment of dreys.

Over a fifth (21%) of people in Britain own a cat, and a similar number, (22%) have at least one dog in their household. Unfortunately these numbers are having a major impact on the environment and our native wildlife. Simple measures taken by owners can ensure the impacts caused by these domestic pets on our wildlife, in particular the red squirrel, are minimized.

- Always keep dogs on a lead
- Never let dogs run out of control or menace wildlife
- Respect the environment and do not allow it to be polluted with faeces
- Clean up after your pet
- Ensure that your cat wears a bell (or two bells if your clever feline learns to hunt silently with one bell!)
- Keep cats indoors at dusk and dawn when wildlife are most vulnerable, or all night if possible

By following these few simple considerations and with a little concerted effort, pet owners could help restore balance and harmony and help ensure our enchanting wildlife, such as the red squirrel, are still there for us all to enjoy.

Photograph by: Hogan



## CAPTION COMPETITION

This brilliant photo was sent in by Betty Smith. Can you come up with a caption for this photograph? Please send your suggestions to us using the contact details below and the winning caption will be printed in the next issue.

## CAPTION COMPETITION WINNER

John Johnstone came up with this brilliant caption for last issues competition.

*Squirrel* - hi are you here for the security job too?

*Hawk* - yes the description sounds perfect for me but why are you here?

*Squirrel* - I heard that they pay peanuts ...**Brilliant!!**



# Red Bush Telegraph



NEWSLETTER OF THE RED SQUIRRELS  
IN SOUTH SCOTLAND PROJECT

WINTER 2010

## RSSS PROJECT UPDATE

The RSSS Project has been through a period of change since the last RBT issue with the departure of Richard Wales, who was with the project for four years, and the arrival of his replacement Karen Ramoo. Stephanie Johnstone has also returned from maternity leave following the birth of her son Jack. But never fear the project has still been progressing full steam ahead!

The main focus of Phase IV of the RSSS Project is still by necessity on grey squirrel control. We now have three full time grey squirrel control officers with our newest officer, Jim McColm, joining the team in March 2010. Jim is working in the upper Nith Valley and into East Ayrshire where he has been recruiting lots of local landowners to help him clear the valley of greys. After only one season of grey squirrel trapping red squirrels are starting to show up in areas throughout the Valley where they hadn't been seen all year. Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) funded landowners have also been successfully controlling grey squirrels throughout the Nith, Annan, Esk and Liddel Valleys for the past 12 to 24 months and have freed up our professional controllers to work in new areas.

There has been some bad news in terms of the distribution of seropositive (pox carrying) grey squirrels in the south. Seven grey squirrels have been dispatched by a Forestry Commission (Scotland) controller in the woods behind Kippford in Dumfries and Galloway following a report of a grey squirrel sighting by a member of the public. Five of these grey squirrels were confirmed to be positive for Squirrelpox virus antibodies indicating that they had almost certainly originated from England. Fears that the virus may spread to the local thriving red squirrel population have not yet come to light but locals are keeping a vigilant eye on the health of their reds as well as being on the lookout for further greys.

Throughout Dumfries and Galloway grey squirrel sightings have been reported from other new areas including Dalbeattie Forest, Mabie Forest near New Abbey and Dalnacallan Forest near Moniaive. The Forestry Commission control officer for the area has been working hard to dispatch all grey squirrels reported. Sightings in the Newton Stewart area have also been trickling in and a trap repository to support our trap loan scheme has now been set up in Newton Stewart with the help of John Sellers from The Southern Uplands Partnership.

In the east a seropositive grey squirrel was confirmed at Cornhill-Upon-Tweed in England, less than one mile from the Scottish border. This sparked action from nearby Scottish landowners who have been working hard to control grey squirrels in the area. The Berwick Volunteer Group has been invaluable in their support of this control activity. So far no seropositive grey squirrels have



Photograph by: Craig Doogan

turned up on the Scottish side of the border and we are hoping that the hard work of the locals will prevent this from happening.

Despite these isolated incidences of seropositive grey squirrels and an apparent increase of grey squirrels in the west country we are feeling positive about the progress of the project. We have had no further incidences of the Squirrelpox disease amongst red squirrels including no reports of poxed red squirrels at the Drumlanrig Estate, Thornhill, since July 2009. We are tentatively beginning to believe that this major disease outbreak, which saw the death of an estimated 350 red squirrels, has now burnt out. This success is due to the hard work of the Buccleuch Estate staff and the support of their neighbours.

In areas where grey squirrel control has been carried out by SRDP participants, professional controllers and volunteers we are beginning to see real reductions in grey squirrel numbers and the return of red squirrels to areas where they haven't been seen in a decade or more. We are now looking to expand our area of concentrated control so that we can push grey squirrels further out of the south of Scotland. Help with this is hopefully going to be coming from our neighbours in the north of England where a new project, Red Squirrels North England, was launched in October.

**You are our eyes and ears out there so please keep reporting all red and grey squirrel sightings!**

[www.redsquirrels.org.uk](http://www.redsquirrels.org.uk)

## Red Squirrels in South Scotland Contact Details

Website: [www.redsquirrels.org.uk](http://www.redsquirrels.org.uk)

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## WELCOME KAREN RAMOO - RSSS PROJECT COORDINATOR

RSSS are pleased to welcome Karen Ramoo to the project team. Karen has taken over from Richard Wales as the new Project Coordinator and is based in the Lindean Mill office near Galashiels. Karen is an applied zoologist with a Wildlife and Conservation Management MSC, and is coming to us from Jacobs Engineering in Edinburgh where she was working as their ecologist. Karen has also held positions with RSPB and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and in 2004 and 2005 she undertook research in Mauritius on the Endangered Pink Pigeons.



## A BOUNTIFUL AUTUMN

This autumn has been a bountiful one for Scotland's wildlife. It has been a bumper year for beech and hazel and our woodlands and forests are littered with nuts and fruits that are providing a feast for a diversity of wildlife. Red squirrels are among the species benefiting from this abundance and populations have increased both numerically and geographically, particularly in areas where grey squirrels are being controlled. Consequently we are receiving exciting reports of red squirrels re-appearing in areas where they have not been seen for many years. For example in Hawick, Paul Alison reported seeing a red squirrel for the first time in 18 years!

The last few months have seen a clear increase in the number of reported red squirrel sightings in some areas of the Scottish Borders particularly Hawick, Kelso and Selkirk. There has also been a noticeable influx of sightings from in and around Peebles suggesting that there are a number of resident individuals located in and around the town. Particular hotspots include the upper reaches of Dawyck Botanical Gardens, woodlands in and around the Hall Manor Estate, Cademuir Forest, Lyne and Stobo.

Of course the downside to this natural bounty is that grey squirrels have benefited too and we have also been receiving an increased number of grey squirrel sightings. The abundance of natural food in the environment has also impacted on trapping success with greys

showing little interest in the baited traps. With winter upon us now is the time to start thinking about increasing trapping effort in preparation for the coming spring when natural food will be scarcer making the bait in traps far more tempting. Making a concerted effort to control grey squirrels prior to their breeding season next year will greatly benefit our native reds during this critical time. If you have grey squirrels in your area and would like to get involved in the RSSS trap loan scheme please do get in contact.



Photograph by: Ruth Eastwood

## VOLUNTEER EFFORT

RSSS relies heavily upon volunteers to help deliver our work and without the dedicated support from members of the public, volunteer groups and landowners, encounters with our much loved red squirrels would be an ever increasing rarity. RSSS would like to say a big THANK YOU to all those involved in the project and to take this opportunity to mention just some of the hard work volunteers have undertaken and the successes they have achieved.

Berwick SoS are a dedicated volunteer group and key players in the cross border grey squirrel control effort between south-east Scotland and northern England. South Scotland is at the frontline in protecting Scotland's red squirrels from seropositive greys coming in over the Scottish border. Without the committed efforts of this group much of the south-east of Scotland would be left unmanned.

The group initially formed in 2005 and during the past five years they have become independent and been raising their own funds and support to keep the groups hard work going. The groups dedicated team of 10 members have worked tirelessly to help stop the incursion of grey squirrels from England. They have devoted an incredible amount of time into undertaking squirrel surveys, monitoring squirrel populations, recruiting members of the public and landowners onto the projects' grey control schemes, continuing to raise the awareness of the plight of red squirrels locally and encouraging people to get involved with red squirrel projects in both England and Scotland.



Photograph by: John Rae

Local volunteer groups like Berwick SoS are key to raising awareness locally and encouraging local action to save red squirrels. If you are interested in becoming involved with Berwick SOS please contact Elizabeth Bamford on 07536076131 or email elizabethbamford@aol.com. Additionally if you are interested in starting up a volunteer group in your local area, why not get in contact with us here at RSSS!

Anyone and everyone can make a difference to red squirrel populations and over the course of the project there have been a number of inspiring success stories from individuals involving the return of red squirrels to areas from which they had previously vanished. Perhaps one of the most encouraging stories to date is that of Lonny Honmer.

Lonny Honmer is a dedicated individual working at Hoscot Estate, a large farm that incorporates 100 acres of woodland in Hawick. When Lonny first joined the project in 2004 Hoscot was over run by grey squirrels with no red squirrels present on the Estate. During the past six years Lonny has worked tirelessly and has now practically eradicated grey squirrels from Hoscot. The Estate now has a thriving red squirrel population and Lonny says a day doesn't go by in which he doesn't see a red! Red squirrels are now expanding out beyond the Estate and into surrounding areas.

Lonny's story is an exceptionally encouraging one and demonstrates perfectly how with continued and dedicated effort red squirrels can be reinstated to their habitat and we can continue to see the welcomed return of a much loved native species to our gardens and woodlands.

RSSS would also like to give a special thank you to our new administration volunteer, Victoria McNamara, for all of her ongoing hard work with the various RSSS data sets and her contribution to this newsletter.



Photograph by: Craig Doogan

## RESEARCH UPDATE

### Tell Tail Signs

In the last newsletter we mentioned the development of a new survey method for collecting tail hairs in order to establish the presence of either red or grey squirrels in areas of woodland. The method allows for immediate identification of hairs by the naked eye negating the need for microscope analysis and saving an enormous amount of time! For the last 4 months Clare Toner an MSc student from Strathclyde University has been evaluating the effectiveness of this new method.

In order to collect tail hairs, feeder boxes were mounted on a 2.5m post and sticky pads attached at intervals, so when the squirrel would run up the post it would leave its tail hairs behind.

The posts were buried in order to prevent hungry badgers or deer from knocking them over and had to be sited away from overhanging branches and tree trunks to stop the squirrels from bypassing the sticky pads to reach the food.

The poled feeder boxes were set out in both coniferous and broad leaved woodlands near to the river Nith in Sanquhar and the Barony A-Frame at Auchinleck and then the waiting game began!

The posts collected a variety of squirrel hairs and some interesting results have been yielded from the study. Clare is in the process of writing up this study but with some constraints and a bit of refining this looks to be a successful and much quicker method of identifying whether there are grey and red squirrels in an area. In the long term this should contribute to the efforts to control greys and conserve the red squirrels in the U.K.

### Grey Squirrel Genetics Study

Lisa Signorile of Imperial College London and the Zoological Society of London is engaged in PhD work to assess the role of genetic determinants in the spreading of grey squirrel populations.

The threat posed by grey squirrels to red squirrel survival in Great Britain is a problem shared with two other European countries, Ireland and Italy, where the American rodents were imported in the first half of the 20th century. In Ireland and Italy the spread of the animals has proven to be much slower than in England and Scotland for reasons which remain unclear. The absence of the Squirrelpox virus in Ireland and Italy might play an important role, but other ecological or genetic factors might be involved too.

According to historical records, in Ireland only 12 grey squirrels were imported from London and in Turin, Italy, only four individuals arrived from the U.S. Therefore these two populations might be affected by what is called an inbreeding depression; that is, inbreeding leading to factors such as loss of fertility or higher mortality rates that affect the ability of the population to grow and spread.

In Piedmont, Italy, in particular, 62 years after their introductions, grey squirrels have spread to occupy an area of only 900 Km<sup>2</sup>, possibly because of inbreeding depression. But there are two other populations nearby to the Turin population that historical records indicate are derived from a different genetic pool. The merging of the three populations might boost the spread of the squirrels across the Alps and therefore to the rest of Europe by alleviating inbreeding depression, leading to the possible extinction or massive reduction of the European red squirrel.

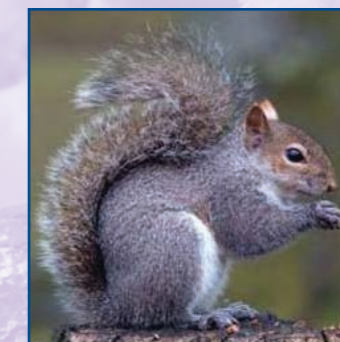


Photograph by: Clare Toner

Grey squirrel DNA samples are being collected across Great Britain, Ireland and Italy to assess the level of inbreeding and to relate it to the rate of spread of different squirrel populations. The effects on spread rate of ecological corridors and control schemes are also considered. RSSS is involved in this project by providing grey squirrel DNA samples from the Scottish Borders, a delicate area where the Scottish and English populations are merging.



Photograph by: Jim Wilson



## GOOD LUCK RICHARD WALES!!

After four years of invaluable service and dedication to the RSSS Project, Richard Wales left Scotland in August of this year for the vast plains of Africa. Richard had worked tirelessly to protect and promote the red squirrels of south Scotland and he will be sorely missed. Richard is now managing the Grevy's Zebra project in Kenya where he is busy setting up remote bases, counting zebra from the air, darting and collaring zebra and attending five hour long village meetings with locals where goat meat and witch doctor blessings have replaced cups of tea and pats on the back. Everyone at RSSS wishes Richard and his partner Sue all the very best in their new adventures.