The RED SQUIRREL Info Sheet

Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group
Save them... ...before they're extinct.

The Red Squirrel

The red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris)* is Britain's native squirrel. It began to live here some 10,000 years ago after the last ice age ended. For centuries red squirrels were widespread throughout the whole of mainland Britain. Now their numbers have fallen to an extent where they live mainly in Scotland and a very few places in England and Wales. There are about 160,000 left with 75% (120,000) found north of the border. The 'Big Tree Country' of Perth and Kinross has many thousands of hectares of woodlands and forests. These offer welcome sanctuary to a significant part of the country's red squirrel population. Visitors to the area have plenty of opportunities to spot them at places such as The Hermitage, Cluny House Gardens, Loch of the Lowes or on the Atholl Estates.

Appearance

Red squirrels belong to the order Rodentia (along with mice and voles) and have really strong front teeth that are good for gnawing open hazelnuts and pinecones. They have longer hind feet than fore feet with long clawed toes that make them excellent tree climbers. They are also very light and weigh no more than 360gm. This makes them able to climb along the thinnest branches high up in the trees. In fact they spend as much as 70% of their time up there. They are very agile and have the ability to rotate their ankles around to get a better grip with their hind feet.

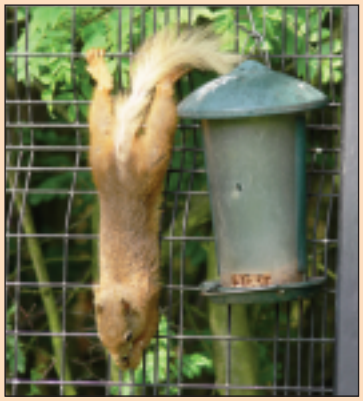
Red squirrels are not all ginger. Their coats can vary from very dark red to almost blonde in the summer. Each year they moult their fur twice, losing it from head to tail in the spring and from tail to head in the Autumn when they grow a thicker, darker winter coat. Also in the winter they grow long hairy tufts on their ears that look pretty striking. They always have white or pale cream coloured undersides.

Habitat

Red squirrels enjoy a range of habitats from dense conifer forests to broadleaf woods. Sometimes they can be found in parkland or even in gardens that border on woodlands. They prefer to live among Scots pines and other conifers as they are a good source of tree seeds, the squirrels' preferred diet.

They build dreys in trees to live in. These are made of a large bundle of twigs that has a core nest space lined with moss, leaves and pine needles. They can be spotted high in trees close in to the trunk on a branch. Summer dreys are lighter but winter ones are dense and snug.

Feeding



Red squirrels eat a whole range of food especially tree seeds. Pine and larch are particularly popular choices. They gather pinecones and pull out the protective covering to get at the seeds inside. Finding chewed cones on the ground is a certain clue that they have been around. They also eat nuts and berries, flowers and shoots and even enjoy mushrooms, which they sometimes hide in trees to eat later. In the autumn they will gather seeds and nuts, to store, in order to have a supply that they can use during the colder months when food becomes scarce.

In the spring and summer months they come out to look for food twice a day in the morning and afternoon. During winter they are less active and only venture out of their dreys for a short while. In bad weather they will save energy by staying indoors. This has led to the mistaken idea that they hibernate.

Breeding

Red squirrels breed from January until September. Sometimes they will have two litters of "kittens" in a year, although first-year females will only breed once. Weather and food supply make a big difference to their ability to have young, as fit and well-fed females are better able to produce and feed healthy offspring.

The female squirrel only comes into season for one day. When all the nearby males notice this, there follows a mad dash through the trees as they chase her and tussle for the right to be her mate.

Pregnancy lasts between 36 and 42 days. Litters are most often three in number. The kittens are born blind, deaf and hairless and it takes about 9 days for their fur to start growing. Their eyes and ears open at four weeks by which time they have developed their bushy tail. It takes another six weeks for them to be fully weaned and ready to go outside and explore the world. Red squirrels can live for up to six years, if they survive their first winter and reach adulthood.

Threats to Red Squirrels

The red squirrel population is under threat for several reasons.

As towns and cities grow so does the demand for places to build houses. This has taken away or broken up woodlands and caused a loss of suitable habitat. New houses mean new wider, faster roads through rural areas. Traffic deaths are a growing cause of squirrel losses each year.

Birds of prey and domestic cats also play a part in reducing the red squirrel population.

The biggest threat to our red squirrels is the introduction of its American cousin, the grey squirrel, about 150 years ago. Grey squirrels compete with reds for food and are better able to eat pinecone seeds and acorns before they are ripe, which reduces the amount available where they share territory. Greys also breed in larger numbers and so will fill a woodland very quickly. This often leads to reds disappearing altogether. Greys carry a type of flea that can weaken red squirrels and make it harder for them to breed in the spring. Finally, greys carry the squirrelpox virus which, although it causes them no harm, is always fatal if transmitted to reds. Large populations of red squirrels have been wiped out by squirrelpox in England. Already some infected greys have been found in the Galloway area of Scotland so this deadly threat is on the horizon for Scottish red squirrels.

Finally, no-one can anticipate the threat to the species from global warming. Unseasonal weather may begin to affect food supplies causing even greater competition for resources.

THE RED SQUIRREL IS ONE OF THE RAREST AND MOST THREATENED OF BRITAIN'S WILD CREATURES. WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK TOGETHER TO PREVENT IT DISAPPEARING FOREVER.

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