

Red Squirrel

General Information

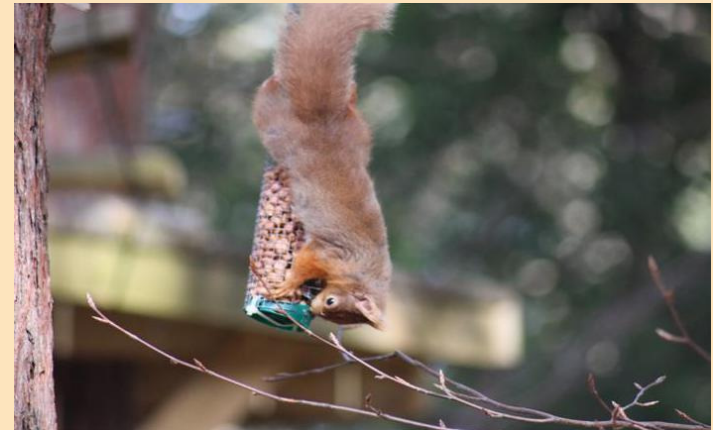
There are only around 140,000 red squirrels left in Britain (120,000 in Scotland, 3,000 in Wales and 15,000 in England). They are being out-competed in deciduous woodland by the non-native North American grey squirrel, whose population number around 2.5million. Greys can feed more efficiently in broadleaved woodlands and can survive in a much more competitive and dense squirrel populations than the reds. Red squirrels also face pressures from disease (squirrel poxvirus), road traffic and predators, including pine martens, birds of prey and domestic cats. At TreeZone we have several red squirrels leaving nearby who regularly take advantage of the food we have provided in our specialist bird proof feeders.

Diet

Red squirrels feed on the ripe seeds and unripe cones, the buds, shoots and bark of pine trees and non-native conifers, such as Norway spruce and larch. They can also thrive in oak or beech woodland as their diet also includes fungi, shoots and fruits of shrubs and trees, and sometimes birds' eggs. Reds do not hibernate but store food such as dried fungi in the trees to eat over the winter months. When food is plentiful, they put on weight to help them through the winter. This is especially important for breeding females who need to be in good condition for producing young.

Box of Knowledge

They can choose between good and bad nuts just by holding them in their paws!



Vital statistics:

Average length - head and body: 18-24cm

Average length – tail: 14-20cm

Average weight: 270-360g

Average lifespan: 5-6 years



Habitat

Red squirrels live in a broad range of habitats ranging from conifer and broadleaf forests to urban parkland, gardens and even mountainous forests up to 425m. They build large nests, called dreys. These usually appear in the forks of tree trunks and are made from a shell of twigs with an insulating core of leaves, conifer needles, mosses and grass. Although squirrels are generally solitary creatures, only coming together to mate, related squirrels will often share dreys in order to keep warm during the winter. Also, some squirrels will use up to eight different dreys in a day. Breeding dreys where the young offspring are looked after tend to be larger and are lined with softer grass clippings.

Breeding

Red squirrels become sexually active at 9-10 months and produce young, called kittens. They reproduce in the spring and sometimes for a second time in the summer if conditions are right. Watch out for the squirrels here crashing around in the trees as potential suitors fight off the competition each and pursue the female through the tree-tops. Each female only comes into heat for one day during their breeding cycle. Females usually have 2-3 kittens but some litters can contain up to 6 young born 45-48 days after mating. Females bring up the young and are territorial over their brood. Somewhere between 20 to 50 per cent of kittens survive to adulthood.



Finding and identifying squirrels

Red squirrels usually have russet red fur, although coat colour can vary with some reds appearing very grey. Reds are small measuring around 180 - 244 mm in length with tails of about 180 mm in length and weigh around 280 - 350g. They tend to have to have quite prominent ear tufts. However, these can almost disappear in summer but tend to be quite large in the winter months. There is little difference between male and female red squirrels, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the sexes. Red squirrels are quiet and elusive creatures and spend much of their time in the tree canopy. When trying to find them look for the large dreys or scratch marks on the bark. They also leave chewed pine cones that look like apple cores. They make a 'chuk chuk' noise and tap their feet when agitated or unhappy. However, if they are frightened they will probably just disappear. They are only active for a few hours a day in winter usually at first light and do not venture out in bad weather. In the warmer months they tend to have an active period in the morning and again in the afternoon but this will vary depending on the season and the weather.



References

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Forestry Commision (no date) *Red squirrels*. Available at: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/Redsquirrel> (Accessed: 18 April 2014)

Scottish Natural Heritage (no date). *Naturally Scottish - Red Squirrels*. Perth: SNH Publications.