

# Victimising Grey Squirrels

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## 1. Native Species?

A key criterion set by the conservation industry for determining if a species is “native” is that it should have evolved with all other species within its own ecosystem and not have been introduced or assisted by man to arrive at what is regarded as its natural location. In short, it should have got to where it is by its own efforts and evolved naturally. If man assisted it, it is regarded as “non-native”.

This is confirmed in Scottish Natural Heritage's website:

*“3.5. Native species are presumed to be those that are present in Great Britain by natural means. In general they migrated (or were transported by other species) into Great Britain after the last Ice Age, without the assistance of humans.”*

*“3.6. Non-native species have been introduced to Great Britain, either deliberately or accidentally, by humans.*

However, this criterion is profoundly flawed and is only credible if the actions of humans are wrongly regarded as outside of nature.

There is no doubt that in the animal world we are pretty smart cookies. We have evolved to manufacture modes of air, sea and land transport, store extensions of our memories on computers, provide ourselves with heat and light, cut ourselves open to remove diseased tissue, grow our own animal and vegetable food, and destroy other members of our own species with unimaginable ferocity if they dare to compete with us for desirable objectives. But none of this excludes us from nature. It only shows we have the mental and physical capacity to use tools and weapons made from natural resources to a greater degree than any other species on the planet. So as we are part of nature, it follows that if we transport fauna or flora to our homeland because we find them attractive, then the claim that these introductions are only acceptable if “transported by other species” is exposed as anthropocentric prejudice, masquerading as science, which serves to undermine the whole concept of native and non-native species

In fact, the survival of all species depends almost solely on their attractiveness to members of their own species, and in many cases their attraction to others as well. It is ironic that attractiveness, which is leading conservationists to “protect” the red squirrel, was the reason for introducing grey squirrels in the past.

Conversely, it is equally ironic that both red and grey squirrels have been demonised as “tree rats” at different times, which has led to tens of thousands being slaughtered because they were intensely disliked.

Also, if it is important to conservationists that a species evolves naturally over millennia in Britain to earn its “native species” status, then it should be equally important that the same species evolving in a different natural environment abroad should not be regarded as “native” to this country. They can’t have it both ways! But they try.

It is well known that the grey squirrel was brought from America to England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century but less known that ancestors of the current population of red squirrels in the UK have been largely introduced from various parts of Europe. These animals evolved within a wide range of climatic and environmental conditions and associated with different flora and fauna encountered across the part of the range they inhabited, so for conservationists to argue that these influences are not important is to argue against their own concept of “native species”.

Both current populations of squirrels, red and grey, have been introduced to this country and there is no evidence that even the earlier red squirrels evolved here continuously from the time of the land bridge to Europe around 10,000 years ago. Scant archaeological snapshots give no indication of a continued presence. Indeed, prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century there seems to be no record of the continuous existence of red squirrel populations living in Britain.

“There is no longer a ‘native’ red squirrel due to the frequent introductions from Europe and habitat defragmentation which has allowed gene flow between previously sub-divided populations.”  
(Harris *et al*, 2007)

## **2. Habitat and diet**

A common assertion is “when greys move in, reds move out” but the blame should not be laid at the door of grey squirrels, but at the conservationists themselves. If conservationists want to assist the red squirrels to survive, they should be improving their habitat by planting suitable conifer trees in which they thrive, instead of the political and identity-crisis fad of wallpapering the countryside with native broadleaves that favours the greys' expansion and the reds' demise. The requirement to plant trees that favour the red squirrel as a barrier to the greys' expansion is well known to the Forestry Commission.

Red and grey squirrels have a significantly different diet. A study published in the Mammal Review showed that while both species fed mostly on seeds and fruit' they could adapt to an abundance of other foods at times of seasonal shortages. In particular the red squirrel was found to largely consume fungi and conifer buds when seeds and fruit were scarce. Greys, on the other hand, will eat acorns – which reds find difficult to digest – and a host of other foods, as widely ranging from deciduous shoots to roots and perhaps the occasional discarded fast food take-a-way that comes their way. Neither species is a serial

predator of birds' eggs or chicks but they won't pass up an opportunity if it presents itself.

### **3. Tree Damage**

"Damage to trees can be beneficial (Forestry Commission, 2006), as wounding can provide habitat for saproxylic fungi and invertebrates, which in turn provide food for woodland birds. Trees killed by squirrel damage can also provide valuable nesting sites for a range of species." (Harris et al 2007)

### **4. Squirrel-pox Virus (SQPV)**

Conservationists tell us that grey squirrels are the "cause" of the red squirrel decline through the transmission of squirrel-pox virus (SQPV) but there is no evidence to support this. It is merely speculation presented as fact. There are a number of ongoing grant funded studies to try to determine the route of infection but would this expensive research be required if the route was already known?

It is known that the disease characteristics are similar to other poxvirus infections and that most are resistant to drying. This can allow infected lesions or crusts to remain infected for a long time thus allowing the spread of the disease throughout the forest environment by almost any creature that comes into contact with it. Indeed, Scottish Natural Heritage admit they do not know the route of transmission and that "possibilities include being passed by ectoparasites, fleas, lice, ticks and mites which may transfer from animal to animal in the dreys". They also acknowledge the virus may be airborne spread. Research by McInnes et al in 2006 acknowledges "the possibility that the virus is endemic to the UK and that other rodent species inhabiting the same woodland environment could be harbouring the virus.

Under a Freedom of Information request "The Forestry Commission have admitted that no routine testing of live red squirrels is undertaken" and they "are not aware of any scientific evidence one way or another as to whether or not there is a resistant population of reds out there". So it is quite wrong to claim red squirrels have no immunity to the disease. Indeed, recent research by London zoologists has established that red squirrels are beginning to show signs of natural immunity.

Early in the last century, out of forty-four districts in England where red squirrels had the disease only four districts had grey squirrels present. This suggests that SQPV has been within the red squirrel population for around a century at least and that grey squirrels are victims of a campaign of unfair vilification. Some people even have the audacity to claim that SQPV somehow arrived around the time it was discovered in 1983 but that is about as ridiculous as claiming America didn't exist

before it was “discovered” by Leif Ericson – centuries before Christopher Columbus was born.

## 5. Immunocontraception

Immunocontraception was deemed immoral in the 1930s in mainland Europe, when it was proposed against sectors of the human population. It is equally immoral to use it against wildlife, as it could affect non-target species and introduce a significant risk of unintended consequences. Unscrupulous conservationists could also use it as a weapon of mass destruction of any species in an attempt to control nature. How long before this dangerous technology, if perfected, could be used against the human population? It is not a route that should be considered by any right thinking people.

## 6. Culling of Grey Squirrels

Culling doesn't work except in closed environments such as islands. According to research it would cost £200,000 per annum to control grey squirrels in Northumberland's Redesdale Forest alone. - Rushton et al (2002) – and would require to be repeated endlessly as greys will quickly re-colonised voids, sometimes within a few weeks. Culling greys across Scotland will be an expensive and futile exercise. It is well known that culling can lead to an increase in population as those left alive enjoy a better habitat and produce more young.

*“Squirrel culling is not a new phenomenon. Some 60 years ago the Ministry of Agriculture started to encourage people to kill squirrels, offering—I remember it only too clearly—a shilling a tail. I became a very wealthy young man at that time, as we had a lot of grey squirrels in the area and I did not need a lot of encouragement to do something about them. When the government at that time had paid out some £250,000, they decided that that was enough. There was no perceivable difference to the squirrel population.” Lord Plumb, March 2006*

In Merseyside, a buffer zone has been in place for a number of years where grey squirrels are killed. However, increased human exploitation of red squirrels for tourism and the frequent intrusion by conservationists for monitoring population levels was always likely to lead to stress and loss of condition of the red squirrel resulting in an increased susceptibility to disease. The announcement that the red squirrel population had declined by 90% in the past two years was hardly surprising.

*In short, fewer grey squirrels with more conservation and tourist intrusion have resulted in a massive decline in the red squirrel population – definitely not the predicted outcome.*

Very recently, The Lancashire Wildlife Trust has claimed productive breeding of red squirrels in Merseyside over the summer has seen numbers rise from between 100 to 200 in October 2008 to between 200 to 400 in October 2009. However, alert readers will note the margin for error has doubled and for that statement to be true only two additional red squirrels would require to have been born.

In a recent Radio 4 "Living World" broadcast, a Cumbria Wildlife Trust officer failed to find a single red squirrel for the presenter in Thirlmere woodland where there is reputed to be a population of "at least 200". If they can't find one for the BBC, how do they know there are 200? This is where a Red Squirrel Trail tour, with no guarantee of seeing a red squirrel, costs a member of the public "twenty quid".

Evidential claims made by conservationists are frequently littered with slippery qualifiers that include words like "presumed to be", "thought to be", "possibly", "perhaps", "may be", etc. and used as escape routes from being held to account. The careful reader is well advised to look out for these qualifiers before coming to any conclusion as to the merit of any particular claim.

## **7. Humane dispatch or brutality**

Grey squirrels usually mate from December to February and again in March to May, although Forest Research has established that they mate all year round. Gestation takes up to 44 days and the young are usually weaned short of three months. This means that most kittens will be dependent on lactating females from mid January to mid-October. Trapping and killing these females at this time results in the extreme cruelty of sentencing their kittens to a lingering death from starvation. There is nothing "humane" about that! It is an act of extreme cruelty.

What is "humane" anyway? "Humane" and "humane as possible" are words frequently used by conservationists to describe the killing of wildlife. So what exactly do these words mean or are they merely euphemistic references to brutality?

Red squirrel groups are currently engaged in what they call the "humane dispatch" of grey squirrels by clubbing them over the head with a blunt instrument. However, Scottish Natural Heritage's area manager for Shetland rightly condemned the brutal killing of twenty-one grey seal pups by a local fisherman, who clubbed them over the head with a blunt instrument. He said, "*This is a shocking case. The degree of casual cruelty shows that there is still a great deal of ignorance and prejudice about grey seals*". But let us not forget that SNH, together with the Scottish Wildlife Trust and others are currently engaged in the "humane dispatch" of grey squirrels by the same method, which amounts to gross hypocrisy and double standards.

Clubbing a grey squirrel over the head is an act of violence and is being promoted and perpetrated nation-wide by government and red squirrel groups. Scientific evidence shows that those who have little regard for the welfare of animals are likely to have a similar attitude to their fellow human beings. Abuse breeds abuse, and in our ever-increasing violent society, what example is it to younger generations that violence and killing is an acceptable solution to a perceived problem of not being native to this country?

Putting aside the argument of whether the animal is a “protected” grey seal or a grey squirrel, it is logical to say that if the method of dispatch is similar, there is no excuse for describing it differently.

**All sentient animals feel pain irrespective of whether they are “protected” or otherwise.**

## **8. One small step from racism**

In reality, rather than in the arbitrary and profoundly prejudiced world of “conservation”, all squirrels born in this country are as “native” by birth as we are, irrespective of their colour, background or success. To expect tolerance within our own population but condemn these animals to death on the basis of their ancestral background is extremely hypocritical and only one small step removed from racism.

**It should be appreciated that squirrels, of any colour, are not “ours”. They are independent parallel mammalian populations that inhabit this planet the same as we do and should be afforded the same respect and consideration to live out their lives that we expect for ourselves.**

**The Grey Squirrel  
Native by birth – Condemned by origin**

**Please read the website  
[www.grey-squirrel.org.uk](http://www.grey-squirrel.org.uk)**