

Species Factsheet: *Red Squirrel (Sciurus vulgaris)*



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Fur colour variable from bright ginger through to red and dark brown or black tinged with grey in winter; larger ear tufts in mid-winter which disappear by the summer; bushy tail which bleaches white by late summer in some individuals.

Size: 180-240mm, tail about 175mm.

Weight: Juveniles: 100-150g; Adults up to 350g.

Life Span: Up to six years in the wild.



Distribution & Habitat

Red squirrels spend about three-quarters of their active time above ground in trees and shrubs, and are at home in both conifer forests and broadleaved woodland. The distribution of red squirrels has declined drastically in the last 60 years and they are now extinct in southern England except for a few on the Isle of Wight and two small islands in Poole Harbour. Elsewhere in central Britain they are confined to rather isolated populations in Wales (notably Anglesey) and around Formby in Merseyside. Red squirrels are still widespread in the North of England and Scotland, and in Ireland, but even there their range is contracting.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Red Squirrels are active during the daytime, though in summer it may rest for an hour or two around mid-day. Squirrel nests, or dreys, are constructed of twigs in a tree fork, above a whorl of branches close to the trunk of a conifer, or, less visibly, in a hole in a tree. They are lined with soft hair, moss and dried grass. Several squirrels may share the same drey, or use the same drey on different days.

Diet and Feeding

Their main foods are tree seeds, especially hazel nuts and seeds from conifer cones. They also eat tree flowers and shoots, mushrooms and fungi from under tree bark. They often suffer periods of food shortage, especially during July.

Reproduction

Breeding can begin in mid-winter and continue through the summer, depending on the weather and how much food is available. Mating chases occur where several males follow a female who is ready to mate. During chases squirrels make spectacular leaps through the tree canopy and spiral up and down tree trunks. Females have one or two litters a year, usually of about 2-3 young. Juveniles are weaned at around 10 weeks, but do not breed until they are one year old.

Conservation Status

Red squirrels are protected by law, and may not be intentionally trapped, killed or kept, or have their dreys disturbed except under licence from Natural England (NE), the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) or Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Red squirrels are considered vulnerable in Britain. However, occasionally high densities in some Scottish forests can lead to economic damage to trees. In such cases, government agencies will assess whether to issue a licence to remove some of them.

Despite historically high numbers, the introduction of grey squirrels during the early 20th century greatly contributed to their decline through disease transfer and indirect competition (better foraging efficiencies). The only certain way to sustain red squirrel populations is through the exclusion of grey squirrels. This can be achieved through the creation of habitats favourable for only red squirrels, selective feeders or lethal exclusion. To improve the success of reintroductions further research is required.