

# RED SQUIRREL *Sciurus vulgaris*

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Red Squirrels and their dreys are protected by UK legislation. The greatest threat to Red Squirrels is the spread of the non-native Grey Squirrel which competes for food and carries disease.

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*Red Squirrel © David Hickson*

## Legal and Conservation status

- UK Protected Species
- UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species and Species of Principal Importance in England
- Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan species

### ***Red Squirrels are protected under:***

- Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (Schedule 5)

### ***It is an offence to:***

- Intentionally kill, injure or take a wild Red Squirrel
- Have in possession or control any live or dead Red Squirrel or any part of it
- Damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which Red Squirrels use for shelter or protection
- Disturb Red Squirrels while they are occupying such a place

(This is a summary of the main points of the law, not a complete statement.)

## Habitat

Red Squirrels are essentially woodland animals, spending the majority of their lives in the canopy. Although Red Squirrels can live in all types of woodland, they cannot compete against Grey Squirrels in mixed and deciduous woodlands, especially if large-seeded broadleaved trees (oak, beech, hazel) are present. Red Squirrels have more of a competitive advantage against Grey Squirrels in coniferous woodlands and this habitat difference is being used in the strategy for Red Squirrels in England.

Habitat connectivity between woodlands through tree-lines and hedgerows is important for Red Squirrels, as they are more reluctant than grey squirrel to cross large distances of open ground.

**Cumbria Key Habitats that are particularly important for Red Squirrels include:**

[Semi-natural woodland](#)

[Hedgerows](#)

## Ecology

Red Squirrels predominantly live on tree seeds but their diet also includes berries, buds, shoots, flowers, lichens, fungi and, occasionally, insects. The autumn and winter seed harvest is extremely important both for over-winter survival and for breeding success the following year. Red Squirrels do not hibernate and need to increase their body weight by 10% in order to survive the winter and maintain good condition for breeding in the spring. The first litter is usually born in March with a second litter, if conditions are right, in July/August. The autumn and winter food runs out by late spring and between April and August natural food becomes scarce.

Red Squirrels build spherical nests in trees using twigs and other material such as mosses, leaves and lichens. These nests are called dreys and a squirrel will use 4 -5 dreys at any time.

Causes of mortality include lack of food, disease, predation and road deaths.

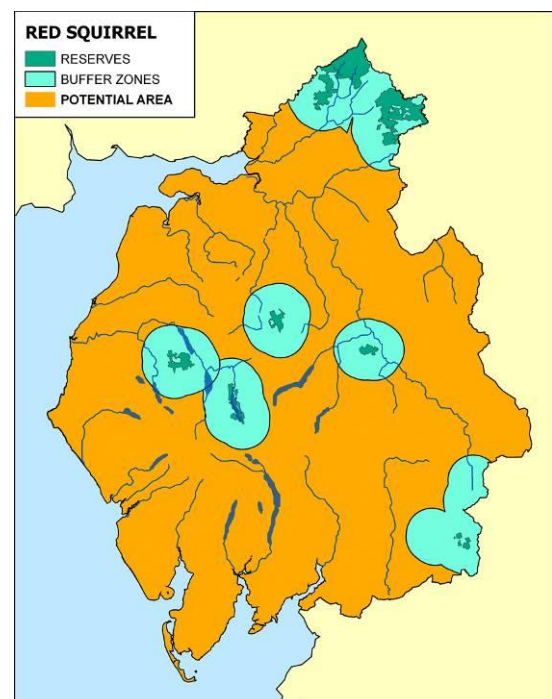
The introduction of Grey Squirrels from North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has had a devastating impact on Red Squirrels not only through competition for resources, but also through spreading the squirrel pox virus which is nearly always fatal to Red Squirrels.

## Distribution

Once ubiquitous in Britain, the species has undergone a drastic decline over the last 50 years and is now essentially restricted to Scotland, Cumbria, Northumberland, County Durham, West Lancashire, Merseyside some parts of Wales, including Anglesey, and island populations such as Brownsea and the Isle of Wight..

Red Squirrels still occur throughout Cumbria but have been declining rapidly in the last 10-15 years. The decline is most advanced in South Cumbria as Grey Squirrels originally colonised Cumbria from Lancashire. It is anticipated that scattered populations in small woods will continue to decline throughout Cumbria within the next 20 years.

The main conservation action in Cumbria is concentrated on Red Squirrel 'reserves' and their buffer zones at Greystoke, Whinfell, Whinlatter and Thirlmere plus Garsdale/Mallerstang on the North Yorkshire border and south west Kielder.



## Conservation Issues

The most important threat to the survival of the Red Squirrel in Cumbria is the spread of the Grey Squirrel. Grey Squirrels compete with Red Squirrels for resources and act as a carrier of the squirrel pox virus, which is usually fatal when contracted by Red Squirrels. Red Squirrels also suffer from road mortality, and loss, fragmentation, and unsympathetic management of their woodland habitats.

## Planning Considerations

- Red Squirrels breed throughout Cumbria and potentially any woodland within Cumbria may contain squirrels and their dreys. Woodlands or individual trees or groups of trees that are used for breeding are also material to planning decisions.
- Red Squirrels may be impacted by development which affects individual or small groups or trees, by poor management, loss of larger areas of woodland, and by the loss of tree lines and hedgerows that link woodland patches.
- Any development that may impact upon Red Squirrels and their habitat would require a Red Squirrel survey with particular focus on their protected dreys and, as necessary, adequate protection and mitigation measures.
- In Red Squirrel reserves and buffer zones the potential for protection and enhancement of habitat should be optimised where ecologically appropriate.

## Enhancement Opportunities

- Take opportunities to manage the mix of species required by Red Squirrels in the reserves and buffer zones. This may include planting the correct tree species or retaining conifers within woodlands, avoiding large-seeded broadleaved species such as oak and beech.
- Design layout of developments, including new roads, in such a manner that habitat links are created or maintained.

## Further Information

[UK Priority Species Page](#)

[JNCC UK BAP Priority Terrestrial Mammal Species](#)

[Red Squirrels and the Law, RSNE](#)

[Pre-submission screening service: advice on planning proposals affecting protected species](#)

[Protected species: how to review planning applications](#)

## Contacts

### National:

- **Joint Nature Conservation Committee**, UK Biodiversity information and advice, Tony Weighell, Tel: 01733 866852.
- **Red Squirrels Northern England**, Care of, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Garden House, St. Nicholas Park, Jubilee Road Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 3XT. Tel: 0191 284 6884.

### Local

**Red squirrels Northern England. (Cumbria)** Simon O'Hare, Tel: 01228 829573.  
Email: [simono@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:simono@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk).

- **Natural England (Cumbria)**, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Rd, Kendal, LA9 7RL. Tel: 0300 060 2122. Email: [northwest@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:northwest@naturalengland.org.uk).

### **Current Action in Cumbria**

- The main conservation action in Cumbria is concentrated on the Red Squirrel reserves and their buffer zones and corridor routes. Red Squirrel Northern England is a partnership working across Cumbria and surrounding counties. It has support from several voluntary organisations, and land managers organising surveys, grey squirrel control, advice and engagement.