

# IN DEFENCE OF **SQUIRRELS**



Grey squirrels are not native to the UK and were introduced to Britain in the late 1800s. They are now a common garden species and in urban areas are often a child's first contact with wildlife.

There are several reasons that people approach us to tell us they "hate" grey squirrels.

The first is usually that old myth that Grey Squirrels are responsible for the decline of our native Red Squirrel. This is utterly incorrect. If every Grey Squirrel in the UK was killed tomorrow, the Red Squirrel would still not return to the areas it has disappeared from. Why?

Because we humans have destroyed its habitat, conifer woodland. Our preference for deciduous trees such as Oak and Beech are not suitable habitat for Red Squirrels and they are simply unable to adapt to the millions of houses springing up all over the UK. It is for this reason, and not that of the Grey Squirrel, that Reds are now only found in remote Coniferous forests. The decline in Red Squirrel numbers is also due to intense persecution in the late 19th and early 20th century when they were considered pests and were killed in their thousands. By the 1920s their population had been decimated. In fact, they were so low in numbers that some had to be introduced from Scandinavia, so these are not native either!

Secondly, the argument that Grey Squirrels have infected Reds with the Poxvirus. Research has shown that Red Squirrels were dying of a disease between 1900 and 1920. Descriptions of the disease give very similar clinical signs to the disease that scientists now know to be poxvirus. Most of the Red Squirrels reported to be dying had never had any contact with Grey Squirrels.

The third argument for "hating" squirrels is that they are pests because they destroy trees. This is grossly exaggerated. This tends only to happen in the mating season and guess what? Reds do it too! The stripping of bark generally does little damage to the tree and will only affect its value to the timber industry when it is cut down and sold because it may have some small flaws. Big Deal! Hardly a reason to kill, especially when the timber is grown for low quality purposes! There is certainly no reason to persecute them in parks and woodlands where the occasional damage just doesn't look as nice! In any event, on the rare occasions where trees are killed by stripped bark, the dead wood, if left by humans, serves as fantastic habitat for a variety of woodland wildlife. Isn't that more important than it looking pretty!

One of the most recent reasons we encountered happened when someone bringing in a hedgehog told us that they "hate" squirrels because they kill birds and small mammals. We had to confess that we had never heard of this happening but when we checked it out with our local mammal recorder, he confirmed that it does happen, but so rarely that DEFRA doesn't even count it as having any impact on bird or mammal populations at all. In fact, hedgehogs (such as the one she was lovingly bringing in to us) have had a far more devastating effect on birds in Uist than squirrels have ever done here. Not that we would approve of those wishing to kill hedgehogs either, particularly when the hedgehogs were introduced to Uist by humans in the first place!

The only real damage caused by squirrels is when they are able to find their way into roof spaces. Then they can make a real mess if left. However, they are relatively easy to remove. Just pop up into the loft, make sure the squirrel is out (usually in daylight hours) and block up the hole! Easy! Do remember to check that there are no babies in the loft however. If there are, disturb the nest slightly, leaving your scent and give the mother a chance to come back and move the babies elsewhere. The following day, you can return and block up the hole from the inside.

Mass culling of grey squirrels is cruel, ineffective and pointless. The vacant territories are simply filled by more grey squirrels from neighbouring territories and the excess food left in the wake means that the newcomers can breed. We can protect Red Squirrels by protecting their habitat not by killing Grey Squirrels who can often be found living happily side by side with Reds, even sharing dreys in some cases. If only we could learn from their example.

If you believe that our work with British Wildlife is worthwhile, feel free to make a donation to the charity via our website.