

FIGHTING BACK



Airgun enthusiast and BASC member **JASON BRAITHWAITE** reports on an exciting and successful red squirrel conservation project taking place in the woodlands of Western Lakeland.

The native red squirrel is returning to woodland due to the successful culling of large numbers of the grey squirrel. The return of the red squirrel is a fragile one, and one that requires constant monitoring and support

Over the last 20 years, the woodlands of Western Lakeland have been host to an unwelcome invasion. Its impact is known to those who live locally and is being felt in the local ecology. Pockets of woodland in this region have traditionally been home to the native and often elusive red squirrel – a species now under serious threat. While grey squirrels have been a common sight for many years in our inner-cities, they have only recently started to appear in large numbers in this stunning part of the country.

In some local woodland regions the red

squirrel appears to have left completely and in others they have a fragile and diminished presence. If grey squirrels become too numerous, the reds will stop breeding, vacate the area, or simply die out. There have also been increased sightings of red squirrels with the deadly Parapox virus in the region. It is time for action. A serious problem requires a professional, and well-planned conservation solution.

The West-Lakes Squirrel Initiative (WLSI) was started in 2011 when its founder members Peter Armstrong and Steve Tyson were contacted by a



landowner concerned that grey squirrels had become established in woodland occupied by indigenous red squirrels. By December 2013, the WLSI was registered as a 'not for profit' company. Currently there are 17 active volunteers directly involved in culling activities, with a few

Wildlife trail cameras tell the airgunner what is feeding and when, 24hrs a day, so an ambush can be planned

additional non-shooting supportive members who help out more generally, monitoring and topping-up squirrel feeders and reporting sightings of both types of squirrel. This red squirrel conservation project currently oversees more than 5,000 acres of woodland for around 100 landowners across the western Lake District. All active members of WLSI are experienced airgun enthusiasts and it is the modern precision air rifle which is the chosen method of grey squirrel control. Air rifles are used in conjunction with an optimised feeder-based methodology.

A feeder and trail camera configuration set up in woodland



Some of the volunteer members of the WLSI

A 21st century approach to conservation: Data-driven airgunning

Hoping to get lucky by walking through the woods randomly looking for grey squirrels is not an optimal strategy for a serious conservation project. The sheer scale of this project requires a 21st century approach combining research, observation, and data-gathering technology. From the feed mix and design of the feeders, to the use of passive infra-red (PIR)-enabled trail cameras and precision air rifles, nothing goes unconsidered. For the feeders, an effective squirrel mix can include nuts and seeds with the addition of maize as an indicator of squirrel species (reds don't generally eat maize). This can be

complemented further by a scent attractant which helps to establish the feeder in that area, drawing the squirrels in to feed. My own additional twist on this squirrel mix is to occasionally add monkey nuts as the squirrel will often pause to nibble open the outer casing to get at the inner peanut. They tend to stay reasonably still when doing this, providing an ideal opportunity for an unhurried head shot, killing the quarry humanely.

Feeders are placed approximately 5ft from the ground and fixed to tree trunks which also act as safe backstops – something which must be considered at all

My own effective squirrel feeder mix containing seeds, nuts and the occasional monkey nut



times. The strategy here is to have feeders in different sections of the woodland and monitor the activity on them. Ideally, and to optimise the method further, the feeder will be coupled with a trail camera to capture all visits to it. The use of trail cams is something of a game-changer for feeder-based approaches. Grey squirrels are creatures of habit and it is now easier to establish their presence and feeding times while minimising the demands upon the time of the volunteer.

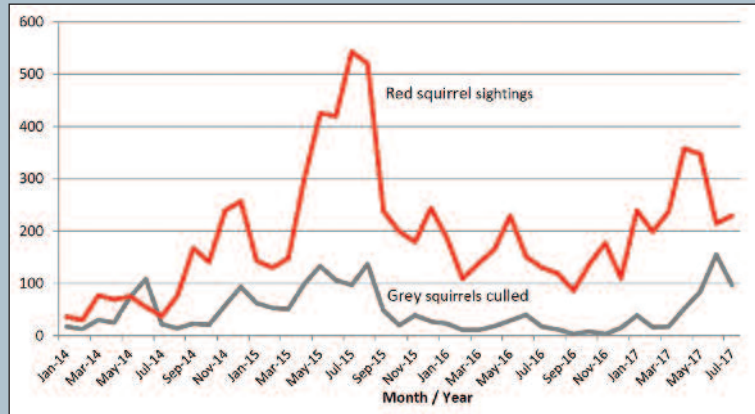
Trail cams will reveal which squirrel species are present and when they like to feed. Once the data from the trail cams has been consulted and grey squirrel activity noted, then it's ambush time!

The trick now is to get out into the woods, set up and get ready before the squirrels come to feed. Shooting seats and shooting sticks are very helpful here as it is important to be comfortable while waiting for the grey squirrels to come and feed. With the cyclical behavioural patterns of the quarry now known, the planned ambush is fully informed.

Detailed records are constantly maintained on the location and numbers of squirrels seen, both grey and red, and how many greys

culled, which also provides a month-by-month measure of efficacy for the methods used. This optimised and evidenced-based feeder approach helped WLSI cull almost 2,000 grey squirrels and documented over 6,500 red squirrel sightings in the woodlands of the Western Lake-

widows' to some extent. From its humble beginnings as a couple of hobby pest controllers trying to save one piece of woodland from grey squirrels, the WLSI now covers one of the largest areas of woodland of any squirrel initiative in the county. The group has become the 'go to' organisation for



Data on red squirrel sightings and culled greys from the WLSI archive.

District since their formation. The group also have clear evidence of the return of the red squirrel into woodland areas from which they had been absent for a decade or more, following the removal or reduction of grey squirrels.

What is particularly admirable to note is that every member of this conservation project is an unpaid volunteer taking pride in their role in protecting the red squirrel. All spare time is dedicated to the on-going demands of ensuring the red squirrel has more than a fighting chance in this stunning part of our countryside. The members in the group joke that their wives and partners have become 'squirrel

landowners in the area wanting to benefit from its expertise and professionalism. The project is an excellent example of the crucial relationship between shooting and conservation and what can be done when landowners and conservation enthusiasts work together towards a common goal.

If you would like to know more about the group or help support its vision and activities, please contact Peter or Steve at wlsi@hotmail.ac.uk for further information.

Western Lakeland provides some of the most stunning views in the country. Its woodlands are also home to the endangered red squirrel, but for how much longer?



Kentucky fried squirrel

Why not do your bit for conservation and start eating grey squirrels? They're tasty, low in fat and plentiful! Squirrel has a lovely, nutty flavour – it's really worth giving it a try.

Ingredients:

- (Serves four)
- 4 squirrels (quartered)
- 2 eggs
- 100g plain flour
- 200g breadcrumbs
- Oil for frying
- Salt and Cajun pepper to season

Season the meat with salt and Cajun pepper. Toss the meat in the flour, dip in beaten egg and cover in breadcrumbs. Put enough oil in the pan to allow the meat to float. Heat it up until smoking hot (about 170°C). Place the meat in the frying pan. Fry for about eight minutes (or until browned) on one side, flip and fry for another five minutes.

Serve with French fries and a good serving of coleslaw. Enjoy!

