

Morpeth and District Red Squirrels



Welcome to the Autumn/Winter 2015 edition of the MADRS Newsletter

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Welcome to the last edition of the Newsletter for 2015. I'm not sure where the time goes but this year seems to have flown by.

We have been extremely busy and with more people coming on board to help with grey control, MADRS has removed over 900 grey squirrels from our area up to the end of September. This has encouragingly resulted in Reds returning to cleared areas and Reds being reported in areas where we have not had sightings before. It is a constant and ongoing challenge, but with our collective efforts, there is a brighter future for our native Red Squirrels in this area.

We hope you enjoy reading the newsletter and if you would like to contribute to the next one, please email contributions through to enquiries@madredsquirrels.com by March 2016 ready for the Spring edition.

We wish you a safe, healthy and Happy Christmas.
MADRS

Events

It has been a quiet summer “event wise” with the notable exception of our attendance at Cambo summer fete. As always it was real pleasure to join in the annual celebrations and, as always, we were blessed by good weather albeit after a rather shaky and showery morning. Jean Thompson helped with the stall with her customary enthusiasm and we are grateful to her for her continuing support.

I worked with Katy Cook from RSNE to provide a red squirrel themed day at Plessey Woods during the school holidays. Frances Povey, the warden at the country park, assisted Katy in leading woodland walks while I stayed in the relative calm of our tent (courtesy of Northumberland County Council) and had a range of interesting discussions with visitors of all ages about the work being done to protect native red squirrels. The “colour in a squirrel” exercise again produced a rainbow of animal masks and hordes of small children running round wearing vibrant examples of local art work.

June Harris will be addressing the Lancaster Park WI group in early November and we have welcomed an approach by the U3Age group to speak to them about work being done nationally and locally to protect the reds.

Longhirst Christmas coffee morning will be held on December 5th, 10 till 12 in the village hall. This year we will be attending to meet up with all our friends in the village but will just be selling Christmas cards and not the usual range of squirrel related products (unless of course anyone would like to contact me and place an order for a mug/toy squirrel/note book etc!).

Anyone visiting Whitehouse Farm over the summer will have seen our collecting boxes on display. Staff at the centre were very enthusiastic to learn about what we do and we may develop some partnership work with them in the future. Grey control work is being established in woods around the farm and, if reds return to the locality, it will add to the experience of visitors who go to Whitehouse to meet the animals there.
Kate 01670 51550



A little red guest appearing at Norman Dyson's feeder, Hartford. This little chap visits every day following ongoing efforts by MADRS volunteers in the area.

Protecting our native red squirrels.

The plight of red squirrels has been in the national news recently, with reports of greys steadily advancing on areas previously inhabited only by reds, protected by rangers employed by organisations such as Red Squirrels Northern England. Kielder is the best known local red squirrel "reserve" but even here grey squirrels have been seen. Greys are, of course, a huge threat to red squirrels. They out compete for food and can eat unripe nuts and berries while the reds wait for them to ripen. More importantly, they carry a disease which is fatal to reds but which they can tolerate. An outbreak of this illness decimated the population of red squirrels at Stobswood last year.

What is not reported in the national press is the news that all over Northumberland there are small groups of reds thriving in their own "communities" and very often they are supported and protected by volunteers from that community. Local residents provided supplementary food, putting up feeders and keeping them supplied with nuts and assorted seed. They report sightings via their local red squirrel conservation group.

Significantly they also report sightings of any greys in order that these animals can be caught and the threat they pose be removed. Some volunteer groups undertake systematic monitoring of local woods to check where the reds are regularly feeding. Road signs are provided to alert drivers to the presence of reds (who have absolutely no road sense at all!) Visitors to Druridge Bay Country Park will have seen such signs, which were provided by Morpeth and District Red Squirrels, the group working in this area. We cover an area of Northumberland from the coast, inland to Widdrington, across to Wallington, South East to Whalton then East via Plessey/Hartford to the coast. We have a team of grey control volunteers who respond to sightings of greys in the villages where they live. We work in partnership with local farmers and landowners and with other groups of volunteers who form a network of red conservation across Northumberland as far as Berwick upon Tweed.

Helping with this work can be as easy as keeping an eye out for any squirrels you may see as you walk in the countryside, although we also have reds in Morpeth and the surrounding villages. Or you may have some time to get more involved. We are always looking for more volunteers so please contact us on enquiries@madredsquirrels.com if you think you might be able to help. If you do not live in the local area but would still like to help, get in touch with Northern Red Squirrels, www.northernredsquirrels.org.uk for information on red conservation in your part of the county.

We would love to hear from you if you think you could help with any of the following:-

- Distribute posters in your local area.
- Help our Treasurer.
- Help with any aspect of grey control.
- Help with landownership identification and permissions.
- Help with producing an information leaflet.
- Help update or look after our web site.

Catherine Weightman
Joint Coordinator MAD RS



Morpeth and District Red Squirrels
(MADRS)

www.madredsquirrels.com



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Photo courtesy of G.A. Charlton



MADRS Christmas cards available to order.
Minimum donation of £3.50 for 10 cards or £1.75 for 5 cards.
2 designs to choose from - Winter Nibbles and Snow Frolic.
Email enquiries@madredsquirrels.com to place an order.
Thank you and Happy Christmas.

USUAL SAFETY REMINDER.

Please don't forget that Red Squirrels and birds need fresh water, but ensure that water barrels and buckets have a lid on them or have a mesh 'ladder' so that anything that falls in can climb out.

Practical Grey Control

For those new to grey squirrel control, this time of year can sometimes be a little puzzling. They see greys are still around, but for some reason they seem to have stopped going into traps so often. Sometimes a grey will even be seen right next to a trap, but not enter it – yet only 2 weeks before the same trap in the same place with the same bait was catching greys. So what's gone wrong? Well the reason for this is that for squirrels of course their boom time for food isn't spring and summer, but autumn and early winter when nuts and fruits are most abundant - what would you rather eat, some hard dried maize, or some nice fresh nuts and fruit?

So at this time, we tend to see greys beginning to turn their noses up at the likes of maize, which is the staple of trapping the rest of the year as there is much more desirable food around such as beech mast and acorns. (Whole maize is cheap, it is liked by grey squirrels but is not much liked by most reds. It is very visible from a distance too, and so is an ideal bait for grey squirrels)

This has led to a belief in some quarters that you cannot do grey control in winter, but that's simply not the case, and as we are fighting to save the endangered red squirrel in this country, the idea of letting greys infect them and/or move into red areas for an entire season every year is simply a non-starter. Where we have not just controlled grey numbers, but successfully returned areas to reds, we have only done so by year round grey control – sadly it takes only one grey carrying the virus to kill tens of reds after all. So like any challenge, we have to adopt our tactics to match the oppositions behaviour, and we can do this with greys in a couple of ways in particular;

The first is by using more enticing (and usually more expensive) food in the traps. A favourite of mine is to use hazelnuts in their shell as these tend to be more bird resistant than shelled ones and thus extend how long the trap is effective or has to be re-baited. Because they can be expensive, (which is not an issue if you are only placing one or two traps, but if you are running 50 or more like myself), it can become an issue, so I usually place one in the bait tray at the very back of the trap and one just inside the entrance so the grey gets to have a try of one and realise how nice it is before spotting the one at the back of the trap. If you are only running a couple of traps you could be a bit more generous of course and maybe put one or two nearby (but bear in mind magpies and jays will take them if they see them, and mice will think it an early Christmas gift on finding them at night) as an enticement.

Every year around this time, as a result of this behaviour change, I see suggestions online of various exotic baits and potions such as aniseed oil (I tried this, and apart from being followed by half the dogs in the district and having aniseed scented pockets from the bottle, I can't say I noticed any result regarding greys at all!), chocolate, peanut butter, jam (!) etc. etc. you name it, someone swears by it. I can only say that for me, doing grey control every working day of the year, none of these has made the slightest difference. Some greys came into traps baited with these things, but some always will, and statistically, there was no difference. However, I am sure that somewhere out there, is the

holy grail of baits that will draw greys in no matter how tasty and plentiful the wild beech mast and acorns are, so it's definitely worth experimenting with new baits and please share your results with us (good or bad, and you don't have to have your name published) and we'll feature them.

Curiously, whilst greys may not be so keen on bait in traps at this time, they very often are still interested in tree mounted feeders, and so full time grey controllers tend to move into target feeder shooting at this time. A "target feeder" is a squirrel feeder put up for the purposes of drawing in grey squirrels to a place they can be safely and humanely shot. They are also useful all year round where trapping is impracticable for whatever reason or for removing a grey that has entered a red area. We will have an article on these next year.

In my own case, while still running traps where appropriate, a lot of the coming few weeks will be spent in hides in woodland staking out target feeders, and the loss of leaves on trees also opens up shooting opportunities for those involved in grey control. Shooting is a whole other field of course, but it is probably fair to say that by far the majority of greys removed by shooting, and particularly by target feeder shooting, are done by the much underrated air rifle. Modern air rifles are a step- change from the ones of our youth, and enable truly accurate humane control nowadays.

This target feeder is of a type which is useful for those who cannot visit a feeder every day. With this sort, enough food can be put in to last up to a week, so are ideal for volunteer shooters who perhaps have work or other commitments and can only visit at weekends. The idea is to get greys coming regularly to the feeder all day, and that means food must be available right up to the point the shooter can be present.

So having said all of this, it is still worth trapping, just results will drop off for now. Also, whereas for the past two years we had large amounts of beech mast, I'm receiving reports from all over Northumberland that there is not much beech mast in many areas this year – that's also certainly the case in the areas I work in. Acorns are said to be normal in some places, but where I am they are quite small and are not particularly prevalent. The nett effect of this will most likely be that the lull in trapping will be shorter lived this year and it also means that where reds are present some supplementary feeding may prove very helpful to them once the natural food disappears. Glen Graham



The Snowy Owl Catch Up

Early November saw 17 of our Grey Control team meet up at The Snowy Owl pub for what we term a 'Trappers Beer'. It's a very informal meet up and really just a chance for everyone to have a good blether about what's what and who's doing what and where. Loads of funny stories, tales of the unexpected, interesting bits and pieces that you never knew and an opportunity to meet new people and share a collective interest in Red squirrel conservation. Not all conversations are about squirrels however...!

It was a great night, good to see familiar as well as new faces and we look forward to catching up again in the New Year.

Sue Mitchell



With grateful thanks to the late Norman Scott for these beautiful photos. A man passionate about Red Squirrels and whose enthusiasm was inspirational.

MADRS Collection tins.

Madr's has collection tins in various locations and shops around the area. If you see one of our tins, please pop any loose change you have in it. If you know anyone who might be willing to support us by having one of our collection tins, please get in touch.

Thank you.



In this issue we would like to share our recent experiences with you regarding our quest to determine whether any Red Squirrels are currently residing within Woodruff Wood. You may remember from our last squirrel update (summer 2015) that we were quietly confident that a small number of Reds had either survived or recolonised the wood following an outbreak of the deadly squirrelpox virus last November, whereby most if not all of our Reds

sadly died (due to a brief incursion by a handful of Grey Squirrels which passed on the virus).

In June, we had the positive news of food disappearing from the squirrel feeders, but this was taking place furtively and we had no visual sightings of any Reds. We therefore became nature detectors, seeking other ways to track down our elusive friends! Our two chosen techniques – squirrel hair sampling and wildlife camera images both proved to be successful.

Hair Sampling

Following a suggestion from Glen at MAD RS (our expert squirrel advisor), we put a piece of double-sided sticky tape underneath the lids of our squirrel feeders. Any visiting squirrels (both Reds and Greys) might leave a few hairs stuck to the tape thereby confirming their presence. On inspection the following day we were delighted to find some obvious red hairs attached to the tape confirming that Red Squirrels are presently living in Woodruff Wood. Although this technique was quick and simple it was also highly effective – we were thrilled at the result!

Having now got proof of Red Squirrels, we removed the sticky tape and focussed on obtaining footage on our wildlife camera.



Wildlife Camera

If you are an avid nature watcher wildlife cameras are a great way to observe animal behaviour without the risk of human disturbance. As our small population of Reds is extremely elusive (no matter how quiet we try to be our presence is immediately detected by the Jays and Woodpeckers who alert the rest of the woodland wildlife with their alarm calls), we hoped that the use of a camera would verify their existence. This has indeed proved to be the case but it has required perseverance and patience on our behalf. We fixed our camera to view a squirrel feeder and after a number of failed attempts with no video footage, yet with the nuts in the feeder vanishing, we were perplexed! It was only by standing in front of the camera ourselves and counting to ten raising one finger at a time that we discovered that there was a time lapse with filming only commencing on a count of six. Therefore any brief forays to the feeder to quickly extract a nut were going undetected! Eventually though, our luck changed and we were finally rewarded with some great clips of Red Squirrels feeding.

If you would like to see these images, please go to [our website](#).

Here you can see a Red Squirrel feeding and look at how you can spot the difference between individuals.

We still don't know how many Red Squirrels are living within Woodruff Wood (we don't think it's many), but for the time being the fact that there are a handful of individuals is good news although there still remains an ever present threat from grey squirrels moving into the area.

Longhirst Christmas Coffee Morning

Along with MADRS, we are having a stall at this year's Longhirst Christmas Coffee Morning on Saturday 5th December (10am to 12pm). Please pop by to say hello and learn more about our work and firewood products – as always, we'd love to see you!

If you would like further information, please feel free to contact us on: T: 07525 841361

E: info@woodruffwood.co.uk

W: www.woodruffwood.co.uk

Julia Meldrum and Chris Tomlinson

NEWS IN BRIEF

*2nd print run of Christmas cards completed following a 'sell out' first run.

*Minolta camera kindly donated to MADRS to sell on Ebay to help raise funds.

*Thank you to Katy Cook, RSNE, for all her technical help recently.

*MADRS Power Point presentation fully re-vamped and ready to roll.

*Red Squirrel conservation book available to download FREE from the ESI website

www.europeansquirrelinitiative.org

Red Squirrel book can also be purchased in hard back form ISBN: 978-0- 9547576-1-8

As always, a huge thank you to everyone who contributes to the continuing work and success of MADRS. It is a collective effort from our grey control team, poster distributors, squirrel feeders and feeder makers, squirrel spotters and reporters, our 'core' team, our Twitter and Facebook page looker afterers.....the list is endless.

Very many thanks to everyone who contributes to helping to ensure the ongoing survival of our native red squirrel.

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