

Background Information

The Eurasian Red Squirrel

Habitat

Eurasian Red squirrels are a native species to the UK and are thought to have existed here for around 10,000 years. They can be found across most of Europe and North Asia where the species is not under threat. In the UK, however, they live only in restricted pockets, mainly due to competition from the larger, non-native, Grey squirrel.

Red squirrels are arboreal mammals, meaning they are a tree dwelling animal. Their preferred habitat is mixed broadleaf woodlands with a variety of species which offer a more diverse diet.

These days in the UK, Red squirrels are often limited to coniferous forests which can cause confusion about their preferred habitat. They will reside happily in coniferous forests as long as they are able to collect enough food.

Appearance

The Red squirrel is named so because of their reddish-brown colouring, although they also possess a lighter, cream coloured underside.

Red squirrels have a famously large and fluffy tail, usually measuring the same length or longer than the squirrels' body length. It allows them to balance magnificently and to move up, down, and sideways through the trees with grace and confidence. They also use their tails to signal danger to other Red squirrels and to keep warm by wrapping it around themselves. Red squirrels are also known for their impressively tufty ears; with their ear tufts growing as long as 3cm in the winter. These long ear tufts help the squirrels with their super sensitive hearing, allowing them to be alert to approaching danger.

Dreys

Red squirrels build their nests, called dreys, high in the trees. This allows them to be safe from predators. They build them close to the trunk so that it is sheltered from wind and rain.

In the summer months dreys are often less robust and are used for a quick post-lunch nap or a short night's sleep. However, in the winter or when preparing for young, the nests are built with much more structure so they are strong and can withstand all types of weather. They are then lined with moss, leaves and fur to make sure it is cosy and warm enough to get through the cold winter.

Food

Red squirrels enjoy a varied of food, although their diets often consist mainly of seeds and nuts, so long as they are available. They particularly enjoy pine nuts and seeds from larch and spruce but will also eat hazelnuts and acorns. Other things they enjoy include fruit and berries, mushrooms, bark, lichen and tree shoots.

In the spring and summer, when these food sources are scarcer, their diet can extend to shoots, bulbs, flowers, fruits, berries and occasionally even insects and bird eggs. Red squirrels will store seeds and nuts for times when food gets short. They gather excess food during the autumn and

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winter months and store it in different locations, buried underground. Unfortunately, they often forget where their stores are, which proves very useful for seed dispersal.

Behaviour

Red squirrels spend much of their time high in the branches of the trees, feeding in the early morning and late afternoon.

Red squirrels give birth to kits. They usually have one litter per year, with an average of three young. The breeding season for red squirrels is between March and June. The kits are born very tiny weighing around 10g-15g, about the same weight as a tablespoon of sugar! They are born bald, deaf, and blind and aren't able to take care of themselves, so the role of the parent is very important during the first month. As they grow older, the kits explore further and further until they eventually leave the drey. Red squirrels do not live in high density populations and when they leave their parents' drey, they can travel more than 10km to find their new home.

Red Squirrels are less active in winter. They will often remain in the drey for days at a time, sheltering from the cold and keeping dry. Although red squirrels usually nest alone, they have been known to gather in small groups and snuggle into one nest during particularly cold times.

Conservation – Why red squirrels are important?

Red squirrels play a rather specialist role in the eco-systems in which they survive. They distribute both deciduous and coniferous seeds, being specially adapted to extract the seeds from cones. Red squirrels are also known to take fungi into trees, wedging it amongst the branches to dry, spreading the spores of mycorrhizal fungi. These fungi form symbiotic relationships with trees and are incredibly important to their survival.

Both Red and Grey squirrels can also damage the trees in which they reside. They strip the bark leaving the tree exposed to infection. However, Grey squirrels live in much more densely populated groups and can therefore have much more of an impact upon the health of the woodlands. If Red squirrels were to become extinct in the UK, it would have significant repercussions on the coniferous woodlands and the animals that rely on this habitat, such as goshawks and wild cats.

Threats

In the UK, the primary threat to Red squirrels is the competition from the non-native invasive Grey squirrels. The North American Grey squirrels were introduced in Cheshire by the Victorians in 1876. The Grey squirrels quickly established themselves and began to spread rapidly. They are larger than the native red squirrel and outcompete for food.

Grey squirrels breed more prolifically than reds, producing 2 litters a year of 3-7 kits, and live in more densely populated groups. The result is that in areas that the Grey squirrels have populated, there simply isn't enough space or food to support both species. A further threat that Grey squirrels bring is a disease known as squirrel pox. This causes the Grey squirrel no harm but is fatal to the Red.

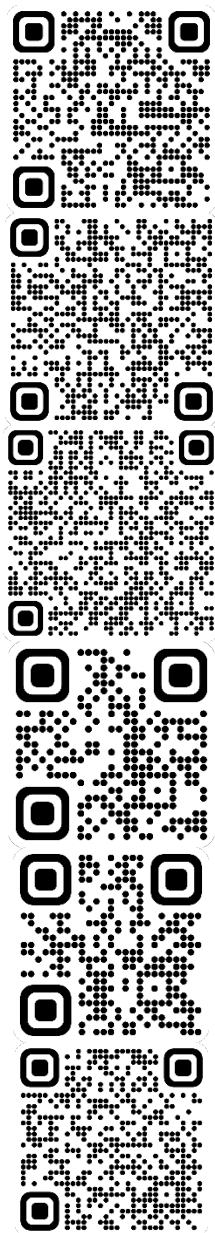
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How learners and schools can make a positive impact

- Raise awareness of the importance of Red squirrels to our ecology by educating the whole school community.
- If you live in a Red squirrel hotspot, take a walk in the woods and look out for Red squirrels, or signs of them, record your sightings.
- Find out what Red squirrels like to eat, offer this food and create/install specialised feeders.
- Looking after your trees and outdoor spaces helps Red squirrels by caring for their habitat.
- Improving biodiversity and creating a wildlife-haven will help lots of species in your local area.
- Find out if there is a local conservation group in your area and / or become a member of a Red squirrel conservation programme.
- Adopt a red squirrel as a class through the Welsh Wildlife trust, you can find more information about this here: [Wildlife Adoption Pack: Rescue a Red Squirrel](#)

Further Information



[More information on dreys](#)

[Red squirrel facts poster](#)

[Red squirrel adoption information page](#)

[The Red squirrel Survival Trust](#)

[The Red Squirrels Trust Wales](#)

[Other Red squirrel organisations](#)