

Scottish Squirrel Group

Thursday 10th October 2013,
Silvan House

Draft minutes

Present:

Jenny Bryce, SNH - Wildlife Ecologist (chair)
Mel Tonkin, SSRS - Project Manager
Lindsay Mackinlay, NTS - Nature Conservation Advisor
Ken Neil, SSRS- Project Officer Tayside
Sophie Eastwood, Fife Red Squirrel Officer
Karen Ramoo, SSRS – Project Officer South Scotland
Heinz Traut, SSRS – Project Officer Dumfries & Galloway
James Silvey, RSPB, Nature Recovery Officer
Megan Webster, SSRS- Project Officer Argyll & Trossachs
Simon Poots, Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group
Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative
Stephen Willis, SSRS - Project Officer Northeast Scotland
Ian Collier, Forestry Commission Scotland and Highland Red Squirrel Group – by video link
Colin McInnes, Moredun Research Institute

Apologies:

Jamie Farquhar, ConFor
Mike Libera, Crown Estates – representing Red Alert South West Scotland
Sian Williams, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Cecilia Rogers, Grampian Squirrel Group

1. Welcome and introductions

JB welcomed the group and listed the apologies received. Introductions and welcomes were made to James Silvey, new representative for RSPB and Megan Webster, the SSRS Project Officer for Argyll & Trossachs.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising.

AP 1: IC to circulate FCS biosecurity website link to the group. *Discharged*

AP 2: All to provide Jenny with suggestions for amendments to the UKRSG ToR by the end of April. *Discharged*

AP 3: IC to circulate the draft stronghold advice statement. *Discharged*

AP4: All to feed back any comments to Julia Garritt. Few had been received, but *Discharged*.

3. Local Group Updates and Discussion

UK Red Squirrel Group

Sophie Eastwood gave a report of the recent UKRSG meeting in Newcastle. The group had visited Slaley Stronghold near Hexham. SE noted that in England the term stronghold refers to a cluster of individual forest blocks or reserves and a surrounding buffer area; i.e. slightly different than how the term is used in Scotland. The visit highlighted the successful partnership with landholders who received a £300,000 from English WGS to support the grey control programme. They are carrying out systematic monitoring (including DNA analysis of hair samples) to assess the impact of culling.

The UKRSG minutes will be circulated when available but SE highlighted some of the points raised.

DEFRA are considering if red squirrels can be added to Schedule 9 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act in order to regulate their release. They are considering adding beavers first, but this may provide a model for other species that are being considered for reintroductions to be added.

There had also been some discussion of funding for Squirrelepox vaccine trials. Colin McInnes updated that there was nothing new to add at the moment. The Scottish Government had written to the other administrations seeking support for a joint government funded project. Intellectual Property for the candidate vaccines is held by the Wildlife Ark Trust. RSST is about to launch an appeal for funds. It is estimated that £200,000 is required for field trials, however, further funding would be required to produce a workable vaccine.

AP 1: Sophie Eastwood to circulate UK RSG Minutes when available.

Ian Collier, Highland Red Squirrel Group

The project web site "Red squirrels of the Highlands" has now been transferred to the HRSG. This site will now be funded by the HRSG charity, the Woodland Trust and Highland Council. Juliet Robinson continues to be involved; updating and managing the web site content as well as raising awareness/survey work with FES in Lochaber. Glen Righ south of Fort William continues to be a great success and it has become a well know wildlife spotting location. These "hotspots" continue to be very popular.

The main activities of the HRSG continue to be recording, raising awareness and maintaining a lookout for greys. There have been no confirmed greys in Highland this year. There were two false alarms: one at Invermoriston and one near Aviemore.

Roy Dennis from the Highland Foundation for Wildlife has this year carried out a translocation of red squirrels to Glencarron (Croick, Amat and Alladale estates). 36 squirrels have been translocated so far, with another 14 to be moved before the winter. Young squirrels have been observed at the release site. This work was licensed by SNH following consideration of IUCN guidelines and veterinary checks. Lindsay Mackinlay (LM) mentioned Inverewe as another possible site for reintroduction. NTS are trying to get someone to look into the feasibility. LM will contact IC for HRSG thoughts.

Simon Poots, Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group

P&KSG have been lobbying the council on grey control. Support in principle for control on land managed by the council has now been passed. There are proposals for P&KSG volunteers to carry out this control in the interim, with a view to applying to SRDP to support this work in the future.

Ayrshire Squirrel Group - Sian Williams – see written update

The group has appointed a Grey Squirrel Control coordinator for the Carrick project area. Joram Smit is employed by the Ayrshire Rivers Trust (on behalf of ARSG) and will be in post for 2 years. The project plan outlines a number of aims which include grey squirrel control, developing a network of grey controllers in the project area, supporting pox sampling efforts and carrying out training with local community volunteers. A project steering group has been set up to oversee the work, freeing up the remaining ARSG members/ committee to increase the amount of education and public liaison work we carry out as volunteers. The project is funded by the local Community Benefit funds of Scottish and Southern Energy's Hadyard Hill Fund and Scottish Power Renewables Carrick Futures Fund.

4. Project Updates

Sophie Eastwood, Fife Red Squirrel Project - see written update for full details.

At the present time the Fife Red Squirrel Project will terminate at the beginning of April 2014 with no plans to seek further funding. SE has started to create a constituted volunteer group with 3 other key individuals to be in place after April 2014. The main purpose is to have a voice in future consultations. There are concerns about the group can achieve with limited financial and strategic support. It is likely they will aim continue a reduced amount of surveying and attend a few key events to raise awareness.

In summary; Fife remains an important area for red squirrels, despite a sustained presence of grey squirrels. From the visual transects so far all of the key sites have marginal numbers of grey squirrels sighted or none at all. Given the lack of strategic support for grey control, data is very limited, but SE will collate existing records. It is clear that there is significant support for red squirrel conservation in Fife including targeted grey control. However, for this to be delivered effectively there must be more strategic and financial support. SE therefore considers it to be essential that the role of grey control in non-priority areas is considered in the next strategy for red squirrel conservation.

SQPV discussion

IC asked if there is SQPV in Fife? SE replied there were two recent suspected cases. The first case was potentially ear mites. In the second case which resembled SQPV, the animal was euthanized and a full post mortem was completed, but was negative for the virus. SE feels that Fife needs to be reflected in a national strategy for SQPV; noting that Fife does not have Strongholds despite suitable sites for viable long-term red squirrel populations. For example, Tentsmuir which was listed as the most defensible site for red squirrels in the SNH commissioned report 89.

CM indicated the need for testing in addition to symptoms such as skin lesions. Recent suspected cases on the Isle of Wight and Northern Ireland tested as not containing SQPV. It was restated that diagnosis can be difficult and although we should be vigilant with symptoms, lesions might not be indicative of SQPV. Advice is available on the UK Red Squirrel website and the South Scotland website; which has contact details for local vets.

SSRS Project Update - Mel Tonkin - see written update for full details

2013 Spring Survey report is available: <http://www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk> Reds seem to have spread out and taken advantage of lower grey numbers from last winter. A draft project evaluation report has been submitted to the Steering Group for review.

A few key points:

- Ongoing grey squirrel control is having a widespread positive effect.
- Data as a whole shows the number of reds caught is increasing. 4,000 greys captured and 16,000 reds captured as by-catch.
- Red squirrels seem to persist in areas with low densities of sero-positive greys.
- SRDP currently has 191 landowners under contract.

MT highlighted some of the decisions for the project going forward. The spread of SQPV to the central belt of Scotland has slowed but not stopped. Should the project continue to attempt to control the spread of the disease or focus on maintaining red squirrel populations in D&G and the Borders? It was noted that people are more willing to get involved with support on a local level where there are red squirrels.

Tayside - Ken Neil - see written update for full details

Some return of grey squirrels had been noted in areas where they hadn't been seen in 18 months, where control had ceased. Highlighting the need to be vigilant and maintain control in areas with grey squirrels. It is hoped that seasonal grey squirrel control will be effective enough. KN noted that follow up was required on SRDP; in terms of delivery, payments and

data. KN asked if there would be a requirement to demonstrate the presence of grey squirrels for the next SRDP and asked whether SRDP would be available for the defence of Stronghold forests?

South Scotland - Heinz Traut

- HT noted positive feedback from two large estates between Lockerbie and Annan where the return of red squirrels in numbers has been witnessed, after three to four years of sustained grey squirrel control. The same feedback has also been given by estates across the Scottish Borders, particularly in the Teviot Valley where red squirrels appear to be on the increase. In D&G not only are reds visually more abundant, but also trapping records for each successive year indicates a positive trend in favour of reds. This is exciting news as these were areas previously affected by Squirrelpox.
- An Annan resident also reported the sighting of a red squirrel in her garden for the first time in 47 years, again similar occurrences are happening right across the south of Scotland with sightings of red squirrels in areas where they have been absent for 10 sometimes even 40 years. In particular, sightings of reds in the Kelso / Morebattle area have been more prominent and it is thought the collaborative trapping effort by RSNE and SRDP is having a positive impact.
- These good-news stories were well received by thousands of SSRS Facebook followers and led to publicity in the press (e.g. The Herald, SSRS interview with BBC Radio Scotland and a news item on ITV Borders News).
- Further positive news is that Squirrelpox virus has not been detected for the last four months around the Thornhill area, an area which has constantly detected positive greys for the last few years.
- Engagement with the public and building awareness of the project has been through various channels: events & talks (~200 people); telephone and email enquiries (~100); Facebook (2500+) and contributing to 11 Forest Design Plans in the region.
- The SSRS trap-loan scheme has received an additional 27 members in the south over the last year and contact has successfully been made with ~170 of the ~320 members across south Scotland.
- Obtaining trapping records from trap-loan participants has been challenging, however SSRS is working on an online-based submission form that will make submitting records easier. Other technologies may also be considered in the future (e.g. Android Apps) if it proves to be a cost-effective alternative.
- Collation of SRDP trapping records has proved to be challenging, however some progress has been made. Further efforts will be invested in the last quarter of 2013 to encourage submission of records by participating estates. Scottish Land & Estates have also offered to assist by encouraging their members.

Stephen Willis - Northeast Scotland - see written update for full details

- Feeder boxes are now being used in advance of trapping. They are set up in woods to check for presence of greys and they also act as a form of pre-bait.
- The use of a wooden box which can be used to hide traps in plain sight is being trialled. If these work then they could be used in busy public parks, University campuses, and around the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.
- A simple flier has been produced which has been distributed at 100+ houses in south Deeside. This generated some records and correspondence but was also invaluable in terms of meeting people face-to-face in the course of distribution.
- SSRS are working with academic partners to begin to work out local squirrel populations and effort to clear them.

South Scotland - Karen Ramoo

Between March and September 2013 there has been an increase in the distribution of sero-positive grey squirrels caught. Between this period a total of 877 blood samples have been taken across Scotland; of these 51 samples have tested positive for SQPV.

The virus appears to have made several significant leaps to the north with positive animals detected worryingly close to the extant grey squirrel populations in the Central Belt. However, sero-prevalence at these sites appears to be extremely low with fewer than 10% of individuals from each area testing positive for SQPV. At present testing is ongoing in these areas to ascertain the exact spread of SQPV in these areas and find the positive/negative interface. Results from the large scale SQPV monitoring scheme are promising and show the virus is not present in any squares neighbouring on to the above infected areas.

Given the uncertainty surrounding some of the results the SSRS Project Steering Group has agreed that for the moment the Project should act with caution in terms of responding to these new cases. It is anticipated that ongoing testing in these areas will further clarify the spread/distribution of SQPV and give us a better understanding of the situation.

In the south, Project control has refocused to take into account the new northward leaps, with control taking place in two of the pinch points recently identified in the SNH commissioned modelling work. Resources are once again stretched in order to cope with these new locations and keep the pressure on existing priority areas which could prove detrimental to slowing/containing spread.

Discussion note: Are squirrels hitching a lift? SQPV may not be circulating in the environment in general in new locations, but how many need to be tested? CM suggested >30% of those tested being sero-positive would give a good indication that it may be circulating in the population. Encounter rates and population density will affect transmission rates. The current sample size of 10 squirrels depends on population size and is not always achieved.

5. Squirrelepox Updates

KT provided a summary of SQPV Presentations from the RSST Conference

Modeling assessment of control strategies to prevent/reduce SQPV spread:

Modelling has been carried out by Dr Andy White and Dr Peter Lurz to inform SSRS's approach. JB gave a summary of some of the key findings. This will be published as an SNH Commission Report and JB will circulate the link after publication.

The modelling work indicates that the disease will spread where there are well connected landscapes with grey squirrels present at high density – which is in turn related to habitat composition. In South Scotland the model predicts that there are several routes by which the disease could spread into the grey squirrels in central Scotland. Targeted control at these 'pinch points' could potentially prevent the spread into central Scotland populations. However, the route through the more urban habitats in Ayrshire would present a challenging area in which to maintain low grey squirrel densities.

Model simulations in the central Lowlands indicated that if unchecked squirrelepox was likely to spread throughout the grey squirrel distribution. However, it suggests that the disease will burn out in red only areas, with outbreaks along the interface with grey squirrels. Again some potential pinch points north of the Forth and Clyde Valleys that could be the focus of control measures to contain the disease were highlighted.

Control strategies for Stronghold forests were also examined using the Fleet Basin as an example. The work looked at what number of grey squirrels would need to be removed to

keep the Stronghold free of grey squirrels. This was estimated to be c. 100 per year which was considered realistic and achievable. When the disease was modelled with this level of grey squirrel control, the red squirrel population was maintained within the stronghold, although there were periodic disease outbreaks from which the population was able to recover.

Discussion note: (1) Supplemental feeding should not happen as it may help to spread the disease. (2) The predicted burnout of SQPV in red only populations only occurs north of the red/grey interface. At the interface, continuous exposure to the disease may be expected to give greys an added competitive advantage resulting in a northwards shift of the interface.

AP2: JB to circulate the link to the Commissioned Report on squirrelepox modelling once published.

6. Initial Discussion of Strategic Review

The last Scottish Squirrel Strategy was published in 2005. The SGG had previously discussed the need for an update. JB highlighted there may be a desire to align an updated Strategy with the new SRDP and with the scope of a national red squirrel conservation project going forward.

To start the discussion about what the strategy might look like JB sought some views on what people considered to be the priorities in terms of:

- The Where –geographic priorities?
- The What – what actions are the priority; grey control, managing strongholds, monitoring populations, disease surveillance, supporting local groups, vaccine development, awareness-education, research?
- The How – the balance of support for local delivery or national delivery?

A range of views were offered on geographical priorities, which covered most of the red squirrel range; with perhaps the greatest concentration in the central Lowlands and Aberdeen with a view to maintaining the Highlands as a red squirrel only area.

Grey control appeared to be the clear priority for action, but with some support for the range of other activities.

There was a clear preference for support for local delivery of conservation action over nationally directed action. This was considered to include local SRDP support. It was noted that in the past, there were 12 local squirrel groups that supported local delivery. However, the need for some national co-ordination, e.g. of monitoring and data was highlighted.

Discussion Notes: It was noted that there are few Strongholds in some areas and there was a desire to support red squirrel populations in more local priority woodlands. Overall it has been noted by the group that public knowledge and support has increased. There was some discussion on the balance of efforts to contain SQPV versus efforts to maintain viable populations. Some views were suggested support for focusing on currently good populations of reds within SQPV areas over stopping the spread, with control in pinch point areas and low levels of monitoring of SQPV.

AP 3: JB to initiate further consultation on an updated Scottish Strategy for Red Squirrel Conservation.

It was noted this was unlikely to be concluded within the timescale for informing the continuation of SSRS or the new SRDP, but it would be hoped they would be aligned.

8. AOB

FCS strongholds

By the end of the year it is envisaged that draft advice statements will be agreed with the landowners of all the Strongholds. It is hoped the statements will act as a guide and will be integrated into LTFP's and FDP's. They should be a strategic steer, focusing down to local level and identify local issues; they will not be generic, but neither will they be too prescriptive.

AP 4: Ian Collier will send out written update on FCS Strongholds.

SRDP

The current SRDP comes to an end on 31st Dec 2013. All contracts are to be signed and agreed by then. There will then be no new applications until 2015. In the interim those with contracts ending this year, will be offered a one year extension. There is currently no target date for the applications in 2015. And it is not clear if another extension will be offered in 2015. A working group is currently looking at the targeting of the biodiversity options.

IC indicated that Gordon Patterson (FCS) has suggested the group may like to feed their ideas into these working groups. However, time is of the essence. It was recognised that those present may wish to make individual representations.

AP 5: Ian Collier to advise how people can make representation to the SRDP targeting working groups.

James Silvey (JS) indicated that RSPB is involved advising on how SBS species should be prioritised under SRDP. Red squirrels are on the list. Initially they are looking at where species occur, but there is an opportunity to determine priorities.

9. DONM

Next Meeting: Thursday, March 13th 2014. Place to be determined.

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AP2: JB to circulate the link to the Commissioned Report on squirrelpox modelling once published.

AP 3: JB to initiate further consultation on an updated Scottish Strategy for Red Squirrel Conservation.

AP 4: Ian Collier will send out written update on FCS Strongholds.

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