

'Save Our Squirrels' (SOS)

A Red Alert North England Project



The red squirrel is Britain's only native squirrel. With russet fur, tufted ears and bushy tail it is one of the country's most iconic species. However, the red squirrel is under threat. The introduction of the grey squirrel at the end of the 19th century has resulted in the rapid decline of the red - with only 20,000 left in England. Action is needed if numbers are to be stabilised. The 'Save Our Squirrels' Project (SOS) was set up to deliver the North of England Red Squirrel Conservation Strategy. Hosted by Northumberland Wildlife Trust, and guided by Red Alert North England (RANEng), this £1.1 million project aims to protect the red squirrel from further decline and raise public awareness of its plight.

objectives

- To support the red squirrel's survival in England by preserving remaining red squirrel populations in Northern England focusing on 16 red squirrel reserves.
- To undertake habitat management and squirrel conservation activities with landowners and managers in the reserves and surrounding buffer zones.
- To raise the profile and plight of the red squirrel through education, community engagement and improved access.

actions

- Establishment of 16 dedicated red squirrel reserves each surrounded by five kilometre buffer zones in:
Northumberland: Kylee; Uswayford, Kidland, Harwood, Raylees, Kielder, Dipton/Dukeshouse Wood, Healey/Kellas; Slaley/Dukesfield.
Cumbria: Greystoke; Whinfell; Whinlatter; Thrilmere.
North Yorks: Garsdale/Mallerstang; Widdale.
North Merseyside: Sefton.
- Employment of seven staff covering the entire red squirrel range in northern England.
- Construction of new viewing facilities at Sefton, Whinlatter and Kielder.
- Promoting management of the reserves and buffer zone woodlands according to agreed guidelines to ensure red squirrel conservation.
- Targeted management of Whinlatter forest: provision of a good habitat for red squirrels with a range of conifer species, monitoring for grey squirrel incursion and deployment of grey squirrel traps in the buffer zone.

achievements

- Sustaining red squirrel populations in each of the reserves.
- Handled 9,000 enquiries from the public.
- Led 27 guided red squirrel walks.
- Recruited 1200 members of the 'Friends of Red Squirrel scheme'.
- 540 school children and nine teacher training days.
- 60 volunteer training days, 3375 volunteer days, and 630 volunteer activities.
- Nine champion schools and 45 educational sessions.
- Engagement with ethnic minority/disabled/youth/elderly groups.
- Attendance at 45 town and country shows.

background

The native red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris* L.) is in serious decline in England as the North American grey squirrel expands its range across the red's habitat. The first recorded release of greys was in 1876 when a pair was released into Hensbury Park, Cheshire. Further releases in England over the next 50 years led to their rapid spread throughout the UK displacing the reds. There are estimated to be only 140,000 red squirrels left in Britain compared to over 2.5 million greys. Reds are core woodland species, but struggle to compete with their larger, hardier cousins in deciduous habitats, or small fragmented woodlands, and are now mainly confined to conifer forests. Squirrel Poxvirus (SQPV) continues to be a major factor in the decline of the red squirrel. Evidence suggests that greys can carry this disease and transmit it to reds - the decline of red squirrel populations seems to be 17-25 times faster in areas where outbreaks of SQPV have occurred. The red squirrel is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and a priority species for the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

In 1992 the RANEng partnership was formed, comprising the Northern Wildlife Trusts, the Forestry Commission, private landowners, Defra, Natural England and others. Focusing on the design and management of conifer forests it drew up a Conservation Strategy, and developed the three-year project, SOS to ensure the sustainable protection of red squirrel populations. The partnership also manages a database of red and grey squirrel sightings to monitor changes in distribution. The Forestry Commission is a key partner in RANEng and a sponsor of SOS, offering further support through targeted grants to woodland owners for red squirrel conservation work. The FC is also the owner and manager of many of the reserves.

quotes

"I'm very pleased to learn that significant new funding has been secured by this partnership project. It is a key step in sustaining the remaining populations of red squirrels in the Red Squirrel reserves in northern England and it will enable more people to enjoy these beautiful animals." Former Forestry Minister, Jim Knight MP.

"This project promotes scientific research, and through grant aid to private woodlands in Northumberland, Cumbria, and other targeted area works with partners and woodland owners to fight to save the red squirrel. We are on the front line here, and are determined to ensure that red squirrels can live on."
Lord Clark, Chairman of the Forestry Commission.

partners

Centerparcs, Cumbria Wildlife Trust
Forestry Commission
Lake District National Park Authority
Lancs, Manchester & N. Merseyside Wildlife Trust
Mammals Trust UK
National Trust
Natural England
Northumberland Park Authority
Northumberland Wildlife Trust
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

funding

Total:	£1.1million
Heritage Lottery Fund	£626,000
FC	£78,000
	(+ in-kind)
Other Partners and supporters	£400,000

lessons learnt

- Good communication between partners is crucial to keeping everyone informed, involved and supportive.
- It is essential to start by preparing a clear strategy that all the key stakeholders are comfortable to sign up to.