

Red Squirrels in South Scotland Project Update

- 34 new SRDP applications have been written and submitted. If all applications are accepted this will bring the total number of grey squirrel control grant recipients in south Scotland to 94.
- The last 6 months has seen an increase in the number and distribution of seropositive grey squirrels. In March high numbers of seropositive grey squirrels were caught at a number of estates adjacent to the River Tweed in south east Scotland. In response to this worrying influx of grey squirrels, Red Squirrels in Northern England (RSNE) implemented emergency control across the English side of the border. Grey squirrel 'health checks' were implemented by RSSS and are continuing to be undertaken to ascertain the spread of seropositive animals in the area. To date it appears we have managed to contain the spread of seropositive grey squirrels in the area.
- The squirrelpox outbreak at the Queensbury Estate has resurfaced with the confirmation of 4 poxed red squirrels found between April 2011 to present. Grey squirrel numbers on the estate remain low with large scale grey squirrel control efforts ongoing. In addition to this outbreak a poxed red squirrel was found at Maxwellton Estate just south of Kirkland in March. This poxed red was found following the control of seropositive greys in Dalmacallan Forest Moniaive. This represents a new squirrelpox outbreaks area in south Scotland. Intensive trapping was implemented around Thornhill and Moniaive and public awareness increased. To date no further poxed reds have been caught.
- There is further concern for the south west with the discovery of a seropositive grey squirrel (1) in Newton Stewart. Those in the locality have been contacted and traps deployed. A SWT seasonal control officer has been clearing the area of any greys. To date no further positive greys have been caught.
- Liaison with the Moredun Research Institute regarding the development of a new dipstick to allow for independent testing of blood samples is ongoing. A new testing method is currently being trialled but initial impressions suggest it will not be feasible nor practical for project staff to do the testing in the field and laboratory space will need to be sought.
- The RSSS Data Management Project funded by the Southern Uplands Partnership (SUP) and SNH is in its final stage. Stage 1 of the project (data collation) has now been completed by The Wildlife Information Centre (TWIC). Stage 2 of the project (analysis and reporting) is due for completion by Newcastle University this month. A summary document for this is currently being prepared and shall be distributed to the RSSS steering group.
- The project has implemented a monitoring and evaluation scheme for determining the success of the project in containing the spread of seropositive grey squirrels. 12 monitoring sites within the pink zone of the RSSS control strategy map have been established. The idea behind these sites is to undertake intensive blood sampling to allow us to better monitor the presence / absence of the squirrelpox virus throughout the pink zone. Each site shall be trapped once a year with up to 20 grey squirrel blood samples to be taken from each site.

- Environment Minister, Stewart Stevenson visited the RSSS project in the Scottish Borders on the 6th July. Mr Stevenson was impressed with the work being undertaken by RSSS to help safeguard red squirrel populations and spoke of the 'encouraging signs of progress'. The project gained good newspaper and TV coverage.