

MINUTES OF THE ENGLAND SQUIRREL FORUM MEETING HELD ON 1ST NOVEMBER 2006 AT THE FRIENDS HOUSE, 173 EUSTON ROAD, LONDON.

Present: Fred Currie, Chairman (FC(E))
Brenda Mayle, FR
Carri Nicholson, Northumberland Wildlife Trust
Colin Booty, RSPCA
Charles Critchley, FE
Charles Dutton, ESI
Jill Nelson, PTES
John Morris, Chiltern Woodland Project
Richard Pow, FC(E)
Tony Mitchell-Jones, Natural England
Lord Redesdale
Alison Chaplin, notes (FC(E))

Apologies for absence were received from Mike Swan, John Gurnell, Jessa Battersby, Judith Webb and Catriona Carlin

The Chairman welcomed those present and round the table introductions were made.

There were no matters arising from the last minutes.

1. HUMANE DISPATCH & UFAW

Brenda Mayle reported that there had not been a lot of success with this as people shooting squirrels in traps were not keen to be monitored. However she had spoken to UFAW and there may still be the opportunity for an audit on the cranial dispatch method once the funding issue had been addressed. Lord Redesdale said that the Red Squirrel Protection Society may be able to help – any trials would be run in conjunction with the RSPCA and the use of best practice would be paramount. Mention was also made of NI Forest Service using shooting to despatch squirrels in traps.

ACTION POINT: FOLLOW UP

ACTION POINT: Liaise with UFAW and NI Forest Service to learn from their experiences.

2. REPORT ON SQUIRREL RESEARCH AND MONITORING (PAPER)

Brenda said that the latest items were those in bold italic type. Of particular interest was item 7, Immunocontraception (ESI). Also there had been news from the north that Pine Martens may predate more on greys than reds. However there seemed to be little evidence of research for this. the Irish project was looking into this and had just received additional funding to carry out survey work.

ACTION POINT: Charles Dutton to send a paragraph to Brenda to be included in the next update.

SQPV had been identified in north American grey squirrels. Recently the Scottish Executive had made funds available for research into pox virus transmission and had invited tenders for this research. It would be a 2 (possibly 3) year study. The Scottish Action Plan was now on the SNH web site.

Of concern was that greys had spread further afield in northern Italy. The origins of the outbreak were not clear. However there was a local importer of animals and rumour was

that he could be responsible. Action was being taken and there was much public support for the eradication of the colony.

Carri reported that there had been 6 reds from Whinfell that had been treated . 2 had died from secondary infections, 4 survived and carried anti-bodies to pox in their blood stream. Tests showed that they could be re-introduced to the wild. However, it had been decided that they would be used to form the basis of a captive breeding programme. As they carried the anti-bodies there was interest in using them as the basis for a vaccine programme. Based on the Whinfell success it was being recommended that other local groups follow the same treatment programme. Colin Booty reported that the manager of an RSPCA wildlife centre in Cheshire had been in contact with one of the above groups re collaborating with the research programme.

A collaborative research project on Anglesey had gained access to a major landowner area where there had been control problems. This had allowed the cull of more greys and were now looking at the concept of using feeding hoppers for more effective control. There may also be seeking a PSD licence to use warfarin.

On the matter of supplementary feeding it was widely agreed that it was not appropriate in mixed areas. Greys needed to be drawn to a separate feeding area for culling. Bait stations should be used and cleaned and disinfected regularly.

It was agreed that this was a very useful paper from Brenda and members would e-mail her with further information for future updates of the paper.

ACTION: ALL MEMBERS

3. SQPV UPDATE

Brenda reported that little positive response had been received to fund priority SQPV research but recently the first positive response had come from Scottish Executive (SE) who had found some funds for a 2/3 year study which may also include work on red squirrel anti-bodies and the creation of a vaccine. Lord Redesdale said that he had good links to the SE and the opportunity to lobby

Best Practice re Nest Box Feeding - It had not been proven and was not recommended that the use of nest boxes reduced the spread of pox virus. General advice was that they should not be used in/at feed points and other points where there may be the risk of transmission/overlap. A best practice guidance note on pox protocol was available and Carri would forward a copy to the Chairman. A copy would go to the UK group for discussion. It was important that the protocol was consistent across the UK.

ACTION: Carri Nicholson

Brenda and Tony Mitchell Jones were to meet the Defra veterinary advisor to talk about to what extent Defra may be able to assist pox virus studies.

Lord Redesdale suggested that a potential political route ahead be for an all party squirrel group to be set up. This would provide an entry point for discussion with Ministers and also for press coverage and the raising of the subject up the political agenda.

1. NORTHERN ENGLAND PROJECT PROGRESS

a) **SOS** – Carri reported that SOS had received funding from a HLF bid. Now, with the match funding they had £1.15 million over the next 3 years. There was 16 red squirrel reserves in the area accommodating approx. 80% of the English red squirrel population. A list of team members, contact details and the roles would be circulated

to ESF members by Carri along with a 1 page A4 sheet explaining aims and objectives.

ACTION: Carri Nicholson

b) Red Squirrel Protection Partnership - Lord Redesdale reported that this group had been set up in a very short time and had received RES funding of £148K from Defra. It was a group purely to address the cull of grey squirrels for the protection of reds. At the moment the Partnership employed 3 people and their web site should be launched within a couple of weeks. They would be using Defra's GIS system to build a map of their target area and would be working in the buffer zones surrounding reserves in the area.

The partnership would be split into 2 teams. The "kill" team would be highly trained and would work to FC best practice at all levels and, he hoped, also closely with RSPCA although no liaison with RSPCA had as yet happened. The "monitor" team would report monthly directly, via e-mail numbers of sightings. The idea was to push the greys back from the reserves and buffers and allow the reds to re-colonise those areas. Emphasis would be on volunteer involvement. However, in areas where there were very few greys a bounty system with gamekeepers was being considered.

Areas far larger than the reserves needed to be looked at. If a buffer zone of even 50km was used the Partnership still thought that it would be putting off the inevitable. Charles Dutton said he thought that the 5km buffer zones were inadequate and he thought that 10km or more was realistic. However, it was pointed out that the buffers were not just created for grey squirrel control purposes but also for the land use within those buffers and the history behind the development of criteria for the buffers including agreement of all stakeholders should be borne in mind.

On the subject of media coverage, Lord Redesdale was not afraid of saying that the Partnership was a control/killing organisation and would say as much to the media as public opinion in the area they would be working supported the control/killing of greys for the conservation of reds. It was appreciated that the Partnership needed the media coverage to encourage volunteer involvement and the link with red conservation would be emphasised. The ESF would support media outputs on the understanding that all such draft media/press releases were run past by ESF prior to release. Colin Booty said that RSPCA would have to be distanced from the project as far as putting ESF comments together. Lord Redesdale appreciated this but pointed out that the last thing that the Partnership wished to be associated with was cruelty issues.

The Partnership was in the process of developing a web site and ideas for content would be appreciated.

The Chairman thanked Lord Redesdale for attending. ESF generally were supportive of all the Partnerships aims. However, there were reservations about the language and presentation issues. It was also recommended that effectiveness and efficacy be objectively monitored.

b) Keilder FC – Nothing to report

- c) Sefton Coast** – a pox outbreak had occurred in Ainsdale and so far there had been 8 confirmed deaths. The woodland was being scoured for any other corpses and to try to treat infected squirrels if possible. Peanut feeding would continue but be monitored closely. Garden feeding was being discouraged.

The Crosby area – a previous pox outbreak had rendered reds extinct in this local area. Grey control continued and the area has now re colonised with reds.

9) ISLE OF WIGHT AND POOLE HARBOUR ISLANDS

a) Recent Grey Squirrel Sightings on IOW and action – Colin Pope reported that there had been reports of sightings of 1, perhaps 2 greys on the island recently. They were not certain sightings and they may have been grey coloured reds. Hair tubes had been put out and grey hairs from a red squirrel had been picked up. Colin was happy that the Islands contingency plan was up to date to deal with any possible outbreak and would keep ESF informed of developments.

Colin Pope and Charles Dutton were possibly going to visit Poole Harbour.

4) FPN4 REVISION

Brenda reported that this would be published by the end of March '07. Brenda had written to all FC staff for comments for revision.

On the matter of the structure of the Note it was suggested that separate parts of the same document be drafted for red and greys. However, some thought that completely separate documents would be more appropriate.

5) WOODLAND BIRDS AND GREY IMPACTS PROPOSAL

The Chairman reported that 2 years ago the Group had put forward a 3 year experimental study to Defra and FC which they chose not to fund so now they were getting a proposal together with Rufus Sage of the Game Conservancy Trust, Loddington Trust and BTO on studying the effects of grey squirrel control on woodland birds. The aim of the study being to ascertain whether grey squirrel control (to current best practice levels) increased the density and/or productivity of woodland bird species. This was still at proposal stage and funding had not yet been secured.

A 2 year study is proposed; year 1 would identify 6 woodlands in 3 pairs (1 pair in southern England, 1 pair in the Midlands and 1 pair in the east of England, 1 wood with control and one without). Year 1 would be a pilot year and during that year a targeted larger sample (approx 20 pairs) of suitable study sites in the same 3 regions as the original 6.

The repeat woodland bird survey had measured the number of dreys and there was some correlation between high numbers of dreys and the decline of lesser spotted woodpecker and hawfinch. Also, related work on cameras on the nests of spotted flycatchers is continuing with substantially more cameras being deployed this year in the 2 study sites, of Devon and Bedfordshire. A significant number of predation incidents had been recorded but only one of these may have involved a grey squirrel.

6) UKRSG FEEDBACK

a) Improving Communications With Regions – at the last meeting of the UKRSG the Terms of Reference of the group had been discussed and main role of the group had been identified as reporting at the UK level, the setting of UK priorities, communications and UK liaison. Gaps in membership had been discussed and it was agreed that representatives from Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly be included. Themed meetings and joint meetings were thought a good idea to make the group more flexible.

b) Web Site - SNH were now responsible for the updating of the web site and for secretariat support. On the matter of the web site it was asked whether countries could have their own pages. Tony Mitchell-ones would raise this at the next UKRSG meeting.

ACTION: TONY MITCHELL-JONES

9) WARFARIN MAP REVISION OPPORTUNITY

a) Selective Hoppers only & no Buffer Squares Proposal – the Chairman had written to ESF members (and FC regional colleagues) at the end of July to see if anyone had suggestions for changing the status of 10km squares and related guidance where there were good grounds for changes and evidence to back up the suggestions. Grid reference of the SW corner of each of the 10km square that changes were suggested for are required. He also asked for views on the buffer squares and whether they were needed or not if only selective hoppers were being used. Replies were requested by end August and responses from FC colleagues have been:

NE – dot map of current red distribution received but still waiting for grid references back so they can be digitised

N. Yorks – proposals for 4 additional red squares.

Suffolk – Rendlesham, recommendation to delete the red square and the buffers as no red there for at least 20 years

Thetford – recommendation to retain the present red squares but remove the buffer squares.

Poole Harbour – Add red squares covering the Harbour Islands to the map

In addition a suggestion from Colin Booty was received on the related guidance that PSD revise/clarify the label approval so that only selective hoppers (as given in FPN4) be used irrespective of location, (ie ban the old hoppers without doors completely). The Chairman welcomed this as a means of also dispensing with buffer squares and thought very few of the older hoppers were still in use anyway. He put this to the UKRSG at their last meeting and they were happy to have it put forward.

The Forum agreed that buffer squares could be removed provided the label use condition that only the selective hoppers are allowable was clarified/confirmed by PSD

ACTION: FRED CURRIE TO CONFIRM WITH UKRSG (at their next meeting on 8 February) WHO SHOULD WRITE TO PSD WITH THIS RECOMMENDATION

It was suggested that the north of England SOS/Red Alert be encouraged to agree red squares put data on red squirrels in better order and onto NBN and all data on red sightings from 1994 onwards be collected

This cut off point for sightings was discussed. Some thought it should be increased to 10 years. UKRSG to be asked to decide

10) EUROPEAN/ESI UPDATE

Charles Dutton introduced himself as the new ESI representative.

ESI held an immuno contraception seminar chaired by Sir Patrick Bateson and Professor Andy Peters who reported on his research findings so far. ESI were looking a number of funding opportunities to take that research forward. Discussions with

Brussels re IMC had taken place and provision existed within framework 7 for work to be carried out into methods of control of alien invasive species. Also they were talking to 2 Directorates– environment and habitat and there may be funding available from them.

ESI had been in touch with the Scottish Executive regarding the red squirrel action plan and were trying to encourage cross border discussion. UKRSG help would be welcomed in trying to get cross border co-operation for control in place.

11) ANY OTHER BUSINESS

a) **Kania Traps** – the article distributed by Jon Morris was discussed. Some reservations about it were made and Brenda was to advise John on a response for publication in Smallwoods magazine.

ACTION: BRENDA MAYLE

12) DATE AND VENUE OF NEXT MEETING

We resolved to attempt again a joint meeting with the Welsh Squirrel Group and 18th/19th April in Wye Valley/Dean was agreed as suitable dates/venue with field meeting on 18th and business meeting on 19th.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 15.40.