

MINUTES IF THE ENGLAND SQUIRREL FORUM MEETING ON TUESDAY 16TH NOVEMBER AT THE ROYAL OVERSEAS LEAGUE, LONDON

Present - Fred Currie, Chairman FC(E)
Bill Burlton FE
Brenda Mayle, FR
Colin Booty, RSPCA
Charles Critchley, FE
Colin Pope, IOW Council
Jason Reynolds, Cumbria Wildlife Trust
Judith Webb, CLA/TGA
Louise Bessant
Roger Cook, ESI
Tony Mitchell-Jones, English Nature
John Morris, Chiltern Woodland Project
Richard Pow, FC
Sandy Greig, FC(E)
Alison Pyrah FC(E) Minutes

APOLOGIES– Apologies for absence were received from Catriona Carlin, John Gurnell, Mike Swan, David Bullock and Melanie Hardie.

The Chairman opened the meeting. He welcomed Roger Cook and ESI to the Forum.

MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Chairman noted that these were joint with the UKRSG and thanked Colin Pope for hosting the last, very interesting and successful meeting on the Isle of Wight.

GREY SQUIRRELS

1. **England Grey Squirrel Policy and Action Plan Proposal** – Sandy Greig introduced this paper and outlined the background to it. The paper tabled had been cleared by Ministers and FC had made a recommendation to go to consultation with stakeholders. This had been agreed by DEFRA. Questions and points raised included

- It was not envisaged that there would be a Ministerial launch of the document. It would however, be published on the FC web site
- Roger Cook said that ESI had felt obliged to disassociate itself from what is now the annex to the paper. The reason being that it seemed clear to them that there was the prospect of further changes between members of ESF seeing the latest draft and it going to the Minister. This seemed to be asking people to “sign a blank cheque”. ESI did not feel that they could endorse something that they had not seen. However, having looked at the latest version of the annex, with the exception of 1 paragraph it seemed very similar to previous drafts. Roger Cook said that this was a shame and had ESI realised this they may have felt differently.

They were also concerned about the short consultation period. Also the list of consultees seemed similar to previous lists for previous drafts, and ESI felt that there were some important names missing off the list who had a legitimate interest in the subject and may wish to make a comment.

Also, as ESI understood it the paper represented advice to DEFRA. They thought that it would affect other DEFRA agencies and Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and may impinge on the UK's international obligations. For all of the above reasons ESI had written to the Minister to say that they will co-operate with the consultation deadline but asking him to have a wider consultation, managed by DEFRA following the results of the planned consultation. (A copy of the letter was distributed to members).

Sandy Greig said that the consultation document had been agreed with DEFRA European Wildlife Division (Martin Capstick). In relation to the consultation period there was a chance that Mr Bradshaw could have said not to bother consulting at all, not being keen on long consultations. He went on to say that he thought that there was nothing particularly contentious in the paper but he was keen for people to have the opportunity to comment on the "front end". At the request of FTA it had been agreed to extend the consultation period to 10th December. This would apply to all consultees.

- John Morris thought it would be a good idea to include a definition of "sustainable woodland management".
- Judith Webb said that (para 4) said that TGA had carried out some research and had identified a lack of understanding of the impacts and the need for squirrel management and that awareness needed to be raised.
- The word "many" in paragraph 5 should be changed to read "some".
- Roger Cook said that he thought that the public attitude comments needed supporting evidence. It was thought that the FC/ESF/ESI could work together to produce this evidence by way of an independent survey.
- Judith Webb said that she thought para 3 was a very positive statement and members had commented so.
- There was no reference to parapoxy or woodland birds.
- It was thought that it should be mentioned that Government supported the continuing use of warfarin.
- On the critical threat table on page 7 there was no mention of seed predation and its effects on regeneration. This would be easy to include.

ACTION POINT 1: members to write in with consultation responses by 10th December 2004.

2. WOODLAND BIRD GROUP DRAFT RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Can grey squirrel control improve the breeding productivity of woodland birds?

Fred Currie reported that a research proposal was being developed by a collaboration of several partners within the Woodland Bird Group – the Forestry Commission, Game Conservancy Trust, Forest Research, British Trust for ornithology, RSPB and Central Science Laboratory. A complex and costly research question to answer the latest draft of the proposal would cost £100K a year for 4 years so a funding partnership would need to be sought. The next draft of the proposal was due at the end of 2004 and Fred would keep members informed.

The outline of the project was to set up 6 pairs of deciduous woodland areas over various parts of the country. They would be studied over 4 years. 90% of the grey squirrels would be removed from alternate areas so that there could be a controlled match plot study. The summer bird productivity would be measured in each of the plots using actual nest outcome monitoring. This would be combined with the identification of actual nest predators.

ACTION POINT 2: The Chairman to keep members informed of developments.

3. ALTERNATE METHODS OF DISPATCH OF TRAPPED GREY SQUIRRELS

Air Gun - a way forward needed to be established that did not come down to opinion, but to a legitimate consideration. Operator preference and circumstances needed to be taken into consideration. Charles Critchley said FE would always use the method of best practice as prescribed in the FC published Practice Guide. However, they would participate in any research work.

Plastic Bag .v. Hessian Sack

Discussions on this were still ongoing. However, an appropriate modern evidence base to support the use of air guns had not yet been clarified. Brenda Mayle said that she had been in touch with the National Proficiency Test Council with regard to the method that they recommended as best practice within game keeping courses and they recommended the hessian sack method. The history for the recommendation of this method was not known. Brenda had been to CSL and spoken to Ian English who carries out research into the humaneness of traps. Having discussed the problem with him he suggested that an alternative to the hessian sack method would be to adapt the corner of the sack to include a "cod net" so that the animal could be ushered into the open corner, exposing the head so that a clean, effective blow could be administered.

It was decided that given an alternative to the sack method was available a way to getting that considered needed to be settled on.

ACTION POINT THREE : It was agreed to set up a working group of Charles Critchley, Jason Reynolds, Colin Booty and Judith Webb to try to find a way forward.

7. TAKING FORWARD THE RED SQUIRREL RESEARCH AGENDA

Brenda Mayle reported on the paper that Nettleton and Co had been asked to produce on the potential to develop a vaccine against parapox for red squirrels. There would be 10 phases before a three year field trial. John Gurnell had also produced a proposal that looked at the modes of transmission. This would be a three year PHD study with an approximate cost of £30,000 per year for three years using Thetford as a location. The other paper concerning the vaccine development would have an approximate cost using two post doctorates for the first three years and one for the next two years would be (before field trials) £136,000 per annum going up to £144,000 per annum for the first three years and £90,00 per annum for the following 2 years. Field trials not costed £150,000 - £200,000 per year for three years and the marketing authorisation at £4,000 – £20,000. The two amalgamated would give an approximate figure of £200,000 per annum for a minimum of five years.

Brenda Mayle to let Roger Cook have a copy of the vaccine paper. Roger Cook to explore contacts in the animal vaccine world.

The Chairman reiterated that the urgent need for squirrel pox research bearing in mind the imminent activation of a Northern England Red Squirrel action plan and increasing threat of grey squirrels to Keilder.

ACTION POINT FOUR: Brenda Mayle to organise a Science group meeting to agree proposals to put to a funding partners group.

4. WARFARIN USEAGE UPDATE

The Chairman reported that Steve Gregory thinks it could come up for a formal vote by the Standing Committee on Plant Health quite soon and that only a small minority would be in favour of retention.

5. UK RED SQUIRREL ACTION PLAN UPDATE

Tony Mitchell-Jones reported that the group had not met since the joint meeting with ESF in May so there was very little to report. However, on the matter of BAP Review he reported that there was a review of BAP targets underway, due to finish in 2004/05. Lead partners had been asked to look at developing new targets for BAP species including the red squirrel. The targets had to be SMART in terms of either maintaining or expanding. This would not be easy for the red squirrel. UKRSG were to meet on 6th December. Thoughts on SMART targets to Tony Mitchell-Jones before then.

ACTION POINT FIVE: An agenda item for the next meeting.

6. SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING ADVICE

Melanie Hardie had sent a copy of the revised Supplementary Feeding leaflet (08/04). The Chairman thought this seemed to concentrate on garden feeding more than woodland feeding and he felt that the woodland scenario should be made clearer and take into account the "hobby" woodland owners.

ACTION POINT SIX: Tony Mitchell-Jones to take the idea of a separate leaflet concerning woodland feeding back to Melanie. The title of the present leaflet to have the words "in your garden" included in the title.

7 NORTHERN ENGLAND PRIORITY SITES MANAGEMENT PLANS/REVIEW OF N(E) PLANS

Richard Pow distributed an extract from the overview document which was the document describing the overall strategy for red squirrel conservation in northern England. In order to sustain viable populations on mainland northern England it had been decided that they would opt for the strategy of identifying a small number (20) of refuge areas of mainly coniferous woodland that contained red squirrels at the moment and were likely to sustain that population in at least the short term. Jason Reynolds had identified the potential red squirrel reserves, a partnership funding package was now being built.

Jason reported that the management plans were "ideals" and they realised that distilling out key points was important. A HLF bid would be written and submitted in the new year.

ACTION POINT SEVEN: Richard Pow to keep members informed of progress.

7. MODELLING SQUIRREL POX EFFECTS AT KEILDER

Bill Burlton outlined the Newcastle University squirrel pox modelling project part funded by MTUK.

It was predicted that grey squirrels would arrive in Kielder area in the next 3-4 years and that they would carry parapox. The probable pathways into Kielder had been mapped and its spread in Kielder forest modelled. The model suggests that pox will burn out and whilst mortality will be high reds would survive. This left a maximum 5 year window to put in serious mitigation/preventative measures.

ACTION POINT EIGHT: as per action point three – pox transmission research urgent.

12. RED ALERT NORTH EAST/WEST

Louise Bessant distributed a written up date of progress to members. The Chairman said that Red Alert officers were the face of the red squirrel conservation initiative and key to getting over the priorities and Northern England plan

to the general public. Public support will be important so vital that Red Alert officers continue to be funded.

13. ISLE OF WIGHT PLAN PROGRESS

Colin Pope reported no more grey squirrel sightings on the island.

He had been called to give evidence at court in the case of a hoax phone in programme on local radio where someone was claiming to be bringing grey squirrels across and releasing them on the island. The police followed this up and the presenter received a 12 month conditional discharge.

14. POOLE HARBOUR ISLANDS PLAN PROGRESS

The Chairman reported on a successful meeting to set up the Poole Harbour Islands Group. An action plan has been agreed and was launched in the summer, including grey squirrel contingency.

15. EUROPEAN SQUIRREL INITIATIVE

Roger Cook reported that the ESI was founded in 2002/03 and was a limited company by guarantee now had full registered charity status. They were mainly concerned with 2 main areas – education/information and research for reds and greys. They had launched a Grey Squirrel Review last September and recently a new publication on Red Squirrels.

ESI had done a lot of lobbying some on warfarin and some on general awareness. They were trying to change European law so that reds could be better protected.

They were also looking into setting up a colony of reds on the island of Mull. The Chairman thanked Roger for ESI input and said that in particular the ESI's European contacts and information would add a new dimension to ESF work.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Judith Webb requested a review of membership in light of the developing agenda.

ACTION POINT NINE: Judith Webb to draft a note for the next meeting addressing the groups membership and contact with other groups.

16. DATE AND VENUE OF NEXT MEETING

23rd February 2005 – Country Landowners Association, Belgrave Square London (to be confirmed)