

UK RED SQUIRREL GROUP

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER 2009

**Northumberland Wildlife Trust
Newcastle**

MINUTES

Present

Tony Mitchell-Jones (NE, Chair)
Mairi Cole (SSG, SNH, Secretariat)
Simon MacKown, (Defra)
John Griffin, (Dardni)
Richard Pow, (FC England, ESF)
Brenda Mayle, Forest Research
Carri Nicholson, WT
Liz Halliwell, CCW, WSF

1. Apologies

Ian Collier, (FC Scotland, SSG)

2 Matters arising not covered by the agenda

SMcK told the Group of a study being carried out to quantify the economic cost of non-native species. Four case studies had been selected for economic evaluation, one of which was grey squirrel. The study will be carried out by CAB International and is due to report in 2010. It is likely that members of the UKRSG, and others, will be approached for information for it. It was suggested that grey squirrel had been selected as a species for which eradication would be prohibitively expensive, demonstrating the benefits of managing invasive species early in their colonisation. BM noted that the estimate should include costs of monitoring to validate whether eradication had been successful as this could be considerable. It was also agreed that an evaluation should take into account the location and method of management as this could also have significant implications for cost and feasibility of success, e.g. warfarin may be deployed effectively in some areas of the UK but not others.

3 Country updates

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum will be re-convened in November/December following a lapse of c. 2 years. This will be led by Jon Lees, from the NI Environment Agency. The main focus of the group will be to deliver actions within the Action Plan which relate to Northern Ireland.

There are currently three squirrel groups in Northern Ireland: Glens of Antrim, Belvoir and Tollymore. The Tollymore group has been established since 2004 and initially had only moderate success in controlling grey squirrels along areas of known incursions. However, since using feeding stations in conjunction with grey squirrel culling, the outcome for the red squirrel has substantially improved with 11 red squirrels and 24 grey squirrels recorded in 2004 changing to 103 red squirrels and 3 grey squirrels in 2008. It is intended to publish the results of this work and a paper is currently being prepared by Anne McComb on behalf of the group. The project is to be included on Countryfile in October.

AP JG to circulate paper to UKRSG following publication.

Samples continue to be sent to Moredun for squirrelpox screening. Grey squirrels were seropositive in six of the seven Forest Management Units (FMUs) from which samples were sent and recent results suggest that the prevalence of the disease has increased when compared to results from 2004 and 1998/99. Colin McInnes had expressed surprise that red squirrels were still present where the prevalence was significant. However, a detailed look at these areas confirmed that a reasonable population of red squirrels only existed in one of these FMUs now, having died out in two other FMUs prior to 2007 and only remaining in an outlying block in another. The tentative conclusion from the data is that squirrelpox virus may be having an impact on red squirrels in Ireland even though death by poxvirus has not been confirmed in a red squirrel. There have been two anecdotal reports of sick red squirrels but no samples to analyse. It is hoped that the new Forum will take on the role of addressing and managing the situation.

There has been a broad-scale decline in squirrels in many forests within Northern Ireland in 2009. This has been particularly noticeable in local grey squirrel populations and is considered to be a natural fluctuation of the population cycle.

Wales

The Red Squirrel Conservation Plan has been approved by the Welsh Assembly Government Rural Affairs and Environment Ministers, formalising it as the policy for red squirrel conservation in Wales. They have also approved that Anglesey, Clocaenog and Mid-Wales should be the focal sites for red squirrel conservation. There is a fourth site where red squirrels are known to be present south of Clocaenog but this not been identified as a focal site. It had been hoped to launch the RSCP in Red Squirrel week but this had been delayed by events. It is anticipated to be launched within a couple of weeks.

AP LH to send link to RSCP when launched

Public funding will be focussed initially on the focal sites. Other sites may be funded through grant schemes if there is funding available and evidence of positive benefits. FCW in mid-Wales are working the project partnership to develop a proposal for conservation work at the focal site there.

It has been estimated that there are 250-300 red squirrels now resident on Anglesey. 54 grey squirrels have been removed this year including the 3 reintroduction sites. The plans for felling at Newborough Forest to restore the dune SAC continues to attract attention.

A new proposal to remove grey squirrels and introduce red squirrels at the Gower has received support from Prince Charles. There is, as yet, limited information on this project.

Scotland

The public consultation on strongholds was opened in March and completed in June. There was general support from the responders. FCS will now analyse the responses and identify the next steps to be taken. The results will be placed on the FCS website in the near future. Following the consultation, one area of potential conflict is the negative impact on habitat networks, e.g. west Argyll Native Woodlands. It is envisaged that this can be resolved by further discussion with those raising the concern. The next step is to draw up management guidance for Stronghold Woodland owners.

The public consultation on the draft strategy for grey squirrel control ran for 12 weeks, closing on 1 September. This attracted 22 responses and results are still to be analysed. A

cursory look at the submissions suggests that there is general support for the proposal and the next step, following publication of a summary report, would be to combine the output with the strongholds work to form a Red Squirrel policy document. This would include guidance on habitat management and sources of funding support for red squirrel conservation action. It is anticipated that this will be developed in early 2010.

The Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project (SSRS) continues to expand, currently supporting a Project Manager, three Project Officers (South, East and North East) and three FTE Grey Squirrel Control (North East and South). There are currently discussions being held to put in place a Project Officer in West Scotland, potentially funded by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. The project has prepared Standard Operating Procedures for grey squirrel control to ensure that welfare standards are identified and met in any control action undertaken by the Project. Project management has also agreed that the Scottish SPCA will be given unfettered access to grey squirrel control to monitor standards. Both the RSSS and RSST have been invited to attend SSRS Steering Group meetings to aid liaison between projects and consistent action over a wide area of Scotland.

The Red Squirrels in South Scotland project continue to focus grey squirrel control on the known area of squirrelpox virus. 26 applications in February received c. £800k of public funds (through the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP)) to support this. Additional applications are expected (c. 50) in the forthcoming funding rounds in 2009/10 raising this total significantly. The SRDP continues to be the main source of public funds for grey squirrel control and, although there were some 'teething' problems following its launch, the issues appear to be being resolved. SRDP will be reviewed in 2012.

A recent outbreak of squirrelpox virus at Thornhill resulted in 26 cases of squirrelpox virus in red squirrels. Although significant, these have been confined to an area where squirrelpox had previously been recorded and is known to be present at significant levels in grey squirrels. The virus does not appear to be spreading in extent.

There is currently a small area of work ongoing to standardise the data being submitted to the Scottish Squirrel Database, reducing the need for validation by a data manager. If successful, this will improve the speed at which data can be collated, mapped and submitted to the NBN.

England

SoS are now one third through the extension year. The focus has been on delivery of the review report and, in particular, landowner engagement and support for local groups. The Project seeks to fill gaps where government funding is not available. The Project is also looking for innovative ways to control grey squirrels in strategic areas. For example, Morpeth is at a confluence of two rivers both of which run into reserves. These potentially act as corridors for grey squirrel spread and landfill tax funding to cover the costs of grey squirrel control in this area could have much wider benefits.

Simon O'Hare has been working on the Eden trying to establish proactive, rather than reactive, trapping. There is currently no funding to support this but he is hoping to attract participants.

There has been successful cross-border grey squirrel control with reciprocal trapping work both in the Liddle valley and at Bonchester Bridge. This work will be maintained in the longer term by the local landowners.

The North England Review was published and circulated to UKRSG members. This included recommendations which are now being responded to. It was anticipated that there

would be another meeting of the working group to identify ways in which the situation could be progressed. There have been initial discussions between FCE, NE and RSST which identified a limited amount of funding and the following priorities in the short-term: 1) support for urgent grey squirrel control which isn't readily funded by EWGS, e.g. in Community (applications opening in November); 2) use of GIS mapping to illustrate the location of current control in North England for use as a future planning tool (to be put out to tender in October); 3) undertake an audit of the 17 reserves. This will not question the principle of reserves for red squirrel conservation but will review the appropriateness of locations (timing to be determined); and 4) monitoring of the effectiveness of current action. This followed recommendations by RSST and focuses on what information needs to be recorded from grey squirrel control to evaluate effectiveness. It was agreed that this was applicable over most of the UK and should be discussed in this context. On this basis, it was agreed that the UKRSG should host a seminar, linked to the next meeting, to discuss suitable methods of survey and monitoring.

AP TMJ to circulate copy of the RSST paper for discussion

AP TMJ/MC to organise seminar linked to next UKRSG meeting

There was some discussion about going to a public consultation to review the location of reserves however it was recognised that this could conflict with the timing of a General Election next year. There was also some discussion on whether this constituted creation or implementation of policy and whether it would require Ministerial endorsement. Further discussion was required on this between participating departments.

The medium-term challenge in England is to pull together the recommendations of the report and focus targeted action. There is a need to obtain funding to support a core project within the wider context of north England action.

There has been a big increase in uptake of the EWGS, indicating that there is still significant interest in using this to fund buffer control and habitat management.

It was noted that there had been no meeting of the England Squirrel Forum for two years. Given the pace of current developments, and the limited applicability of the recommendations, it was acknowledged that this group would have to be re-convened to ensure a national perspective on issues.

CN informed the Group that SoS had a requirement to host a conference at the end of the period of HLF funding. This was being planned for Spring 2010. MC noted that there had been similar discussions for SSRS and the Group agreed that it would provide a focus for the UKRSG to host a UK conference drawing in all relevant UK projects. This could be organised by a sub-committee and would aim to include as many partner organisations as possible. CN noted that SoS does not have funding for the conference, despite it being a key target output, but is in the process of discussing funding sources for various elements of the programme. It was anticipated that the conference would span two days and involve c.150 delegates. It was hoped that the conference costs would be covered by delegate fees. There was some discussion on the most appropriate length of the meeting, given the necessity and cost to delegates of staying over night. It was agreed that the current plans should be mooted to the country groups and views sought.

AP RP to approach RSST to invite their involvement

AP CN to circulate outline agenda for conference to UKRSG.

AP MC, LH and JG to obtain views of country group members and feed back to UKRSG (through MC).

4. Squirrelpox (SqPV) update

Previous research suggested that SQPV is predominant in South and Central Northumberland: about 80% of greys tested in these areas are seropositive. The only areas that are seronegative at present are in the North East of the County (north of Alnwick) where the only greys found are coming in from Scotland. Cumbria is also predominantly seropositive, with between 80 and 90% of greys tested carrying antibodies. Due to the prevalence, sampling tests only the first 20 grey squirrels in areas of new colonisation or have re-colonised after being formerly cleared.

There was some concern about the cost and turn-around time for serology sampling with current estimates being 6-8 weeks to return results. MC noted previous discussions with Moredun had clarified that this was considerably shorter where samples were flagged up as urgent.

AP MC to request clarification from Moredun re sampling and reporting of serology results.

There has been an increase in the number of red squirrels succumbing to SqPV in South Scotland. However, this has been confined to an estate known to host the virus. Trapping seems to have been effective in containing further spread.

A brief report was also received from the Moredun outlining progress with the transmission research. Preliminary work confirmed that in red squirrels no obvious pathology is found in any of the internal organs and that the major site of virus replication was in the skin. No internal sites of virus replication could be found.

Work with grey squirrels produced similar results to the reds, but the major site of virus replication has yet to be determined. No internal pathology has been found in infected grey squirrels and no viral DNA found in internal tissues. Although viral DNA can be found in skin sites, results so far have not indicated significant viral replication therein.

Serological monitoring of the experimentally-infected grey squirrels has also produced interesting results in that there is little or no sero-conversion upon first infection with the virus. This contrasts to squirrels from the wild that have been monitored and show high levels of sero-conversion. This may suggest that grey squirrels in the wild are being continually exposed to the virus and that environmental load of virus may need to reach a threshold before the infection becomes evident in the greys.

Progress is slightly behind schedule due to difficulties in the supply of greys and the lack of serological response in primary infected animals calls into question our strategy for monitoring the effects of environmental contamination on transmission dynamics. Moredun hope to produce an alternative strategy for the final part of the project.

Questions were also raised about progress on the vaccine research. This was originally mooted as a 5 year project which was amended to a 3 year project with the aim of identifying only potential vaccine candidates which could be tested for efficacy of protection. Two years of funding were provided by the Wildlife Ark Trust and this process was begun. It is not clear whether funds are available for the third year.

5. Research update

BM presented the research update. There was some discussion about the presentation and content of the information with no consensus for change.

**AP All to feed back suggestions to BM of information to be removed from list.
Feedback requested by 25 October.**

6 Website

MC was concerned that the website was not being managed appropriately. This was due to a combination of reasons, e.g. limited time available, amount of text requiring updating. It was proposed that the website should provide a portal to other sites hosting the relevant information, thereby avoiding duplication and reducing the level of management required. This was accepted by the Group. A draft structure was discussed. Key issues included: 1) country groups continue to need a page each as these do not support their own. This would continue to post minutes of the meetings; 2) the site required a page outlining the background issue in red squirrel conservation, including information on the threat from grey squirrels in the context of the GB Non-native Strategy; 3) the research information could be presented on-line, rather than hard-copy circulated at each meeting. Links to other research could be live, although there was a note of caution about copyright issues where this linked through to published papers.

AP All to provide comments on website content and structure to MC by 25 Oct.

AP MC to investigation creation of a draft site for comment by UKRSG members.

7. RSST invitation

TMJ raised the possibility of extending current membership of the UKRSG to include RSST. The Group recognised the potential benefits of this but felt that the current membership had been constituted under the Terms of Reference to maintain a small, workable core Group with the ability to invite other participants to relevant meetings. It was agreed that this would continue to be appropriate but that RSST should be included in any wider meetings which were held.

8. Minutes of last meeting

RP and JG offered small amendments to the last Minutes.

AP MC to amend Minutes of last meeting accordingly.

Subject to these changes, the Minutes were accepted as a formal record of the previous meeting.

Outstanding Action Points:

AP MC to circulate copies of the LLTNP Rope Bridge report to UKRSG

All other APs were discharged.

9. AOB

One item of AOB – the RSST Monitoring paper – had been addressed during the England country report and action noted.

10 DONM

This is to combine a UKRSG business meeting in the morning with a wider seminar to discuss survey and monitoring in the afternoon. A provisional list of participants was identified and 26th/27th January 2010 offered, subject to their availability.

AP MC to verify availability of key participants before finalising date.

AP SMcK to provisionally book Defra office in London for agreed date.