

UK RED SQUIRREL GROUP

THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY 2007
Defra, Ergon House, London

MINUTES

Present

Tony Mitchell-Jones (NE Chair)
Jessa Battersby (JNCC, Secretariat)
Mairi Cole (Scottish Squirrel Group)
Fred Currie (England Squirrel Forum)
Brenda Mayle (Forest Research)
Richard Schaible (DARDNI)
Carri Nicholson (SOS)
Mark Wilkinson (SOS)
Matt Hartley (Defra)
Andrew Voas (Scottish Executive)
James Kirkwood (UFAW)

Apologies

Ian Collier (Scottish Squirrel Group)
Liz Halliwell (Welsh Squirrel Forum)
Deborah Gooch (Scottish Executive)
John Gurnell (QMWC)
Nick Ambrose (Scottish Executive)
Corrie Breummer (NE)
Anna Meredith (Dick Vet, Edinburgh)
Julian Chantry (University of Liverpool)
Peter Lurz (University of Newcastle)
Tony Sainsbury (Institute of Zoology)
Colin McInnes (Moredun Institute)

Note. Bad weather, or the threat of it, caused travel disruption, hence the high number of apologies

Minutes of last meeting

AP1 Discharged: ToR agreed by group.
AP2 Ongoing – passed to MC as new Secretariat
AP3 Discharged
AP4 Carried forward: *LH to contact WAG and invite them to join the UKRSG if they wish*
AP5 Discharged
AP6 Discharged
AP7 Ongoing: *JB to update website until [location] situation is resolved.*
AP8 Agenda item
AP9 Agenda item

The minutes were agreed as an accurate record of the last meeting.

Matters arising

No items were raised.

UKRSG Secretariat changes

SNH are taking over UKRSG Secretariat from JNCC. There has been some discussions on the location of the website which goes along with this and whether JNCC should remain as the host server. Given security aspects, JNCC and SNH decided to move the content to the SNH server to enable direct administration of this. This work is currently underway. Mairi Cole will provide UKRSG Secretariat on behalf of SNH.

Regional updates

England

ESF covers all squirrel issues (red only, red/grey and grey only). A meeting was held in November. There were sightings of grey squirrels on the Isle of Wight last Spring/Summer and Colin Pope carried out a hair tube survey. He found grey hairs from red squirrels and concluded there was no problem. The Contingency Plan has been brought up-to-date and things are prepared for any incursion, if and when it happens.

There are two partnership looking at possible grey squirrel impacts on breeding woodland birds. These will get underway in 2007/08. One project – led by GCT/BTO and funded through the Tubney Trust grey squirrel initiative – will try to determine the effects of grey squirrel control on woodland bird species. This will use control and experimental plots for statistical comparisons. A second pilot RSPB/FCE/NE partnership project will use nest cameras to gain evidence of actual nest predator species of open-cup nests of a range of species at different canopy heights in woodlands. This is a one year pilot and should provide important direct evidence of impacts.

The group discussed the situation with the warfarin map. There were some responses from ESF members to requests for data. Data from Northumberland and Cumbria in the last 4-5 years was considered to be sufficiently good quality robust information for a local update. Data from Lancashire is patchy. A question remained as to the cut-off date for data and the group debated five or ten years as appropriate. This was not resolved at the meeting but will need to be reviewed. There was a proposal for four additional squares at Poole Harbour and to get rid of the Suffolk square in Redlesham. Thetford was more problematic because of possible captive bred squirrels being released. It was recommended that this be retained but to remove the buffer squares.

Steve Gregory (FC) has written to PSD recommending that the label make it clear that only selective hoppers can be used *regardless* of the location. It was thought that very few old hoppers are now in use. The group recommended awaiting the response from PSD to Steve's letter before considering further action.

The Save Our Squirrels (SOS) project was established in May 2006 with a budget of £1.15m. 56% of this was provided through HLF funds. The project covers from the Solway Firth to Merseyside and includes education, interpretation and focuses on the maintenance of red squirrel reserves. This includes habitat management in reserves and buffer zones. Reserves were selected on a range of criteria, and include Kielder which could hold up to 70% of the England squirrel population in a good year. The project raises public awareness of the plight of red squirrels and the impact of grey squirrels. There have been three squirrelpox outbreaks: Ainsdale confirmed 16 deaths – and has not died down over winter – and 14 confirmed deaths at Harwood (Castle Morpeth). There was one confirmed death just outside the buffer zone for Kielder. There has been good volunteer effort to find carcasses but no more have turned up. The project are planning a conference in 2007 to

look at the outbreaks. A local gamekeeper will be employed at Castle Morpeth to do work on red squirrels. SoS are not allowed to carry out grey squirrel control and, as a result, the Red Squirrel Protection Partnership submitted a Business Plan to Defra for £150k to kill grey squirrels in Northumberland. However, this project doesn't cover Cumbria, where there is a much worse problem extending into Dumfries and Galloway. There is currently no group to submit a bid for partnership and SoS are hoping to encourage local Cumbria groups to form an association to bid for funding themselves.

Mark Wilkinson will be taking over as SoS project manager while Carri Nicholson is on maternity leave.

There was some discussion about squirrelpox. Concerns were expressed about the interferon being used on the squirrels which have been treated, as it may be outdated stock. It was agreed that vets cannot be expected to use out-of-date products as was suggested. Corporate sponsorship appeared to be an option – one human dose of interferon could cover up to 60 red squirrels. It was suggested that interferon had been very successful when it had been used, successfully treating squirrels with lesions – but this work was still to be documented. It was agreed that the decision on whether to use a product was for the vet.

Wales

LH was unable to attend the meeting but sent an update. WSF last met in November 2006. CCW has approved the idea of the Wales Red Squirrel Project and LH has bid for funding to develop the project proposal. A Project Development Plan is now in preparation.

A sub-group of the WSF has met to discuss a first draft for a Conservation Plan. This is currently being revised.

LH is still collating records of 10km squares with red squirrels since 1994. This work is ongoing.

FC Wales are preparing guidelines for GS control under the 'Better Woodlands for Wales' grant programme. It is likely that there will be different payment rates depending on whether cage trapping or warfarin is used and whether the applicant is in a high or low risk area. Areas with red squirrels will be considered high risk. There was concern that applicants will not be able to apply just for the grey squirrel control element and will have to go through the full BWW management plan process.

Sarah Cartmel is preparing a Squirrelpox Virus Contingency Plan.

Northern Ireland

The Action Plan is currently going through government consultation. It was anticipated that this may be completed by mid-February. There have been reports of seropositive grey squirrels but, as yet, no transfer to red squirrels. There have been two substantial studies on grey squirrels but no dead red squirrels have been found.

Scotland

The Scottish Squirrel Group discussed the request for changes to the warfarin map and made two recommendations: 1) if the science was able to support the selective hoppers as sufficient protection against red squirrels gaining access to poisoned bait, the map should be amended to lift all geographic restrictions on the use of warfarin. 2) If, however, the science was not sufficient robust to ensure red squirrel protection, the SSG did not favour any changes to the map until completion of the Scottish Squirrel Survey. This was debated by the UKRSG and it was concluded that, as the Warfarin Order states that the poison cannot

be used in areas with red squirrels and pine marten, removal of all restrictions would require a change to the Order. Also, removal of all restrictions was not in keeping with the general desire to discourage the widespread use of poisons. The meeting, therefore, accepted the second recommendation.

A guidance note has been produced, by FC Scotland, on *Forest Operations and red squirrels in Scottish Forests*. This was to address the problems arising from the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004. It is intended as an interim guidance and will be reviewed, in light of comments, in Autumn.

Following publication of the red squirrel *Action Plan*, FC Scotland were now pursuing identification of red squirrel stronghold areas. It was anticipated that this would be done, in partnership with SNH, by March 2008.

Two Grey Squirrel Control Officers are in place in South Scotland to address the problems of squirrelpox incursion. These are funded by SNH until March 2007 although funds are being sought to extend this until March 2008. Concern was noted that more grey squirrel control was required in Cumbria to support this. The UKRSG was asked to note this concern. Concern was also noted that pest control companies were not despatching grey squirrels – as per the law – but were trapping and re-releasing them elsewhere. The SGG are to approach pest control companies and cage manufacturers to re-iterate this requirement and see whether manufacturers would include notification on this for trap sale.

As the SSG now numbers 31 members, alternative ways of working are being considered (sub- and policy-groups).

Research update

A summary was provided by BM (attached). It was agreed that the Research and Monitoring updates would go on the website.

AP1 All to advise on contact details and any corrections to BM.

There was some discussion on the suggestion that pine marten were preferentially preying on grey squirrels. TMJ cautioned on the interpretation of scat analysis to investigate this. This needed to be put into the context of location and food availability. An experiment would need to compare areas where pine martens existed with either red or grey squirrels as well as areas where pine martens were present with both species. BM indicated that Forest Research could provide scat analysis at cost price in Edinburgh.

Advisory Notes

There appears to be two lines of advice with respect to supplementary feeding where there is risk of squirrelpox virus. Sefton area continue to feed to attract grey squirrels for removal. Feeders are kept clean during this time. It is also used as a method of monitoring the health of the red squirrel population. In contrast, Cumbria recommend stopping supplementary feeding. The cross-border group looking at squirrelpox and grey squirrel control recommend encouraging planting of food source trees instead of putting out supplementary feeders. They recognise that supplementary feeding can have an impact on the population so stopping could have a negative effect. They also recommend that peanuts are not used as a sole food – these are not native food and, if not screened for toxins, have the potential to cause metabolic bone disease.

Scottish conference

Mel Tonkin will be arranging a one-day conference on squirrels on 21 April. This will be at Dundee and will focus, primarily, on local delivery of red squirrel conservation. UKRSG members will be invited also.

Humane despatch

Forest Research commissioned a review of methods of humane despatch of grey squirrels. This was undertaken by James Kirkwood (UFAW) who reviewed the cranial despatch method. He observed it being carried out in the field on one animal and concluded that this was done humanely and with due respect and care for the animal. However operator skills are very important and training would be required. The method is currently demonstrated by RDS, GCT and most courses (colleges) that run a game-keeping section. JK reported that he had not observed other methods of despatch but did not consider that, due to logistic concerns of delivering the barbiturate under the appropriate conditions, lethal injection posed significantly more welfare benefits. Transporting barbiturates to the field, to apply *in situ*, also raised it's own Health and Safety concerns. Shooting presented problems of ensuring that the animal was sufficiently constrained to deliver the fatal shot, however this method had not been observed in practice and there was no data on the relative merits of these methods to draw informed conclusions.

There was some discussion about the use of fine mesh onion sacks in place of hessian sacks for cranial despatch. It was also agreed that there needed to be a mechanism in place to allow operators to report back to someone if there was a problem with grey squirrel despatch.

Forestry Commission will continue to promote cranial despatch for grey squirrel control. Although shooting in traps in mentioned in their new guidelines it is not recommend.

Squirrelpox virus

The weather caused significant travel difficulties during the day and apologies were received from a number of key contributors to the discussion on squirrelpox virus. A decision was made to defer the discussion on this for a future date. However, attendees at the meeting were able to provide brief updates on progress with respect to the disease.

Andrew Voas reported that SEERAD were funding the Moredun Research Institute to investigate the virus (£280k for a three year project). A Steering Group will be formed for this work – anticipated to include SEERAD, SNH, FC and Moredun – and work will be carried out by a PhD student supervised by Colin McInnes (Moredun) and Elspeth Milne and Anna Meredith of the Royal (Dick) Veterinary School. The work will comprise a series of experiments on captive grey squirrels, in a high containment facility, looking at the pathology of the virus. It will specifically investigate the route of transmission of the virus through the body and methods of transmission between individuals.

BM raised the Wildlife Ark Trust appeal for funds to support research on a squirrelpox virus vaccine. Groups around the table were aware of the campaign but, as yet, had not been contacted to discuss involvement. It was agreed that, as yet, there was insufficient information available on the proposal to provide support.

CN noted that Lancashire WT were working with Leehurst Vet School to look at the impact of squirrelpox virus on the red squirrel population (project Ainsdale-based).

MH stated that VLA will accept squirrel carcasses. Post mortem would be free but they would have to charge for serological analysis as these were sent to the Moredun (who hold the intellectual property rights for the PCR method).

MH also raised concerns about the lines of communication on squirrelpox issues. This is a very dynamic area at present and, as requests come regularly from Parliament to support Minister's answers, it was requested that relevant information be circulated widely to ensure clear lines of communication.

Any other business

JB reported that Phase I of the Priority Habitats and Species Review had been completed in 2006. Phase II – the 'signposting exercise' – was now underway. JB is the mammal contact for this phase which will identify the actions for the species. The red squirrel template had been sent to MC who would attempt a first draft and circulate it round the group. This had to be returned to JB by 2 March.

MC reported that SNH were to have a meeting with the Abbey Bank to discuss possibilities of funding for red squirrel conservation work. An update would be provided at the next meeting.