

UK RED SQUIRREL GROUP

WEDNESDAY 27 AUGUST 2008

3-8 Whitehall

London

MINUTES

Present

Tony Mitchell-Jones (NE, Chair)
Mairi Cole (SSG, SNH, Secretariat)
Simon MacKown, (Defra)
John Griffin, (Dardni)
Richard Pow, (FC England, ESF)
Ian Collier, (FC Scotland, SSG)
Brenda Mayle, Forest Research

Liz Halliwell, CCW, WSF (by phone)

Apologies

Carri Nicholson, WT

1. Matters arising

Minutes of last meeting: MC received correspondence from Sian Williams, the Project Officer working on identification of red squirrel strongholds in Scotland at the time of the last meeting. She requested a change to reflect the fact that, contrary to the statement in the minutes, she did make the effort to contact the relevant people in North England and had spoken to one person in the SoS project for over 2 hours regarding the situation with Keilder Forest. This had not been acknowledged in the discussion at the last meeting but was felt to be important to clarify that clear lines of communication had been made. It was agreed that the minutes of the last meeting would be amended.

AP1 – Discharged. BM had discussed habitat data with Gordon Patterson and Sian Williams to ensure North England was taken into account in the analysis.

AP2 – Discharged

AP3 – Ongoing

AP4 – Agenda item

AP5 – Agenda item

AP6 – Discharged

2. Updates from Country Groups

Northern Ireland

For the time being, Declan Looney replaces John Milburne as the contact in DOENI and will act as co-chair of the Northern Ireland Red Squirrel Forum.

The Environment & Heritage Service has been replaced by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) which is the largest Agency within the Department of the Environment. NIEA takes the lead in advising on, and in implementing, the Government's environmental policy and strategy in Northern Ireland.

The Irish Squirrel Survey was carried out on both public and private lands in the north and Republic of Ireland, mostly through sending questionnaires to organisations.

<http://www.coford.ie/iopen24/pub/pub/irishsquirrelsurvey2007revised.pdf>

A NI Red Squirrel Forum meeting is planned in the next couple of months to work on aspects of the recently published All Ireland SAP – http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/all-ireland_red_squirrel_sap_web_version_may_08~changed~final_2_.pdf

Work is continuing on identifying the most suitable red squirrel reserves in Northern Ireland based on the methodology adopted by Poulson *et al* in a report commissioned by SNH.

England

Review

- Review of red squirrel conservation activity in northern England now underway. Purpose: To evaluate what has been achieved over last 3 years and to provide costed options/recommendations for way forward.
- Contract being managed by Natural England (Newcastle Office) on behalf of the Review Steering Group (FC; NE; SOS; RANEng; Northern Red Squirrels; ESI; RSPP). Funding being provided by FC, NE, ESI and SOS.
- Contract awarded to consortium led by CSL and involving Uni of Newc; Uni of London (QM); Game Conservancy and Wildlife trust.
- Due for completion this winter.

A new Reserve?

- YDNPA, supported by RANEng chair, have proposed Greenfield forest as new red squirrel reserve. RANEng steering group at their July meeting agreed to this proposal and subject to owner confirmation this will be designated a reserve.
- Greenfield is 1,000ha predominantly p60s and 70s SS plantation in the Yorkshire Dales about 4 miles north of the Widdale reserve near Hawes.
- Recent hair tube monitoring has confirmed presence of reds (and unfortunately greys).
- Had there been robust evidence of presence of reds in 2005 when other reserves were designated Greenfield would also have been designated as it scores very well with respect to all other selection criteria e.g. size, Spp composition, defendability.
- Designation enables access to EWGS funding, the majority of which is likely to be used for grey control.

Buffer Zone boundary Re-shaping

- At the last RANEng meeting it was agreed to revise the 5km wide areas around the reserves (buffer zones) so that they respond better to land-use and topography and draw on research undertaken by Peter Lurz on grey squirrel incursion corridors.
- The final versions of the new maps will be available soon.

AP1: RP to provide copy of Peter Lurz's report

RSPP, SOS and Grey Control

- RSPP were very active until a few months ago as they set about "clearing" Northumberland of grey squirrels and a very high number of greys killed has been reported (upwards of 15K).
- They have recently notified that they will not be undertaking grey control in any new areas until further notice.

- It has proved difficult to get the flow of information between RSPP and SOS (and other partners) to effectively co-ordinate grey control across northern England.
- SOS, as a result of receiving substantial funding in addition to that necessary to match HLF funding, now employ a grey squirrel control officer, Jamie Stewart. Jamie has been focussing on protecting the western flank of Kielder and minimising the northward migration of poxed greys into Scotland. His efforts have been boosted considerably recently with the loan of 1,000 traps from RSSS.
- Jamie, with the support of volunteers and local groups has been able to broaden the area in which he is working to one bounded by the A68, A69 and Scottish Border. He is working in close co-operation with the Scottish grey squirrel control officers.
- Local Groups now have an umbrella body known as Northern Red Squirrels (NRS). SOS and RSPP are working closely with NRS who are represented on the RANEng Steering Group.

HLF have agreed to a one year extension of SOS (to July 2010).

Wales

A draft project plan has been produced for the proposed Wales Red Squirrel Project. This is based on discussions at a workshop and meetings with individual projects. The draft is now being considered by the WSF and should be finalised by the end of the year. A red squirrel site assessment process is being developed to provide a rationale for the selection of focal sites in Wales.

So far this year, the Anglesey Red Squirrel Project has killed 86 adult and 53 juvenile grey squirrels. Grey squirrels are also now being culled on the mainland side of the bridges to reduce the risk of greys crossing to Anglesey. At the Newborough reintroduction site, 83 red squirrels have been caught this year and an increasing number of red squirrels are being seen at other sites on the island.

The mid-Wales Red Squirrel Project has received funding from the BBC for further survey work and preparation of a project leaflet. There are concerns about the clear-felling and thinning of areas of larch and pine in the Tywi area by FCW.

In Clocaenog, FCW in conjunction with CCW, are preparing a red squirrel management plan for the LISS areas of the forest (approx 50% of the total area). Important red squirrel areas within the forest (NS, larch and pine) have been mapped and assessed. Areas where connectivity between these blocks needs to be maintained or enhanced have been identified.

CCW's squirrel data has been uploaded to the NBN. The WSF is working on ensuring other data is also added.

Scotland

Strongholds

Jo Ellis (FCS) is leading on identification of these. GIS analysis has ID'd 44 potential sites to be narrowed to c.20 covering an area of c. 80,000ha. JE is holding local meetings to feed into the process. Woodland officers and SNH Area staff are being asked to comment on the proposed sites and feed back to Jo. This has raised a mixed response, including concerns about managing for a single species and the proportions and compositions of the woodlands required for red squirrels. This includes queries as to the relative value of sitka spruce and Scots Pine as it is unlikely that the former will replace the latter in areas of high native pine value, e.g. Cairngorm. Jo will review comments and make recommendations. Once sites are selected, FC(S) will approach private landowners. The Scottish Squirrel Group have requested a one-week pre-consultation prior to going to landowners. The outcome will influence funding which is the 'carrot' offered to landowners to become involved.

Grey squirrels

Two grey squirrels have been sighted in Inverness and one at Coylumbidge, Aviemore, in the past 6 months. One of the Inverness animals has subsequently been removed by local action. No further sightings have been made of the other two. The origin of all three animals is still uncertain, although there has been speculation about malicious releases or incidental transfer of animals on lorries, etc.

Grey Squirrel Control Strategy

This is still being developed by SNH. It covers three reasons for removing grey squirrels: 1) to stop further spread of the poxvirus, 2) to prevent further spread of the species and 3) to protect strongholds. SNH are awaiting feedback from the Red Squirrels in South Scotland project to help inform the strategy in this part of the country. It is anticipated that this Strategy will help target public funds across the country when it is completed.

Re-introductions

SNH has received a licence application to translocate red squirrels from North East Scotland to the Highlands. Three animals have already been obtained from a rehabilitation unit and the proposal is to take a further 40-50 animals from the wild. The application is currently under consideration.

Scottish Project

At the time of the last meeting, SNH were working in partnership with SWT to prepare a pan-Scotland red squirrel project. This would include employment of up to five Red Squirrel Conservation Officers and the equivalent of 6 Grey Squirrel Control Officers. This had been discussed with the Scottish Squirrel Group and comments fed into revised versions. Most comments were generally supportive of the initiative, with the exception of the Red Squirrels in South Scotland project who did not think that sufficient resources were included for grey squirrel control. They subsequently made an approach to the Minister for the Environment, Michael Russel MSP, who looked favourably on their proposal and instructed that work in South Scotland had to be led by the objectives of the RSSS. This was to be steered by a landowner-led Steering Group with statutory attendees to ensure some level of statutory governance. This group have held two meetings to date and are compiling a Plan for grey squirrel control in South Scotland.

SNH continues to fund the two grey squirrel control officers in South Scotland under the direction of RSSS. In addition, FCS are providing a further four control officers to be deployed in the area. However, RSSS did not have sufficient funds for a Project Co-ordinator to direct the work so SNH/SWT offered to fund this post and provide line management to implement the work as instructed by the RSSS Steering Group. This provides a link to the pan-Scotland project which continues to be developed by SNH/SWT. This partnership project has since employed a Project Co-ordinator – Dr Mel Tonkin – and is currently advertising for an East of Scotland Project Officer to complement the position in the South. Further positions will be recruited as existing posts terminate, although this is subject to additional funds being achieved.

The purpose of the pan-Scotland is, primarily, to provide evidential data to demonstrate the feasibility of, and commitment required, for grey squirrel control as a mechanism for protecting red squirrels in Scotland. This will be a four-year project.

3 Revised BAP process

TMJ tabled a paper outlining the new approach to BAP in England. England are moving towards more integration between species and habitats, using Biodiversity Integration

Groups (BIGs) to deliver priority habitats with the right features for associated species. Taxonomic Groups have been appointed to provide species advice to the BIGs. The group agreed that red squirrels do not fit into any of the key habitats involved and other ways are therefore required to ensure their conservation. TMJ has reviewed the main actions identified by the signposting exercise last year to consider whether these were sensible and suitable for more SMART targets. The intention is now to ask the Taxonomic group to evaluate these or offer alternative suggestions.

RP suggested that this may be criticised by some as not progressing the BAP work. The group agreed that this exercise may highlight the need for England to prepare a Red Squirrel Action Plan, specifying roles and responsibilities, as had been done in the other countries. MC and LH confirmed that SNH and CCW respectively had also been approached to revise the BAP process and each had identified similar habitat-based groups (Welsh Species Expert Groups and Scottish Ecosystem Groups). However, they had also concluded that red squirrel falls outside this approach but were in a better position to take forward action through their respective action plans. JG confirmed that Ireland were also considering the approach and had umbrella habitat groups. Work was currently being done to review progress of these groups but they still had to consider how to integrate the species elements through clumping HAPs. HAPs will live within an All-Ireland plan, although Eire don't currently contribute to HAPs.

There was currently no action for the group as a whole but progress in each country would be monitored.

4. Squirrelpox virus update

David Everest, VLA, had produced maps of positive squirrelpox records across the UK. All agreed that these were useful as an illustration.

Moredun continue work on transmission of squirrelpox. They have managed to infect a grey squirrel in captivity but need to carry out more work to identify in which part of the body the virus is retained and replicated. Rabies provides a suitable model for development and delivery of a vaccine to a wild population although further work is required to clarify other implications with respect to a squirrelpox virus, e.g. oral delivery, targeting and dosage.

AP2: BM to circulate an update on progress from Colin McInnes

The group discussed some issues of mapping. SNH are continuing to produce maps of serology results for RSSS to help inform their work. This had been extended to include North England in the last map and MC suggested that this would be useful to continue. However, it may require a data agreement to be included on submission forms to ensure that people submitting samples are aware that the results will be circulated.

AP3: RP to discuss inclusion of data agreement with SoS

There is still only one case of the virus in Wales (Newburgh). One animal was submitted from Pentraeth but the results came back negative.

5. Research update

BM circulated the research update. This is growing in size and the group were asked for suggestions as to which projects were now out of date.

AP4: All to pass suggestions to BM

Defra have recently commissioned a public attitude survey to Species Management, including culling. This will report in January 2009. Involves 1) which species are involved, 2) how this is done, 3) why it should be done and 4) cost. Other surveys have also been published by RSPP and ESI (http://www.europeansquirrelinitiative.org/news_update.html).

6. UKRSG website

MC noted that some amendments had been made to the website but that there were still some outstanding questions,

AP5: MC to circulate list of outstanding queries for comments and suggestions

The group were concerned at the number of sightings records which were submitted through the website and suggested amending the structure to avoid this. MC agreed to review the queries and identify how much of a problem this is. However, the group suggested reviewing the website to direct enquiries to local groups.

AP6 MC to amend website structure to re-direct sightings to local groups.

9 AOB

None

10. DONM

tbc