

Scottish Squirrel Group

Wednesday 2nd September 2009

**Scottish Natural Heritage
Battleby**

Final minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) (SNH)
Ian Collier, (Secretariat) (FCS and Highland Red Squirrel Group)
Juliet Robinson, Red Squirrels in the Highlands
Ken Neil, Project Officer (East) – Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels. (SSRS)
Abbie Patterson, Private Consultant
Jamie Farquhar, ConFor
Gavin Skipper, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel Working Group.
John Massey, Cowal Red Squirrel Group
Johanna Willi, Fife Red Squirrel Group
Mel Tonkin, Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels
Richard Wales, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Sian Williams, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Brenda Mayle, Forest Research
Mike Libera, Crown Estates – representing Red Alert South West Scotland
Keith Morton, RSPB
Holly Walker, Project Officer, SSRS, North East Scotland

Apologies:

Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative
Karen Pickles, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Stephanie Johnstone, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Paul Gallagher, Scottish Wildlife Trust
James Pringle, Scottish Rural Property and Business Association
Neil Cowie, RSPB

1. Welcome and introductions

Holly Walker, the Project Officer North East Scotland- Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels was welcomed to the group as was Keith Morton from the RSPB, who was standing in for Neil Cowie.

2. Minutes of previous meetings and matters arising

AP's from September 2008 meeting

AP5 MC: to check with the Aberdeen Ring Road planning dept to assess possibility of including early trapping of greys to the south of Aberdeen: *Superseded.*

AP's from meeting on 10th March 2009

AP 1: JP to circulate details of Red Squirrel Survival pack: *discharged,* (hard copy on the way.)

AP 2: All to consider the structure of the SSG: *discharged.*

AP 3: IC to circulate research update: *discharged.*

AP4: MC to circulate a proposed general response to FOI enquiries about culling of greys: *ongoing (sent out already but MC to repeat circulation as some members appeared not have received a copy.)*

Matters arising

Concern was raised by some members of the group regarding grey control on National Forest Estate land in South Scotland. The only control being done by Forest District staff was in areas that were covered by designated control officers employed by FES on behalf of the RSSS. The formation of a steering group to direct all grey squirrel control in the RSSS area was welcomed.

The future structure and working of the SSG attracted few comments from members. The agenda set for this meeting (2nd Sept 2009) was presented as a new structure. For future meetings it was agreed that the policy issues and updates from the large projects (SSRS and RSSS) would be covered in the morning. The afternoon would be spent on local group issues with appropriate issues such as good practice being covered. It was suggested that a theme could be selected and discussed, such as surveying and recording.

For future meetings local groups will be asked to provide a written up date prior to the meeting. IC will distribute these summaries with the papers for the meeting. No written up dates will be accepted after this. The afternoon discussion can then address wider issues of interest, rather than the detail of local action which is covered in their written update.

IC will minute only significant points of the afternoon discussion and, if no witten update is provided, groups will be relied upon to update their own PR to keep colleagues informed of general progress.

3. Grey Squirrel Control Strategy update.

The consultation on the Grey Control Strategy has now finished. There were 8 representations from individuals and 14 from organisations. The responses will be analysed and the consultation response published at the end of the year. It is the intention to combine the outcome of the Control Strategy consultation with that of the

stronghold work to provide a consolidated Government policy statement underpinning the SRDP in early 2010

4. Strongholds Woodlands update

The consultation on the Stronghold Woodlands is now complete. 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.

Members of the group queried the legal status of strongholds. MC stated that there was no mechanism for a legal designation but that strongholds would be a fundamental element of Government policy and, as such, would carry some authority. Members questions this both in relation to existing wind farm applications and the new proposed development at Dall Estate at Rannoch (see separate heading below). Although the potential for conflict was fully recognised, JF suggested that such an approach should not be too restrictive but should recognise the dynamic nature of land management. MC confirmed that SNH assess whether the detail of an application is detrimental to the red squirrel population rather than trying to prevent any other activities. On this basis, some activities can be compatible with the aims of site management although there are evidently cases where they are not compliant and alternatives need to be considered.

5. Project updates.

HIGHLAND

Funding News

LEADER has confirmed funding for a further 3 years. FCS, SNH and CNPA matched this funding. The total budget is just over £100,000 and will pay for a part-time project officer, the creation of a new interactive website, reasonable mileage for volunteers taking part in 'extreme squirrelling' and the creation of a series of squirrel trails in Highland. This project AKA *Feorgan Ruadh na Gaidhealtachd* will run from July 2009 until June 2012. As before, Juliet Robinson is the project officer with Ian Collier of FCS, the project manager.

Launch

We are planning to launch the new project during Red Squirrel Week in October. We hope to attract media attention by organising events all around the Highlands. The theme of the launch will be 'extreme squirrelling' which is an attempt to attract volunteers to survey/record red squirrels in the more out of the way woodlands in Highland. We will target areas such as Caithness, Sutherland, Ardnamurchan and Wester Ross.

Survey Techniques

FCS Practice Note 'Practical techniques for surveying and monitoring squirrels' is currently being revised and updated. It should be ready for distribution by October, for Red squirrel week. One of the authors, Peter Lurz is coming up to Highland to

test out the revised techniques in October. This 'test' is being done as part of a PhD study, which is taking part in Abernethy Forest, near Aviemore.

Mapping Records

Highland records continue to be mapped in-house. This has meant records have been available to FCS staff and other interested parties. However, it would be far better for all our records to be on the NBN gateway, as this is the main source of mammal & plant records nationally. As this is not occurring, we hope to get our records onto our new website so that volunteers and other interested parties can access up to date information. We hope to be able to map records at a scale of about 1:50,000.

Education and raising awareness

As mentioned above, a very significant part of the new project will be the creation of a new website. This will become our main tool for raising awareness and education. It will include a section for squirrel recording, a blog which will be updated regularly, a forum for people to exchange information and thoughts and a link section to other squirrel initiatives.

SAVING SCOTLAND'S RED SQUIRRELS

Mel Tonkin overview

1. Project Start

After a preparation period of 8 months, the *Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels* officially started in April, under the steerage of its new partnership: Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and Scottish Rural Property & Business Association (SRPBA). The Project Team now consists of a Project Manager (Mel Tonkin), a Project Officer Tayside (Ken Neil), a Project Officer North East Scotland (Hollie Walker), two contract grey squirrel controllers, Derek Wedderburn and Jack Garven and a temporary Aberdeen City Grey Squirrel Control Officer, Chris Sutherland. We are currently advertising for a seasonal grey squirrel control officer for Tayside, and a longer term control officer for Aberdeen City. Our new PO, Hollie, works out of SNH offices in Aberdeen, and is responsible for co-ordinating the work of the grey squirrel controllers, and liaison with all the stakeholders (landowners, foresters, countryside rangers, householders, community groups) and is tasked with delivering the red squirrel conservation message widely across Aberdeenshire, and in collaboration with *Feoragan Ruadh na Gaidhealtachd*, across Moray.

Consultation is underway with Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park to expand the project across to the west of Scotland, principally to work on developing a grey squirrel control network in the Loch-Earn-Callander and west Loch Lomond-North Cowal areas, as well as working to complete surveys and monitoring in target areas and promoting woodland management to favour red squirrels.

2 Fundraising Progress

SWT Fundraisers have been pursuing a vigorous and successful fundraising programme to raise the 46% funding shortfall for the Project. The shortfall now stands at £103,310, which is some 7.5% of the Project total.

3. The Project in Tayside

In Tayside the PO Tayside has been working at recruiting landowners and various environmental initiatives to take on grey squirrel control in a target zone to the south of the Highland Boundary Fault, from Comrie in western Perthshire to Montrose on the Angus coast. These estates and organisations are cooperating through SRDP funding applications guided by Ken, through operating traps provided by the Project's trap-loan scheme, by providing training (in partnership with The British Association for Shooting and Conservation) and by setting up voluntary initiatives to monitor and potentially control grey squirrels across large areas. Detail will be provided by Ken in the SSRS Tayside update.

4. The Project in North East Scotland

Hollie Walker joined the Project in early June, and immediately launched into pulling together a wide range of local interests to co-ordinate grey squirrel trapping in and around Aberdeen, through the same routes as Ken in Tayside. She has drafted survey and monitoring methodology for feeder-box surveys in the 32 10km-squares identified during the Scottish Squirrel Survey and volunteers have been recruited for 28 of the squares, with Grampian Squirrel Group taking on the co-ordination of the surveys. A grey squirrel control training workshop organised jointly with Scottish Agricultural College is to take place in the autumn. Detail will be provided by Hollie in the SSRS North East Scotland update.

5. Standard Operating Procedures for Grey Squirrel Control.

A guidance document on the standards and practices required of anyone undertaking grey squirrel control on behalf of Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels has been developed by Mairi Cole on behalf of the Project. In particular it gives guidance on practices necessary to minimise distress to grey squirrels trapped.

6. Website

SWT is currently working on a new website for the SSRS Project. We are hoping it will be up and running by mid-November.

North East Project Overview (Hollie Walker):

Staffing

8 June 2009	SWT recruited Project Officer North East – Hollie Walker
1 August 2009	SWT engaged two Rural Aberdeenshire grey squirrel controllers under contract (previously under SNH contract)
11 August 2009	SWT recruited a temporary Aberdeen City Grey Squirrel Control Officer (GSCO), pending the recruitment of a full-time GSCO for the next two and a half years.

Liaison

Hollie Walker reports to the Project Manager (Mel Tonkin) and is responsible for coordinating the work of the grey squirrel control staff and contractors; for liaising with landowners, woodland managers and gamekeepers, householders, local authority rangers, foresters, government agencies and volunteers to deliver the priorities as outlined in the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project Plan.

23 June 2009 Meeting of the local steering group for North East Scotland. Present were Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project Officer and Project Manager, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), Local Biodiversity Co-ordinator, Aberdeen University, Aberdeen Greenspace Trust, Aberdeen City Countryside Rangers, Scottish Rural Property & Business Association (SRPBA), Miranda McHardy (representing Deeside landowners). The group was briefed on SSRS priorities in the region. All present were extremely enthusiastic and supportive.

Since 8th June 2009 Hollie has had meetings with the following groups: Grampian Squirrel Group, Birse Community Trust, Forestry Enterprise, Forestry Commission, Aberdeen Council Rangers, Aberdeenshire Council, Scolty Woodland Park Association, Highland Wildlife Park, Highland Red Squirrel Project, Scottish Rural Property and Business Association, National Trust Scotland, Aberdeen Council planner, European Squirrel Initiative, Water Vole Project team at University of Aberdeen, Scottish Agricultural College, Crathes Estate, NESBReC, DAISIE, Cairngorms LBAP, Aberdeen Greenspace, Scottish Squirrel Group.

Grey Squirrel Control

- Identifying landowners and encouraging grey squirrel control target zones has been a priority, informing landowners of the benefits of SRDP funding.
- A letter is soon to go out to over 80 land owners regarding grey squirrel control, detailing how individuals can assist the Project and how the Project can assist them.
- Grey squirrel control is continuing around the periphery of Aberdeen City, Banchory and Peterculter.
- The temporary Grey Squirrel Control Officer is assisting the Project Officer with trap-loans to householders in Aberdeen who have approached the Project wishing to help in this way.
- Trapping information packs have now been produced for controllers to hand out to householders who agree to monitor traps or have trapping go ahead on their land.
- A grey squirrel control campaign document for Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire is being finalised.
- A grey squirrel control training workshop, is due on the 9th October at Craibstone. The Scottish Agricultural College is to provide the training, with assistance from the Project Officer and a Project Grey Squirrel Controller. Traps and feeders will be available for loan to the course attendees.

Feeder Box Surveys

- A document outlining a methodology for feeder-box surveys to detect presence of red or grey squirrels in 32 key 10km-squares across the region is under development. Grampian Squirrel Group is to assist co-ordination of the surveys, after a joint survey training session with the Project.

- NE LBAP has supplied a batch of 230 feeders for the surveys sourced from Wood Recyclability, a local initiative which gives meaningful employment for adults with disabilities.

Landowners Engagement

- Malcolm Hay of the landowners' group, SRPBA, conducted a questionnaire survey of 80 Aberdeenshire landowners and received responses from most of them: Most were willing or eager to co-operate with the SSRS project aims, and provided useful information on grey squirrel presence across the region. Project Officer to engage each in assisting project in whichever way is appropriate: support for trapping own estate; liaison between neighbours willing to assist one another; trap-loan; support service for those who wish to apply for Scottish Rural Development Programme funding for grey squirrel control; support to set up monitoring for grey squirrel encroachment.

Promotion

Promotion of the Project through the media is ongoing. Both the Project and the North East Project Officer appointment have been featured in many local and national papers, on TV and on Radio.

News

Recent reports from Bieldside and Cults indicate that red squirrels could already be making a come-back in Aberdeen City. This is exciting news, giving us hope that red squirrel conservation activities will rapidly make a difference.

East project Officer overview Ken Neil

This last month has seen the deadline arrive for submissions for the next RPAC in November. There have been seven submissions from estates in the area this time around. If we are successful, formal trapping will begin at the start of next year. However, some of them are already participants in the SSRS trap loan scheme and have been at work already in some key areas. Hopefully, there will be an increase in uptake for the next round of SRDP submissions if we have some success in November.

The trap loan scheme has been taken up by twenty clients in the last few months and we have about 170 traps out on loan. Some of them are at work on four sites around Comrie where they are playing a part in containing any breakouts towards the Loch Earn direction and into the National Park. There are also some in place on properties along the A923 between Blairgowrie & Dunkeld which is a key route on the priority line.

We had a very successful three days at the Scottish Game Fair with a non-stop flow of visitors to our marquee. Out of this we have found several new volunteers to both trap and survey and monitor across the region. The Dundee Food & Flower Festival and the Glamis Country Festival are coming up on the first weekend of September and we shall have a presence at both.

Work with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) is underway to develop a training programme for volunteer trappers across Tayside. We hope to hold our first session in October and over twenty people have signed up already. This will give us a group of trained trap operators who can visit gardens and small

properties to supplement the work of the GCO. The GCO (Grey Control Officer) for the region will be appointed in October and will be charged with carrying out trapping and linked duties in the north of Perthshire to begin with.

RED SQUIRRELS IN SOUTH SCOTLAND:

26 Landowners have been successfully recruited to the SRDP and are receiving funding for grey squirrel control. It is intended that a further 21 applications will be submitted for the November RPAC round. One of the biggest obstacles to date is the requirement for Field Identification Numbers for all woodlands that will be targeted for trapping. Recruitment is ongoing.

Traps continue to go out under the RSSS trap loan scheme as do blood sampling kits.

To date there are no new positives in areas outside the established pox/seropositive range.

The Pox outbreak at Queensberry is unfortunately ongoing with 28 red squirrels now confirmed to have died from the disease (by PM and EM). Research from England indicates that approximately only 10% of pox casualties are ever found as most succumb to predation or die in dreys etc and remain undiscovered. The outbreak has thus far been contained within the Estate. Buccleuch Rangers continue intensive grey squirrel control and infected red squirrels are being removed from the population. A red squirrel at Lockerbie was confirmed as having died of the Squirrelpox disease in July, not far from the first Scottish outbreak site. A second apparently diseased red squirrel was seen by a member of the public in the same garden but was never captured. Grey squirrel control by the RSSS grey squirrel control officer (GSCO) has been stepped up in the vicinity in response to this outbreak.

SWT has approved the employment of a third full time GSCO to work in the upper Nith Valley between Sanquhar and Cumnock above the Queensberry Estate. Funding for this post is currently being raised.

Four new GSCO's will also be employed under the Future Jobs Fund scheme. Two will work in the Hawick area of the Borders where we have recently gained council permission to control within the parks and other council owned properties in the town. Two will work in the lower Nith area of Dumfries and Galloway.

Work with FCS is progressing well with a commitment from the Commission to deploy their GSCO's to targeted locations out with the National Estate. Negotiations regarding the conditions of this deployment are ongoing.

RSSS is now attending SSRS steering group meetings to enhance communication and co-operation between these sister projects.

The RSSS are developing a revised method of collecting tails hairs which are key to identifying whether they come from grey or red squirrels

6. Research Update

See attached

Forest Research are to pull together a review of coning information in relation to habitat management for squirrels and Crossbills et al.

In North England, the A74 corridor has now been recognised as an important area for grey incursion northwards. As a result grant aid is now available for grey control within this area.

AP 1: Sian to send BM copy of the garden squirrels project

AP 2: all to send BM any research items so she can keep the list updated.

AP 3: IC to send BM details of survey proposal in Glen Alladale area.

AP 4: All to consider areas for future areas of research. Bring ideas to next meeting.

7. UKRSG update

Draft minutes are to be agreed soon and the final version will appear on the UKRSG web site. During the last meeting a main point of discussion was the draft "Review of red squirrel conservation activity in Northern England"

MC summarised the outcome of this and members of the SSG recognised a recommended structure which mirrored that already in place in Scotland.

The new re-vamped UKRSG website is being developed.

8. Local Group updates and discussion

Surveying and recording techniques

A revised Forestry Commission Forest Practice Note 11, " Practical Techniques for Surveying and Monitoring Squirrels" is to be published in October.

AP 5: BM to let SSG know when it is published

The main revisions relate to pre-baiting of transects and target surveying of "good" areas.

It is important to remember that rigorous protocol and repeatability are the key to good data.

AP 6: MC to chase the progress of placing all Scottish Squirrel Survey records on the NBN

Re-introductions

A discussion about the appropriateness of re-introducing red squirrels followed the presentation by JR.

AP 7: IC to invite Roy Dennis to talk to next SSG about red-squirrels re-introductions.

Many SRDP applicants were experiencing problems obtained FID numbers
AP 8: JF to take this issue to a future CONFOR meeting.

Fife Red Squirrel Group

See attached

Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group

See attached

SW has noted a number of grey corpses containing a heavy load of parasites. It was suggested that could be a result of coccidia with secondary mite infestation.

Cowal Group

See attached

Other updates

NTS

Abbie Patterson has left the NTS as is now an independent consultant.

ESI/SRPBA

See attached

9. AOB

Dall Estate

Colin Castle the SNH Area Officer involved in this proposal joined the group to hear concerns.

The proposals are for the development of a holiday complex including two golf courses adjacent to the old school. The golf course proposal is on land that could be leased from the National Forest Estate and is currently woodland. This forms part of a proposed Stronghold Woodland.

There is great concern from the SSG as a whole as 400ha squirrel habitat will be potentially lost.(approx. 12% of the SW). The loss of this habitat is the key issue

The SSG have no executive function or role from which to object. It is up to the local groups within the SSG to do so if they wish.

Grey control

There was some concern and varied opinion between the project officers about use of volunteers for trapping greys. After a lively discussion it was agreed that each area would continue with the policy that they see best (whilst adhering to current guidelines) Training and competence was seen as paramount.

MC summarised discussion at the last SSRS Steering Group meeting where SJ has outlined welfare aspects of grey squirrel control in South Scotland. This included the use of designated people to humanely despatch animals. RW challenged this stating that this was an exceptional circumstance and was not routinely offered as a service. MC indicated that this was the SSPCA understanding from the meeting and that this would need to be clarified.

AP 9: MT to clarify the approach in South Scotland.

SRDP

There was concern from some of the group that some applicants are finding the SRDP application procedure too complex. However where a Red Squirrel Conservation Officer is helping applicants the uptake of SRDP applications has been high. It was suggested that the SRDP was subject to pressure on funding and not the best way of funding grey control. The SRDP mid review was an opportunity to raise these issues. However it was concluded that any other funding pot would be subject to the same rules and eligibility selection criteria as the present SRDP.

10. DONM

Wednesday 10th March 2010, NRS, Roslin

Wednesday 1st September 2010, SNH Battleby

Ian Collier, 26th October 2009