

Scottish Squirrel Group

Wednesday 10th March 2010

Forest Research, Roslin.

Final minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) (SNH)

Ian Collier, (Secretariat) (FCS and Highland Red Squirrel Group)

Alison Graham, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Georgina Watson, FCS Ecological support officer, Forest Research

James Downie, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel Working Group.

John Massey, Cowal Red Squirrel Group

Johanna Willi, Fife Red Squirrel Group

Sian Williams, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group

Mike Libera, Crown Estates – representing Red Alert South West Scotland

Keith Morton, RSPB

Hollie Walker, Project Officer for North East Scotland - Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative

James Pringle, Scottish Rural Property and Business Association

Lewis Pate, Project Officer for Argyll & Trossachs - SSRS,

Apologies:

Richard Wales, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Jamie Farquhar, ConFor

Juliet Robinson, Red Squirrels in the Highlands

Stephanie Johnstone, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Neil Cowie, RSPB

Ken Neil, Project Officer (East) – Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels. (SSRS)

Abbie Patterson, Private Consultant

Mel Tonkin, Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

Brenda Mayle, Forest Research

1. Welcome and introductions

Lewis Pate, the Project Officer for Argyll & Trossachs - SSRS, was welcomed to the group, as was Keith Morton from the RSPB, who replaces Neil Cowie. Georgina Watson was standing in for Brenda Mayle and Alison Graham for Richard Wales. James Downie has now taken over from Gavin Skipper.

2. Minutes of previous meetings and matters arising

AP's from September 2009 meeting

- AP 1:** Sian to send BM copy of the garden squirrels project: *discharged*.
- AP 2:** all to send BM any research items so she can keep the list updated: *ongoing*
- AP 3:** IC to send BM details of survey proposal in Glen Alladale area. *ongoing*
- AP 4:** All to consider areas for future areas of research. Bring ideas to next meeting. *ongoing*

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: *discharged*
 - AP 6:** MC to chase the progress of placing all Scottish Squirrel Survey records on the NBN: *discharged*
 - AP 7:** IC to invite Roy Dennis to talk to next SSG about red-squirrels re-introductions. *ongoing*
- Many SRDP applicants were experiencing problems obtained FID numbers
- AP 8:** JF to take this issue to a future CONFOR meeting. *discharged*

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: *ongoing*

Matters arising

It was felt that another season of monitoring at Dundonnel would lead to a fuller picture of the re-introduction project.

- AP 1** IC to invite Roy Dennis to next meeting at Battleby.

The group asked if there had been any more developments with Dall Estate:

- AP 2** MC to get update.

3. Grey Squirrel Control Strategy update.

The consultation response on the Grey Control Strategy will be publicised within the next two weeks. MC will circulate the link when available. It is hoped that the resulting strategy will be on the SNH web –site in April. Again the relevant link will be circulated by MC. The contents of the strategy will be fed in to the revised SRDP in 2013.

AP3 MC to circulate links

4. Strongholds Woodlands update

The consultation response is now available on the FCS web site. The FCS intends to carry out specific actions. Two key issues are:

The FCS will make clear the principles for managing strongholds and in 2010 a stakeholder group will be convened to help develop appropriate guidance for woodland managers. In the context of this guidance the FCS will work with landowners to develop management and design statements for each of the sites, taking into account the unique conditions at each site. Where there is potential conflict with objectives for a site then locally appropriate solutions will be sought.

The group raised the issue that the key was to balance out opposing objectives however this small isolationist approach of stronghold woodlands could work well. There may be an opportunity to use the potential grey movement corridors as grey control zones.

5. Project updates.

HIGHLAND - September 2009 to March 2101

Website launch

The new website was successfully launched on 10th March 2010. It has an ordnance survey map for recording and viewing records (which can be interrogated), an events section, discussion forum, blog and guidance section.

www.redsquirrelsofthehighlands.co.uk

Survey Techniques

A survey pack has been produced for volunteer surveyors in the Highlands. Agents and forestry staff can also use it. Level 1 is for presence/absence information and Level 2 is for more detailed surveys, based upon FCS Practice Note '*Practical techniques for surveying and monitoring squirrels*' 2009. Survey training days took place in January (between snowfalls) in Munloch; more are planned in May. The purpose of the training days is to get more people recording and surveying, and where possible to identify lead volunteers.

Mapping Records

All records are displayed on the new website and are being shared with FCS Districts in Highland and with the Scottish Squirrel Survey.

Education and raising awareness

Taking groups on walks and giving talks continues as before. Increasing emphasis upon groups involved with the health agenda means more people are appreciating the value of healthy walks mixed with a focus on red squirrel conservation.

New leaflet

A new leaflet explaining the project and new website has gone to print. It will be distributed at the next meeting in September.

Grey squirrel news

We are still grey-free as far as we know. Any records of possible grey sightings are always followed up. We have a procedure for dealing with these records – speak to the recorder, visit the site, distribute flyers to encourage more recording, put out feeder with sticky blocks and traps will be used if grey hairs are identified.

SAVING SCOTLAND'S RED SQUIRRELS

1. Project Summary

A period of securing the final blocks of funding has allowed *Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels* to recruit the final staff members originally envisaged in the Project Plan. The Project Team now consists of :

- Project Manager (Mel Tonkin),
- Project Officer Tayside, Ken Neil, plus 2 summer seasonal Grey Squirrel Control Officers (GSCOs), Craig Wilson and Keith Stephen;
- Project Officer North East Scotland (Hollie Walker), two contract grey squirrel controllers, Derek Wedderburn and Jack Garven and an Aberdeen City GSCO, James Kennedy;
- Project Officer Argyll & Trossachs, Lewis Pate.
- We have also recruited a further GSCO for *Red Squirrels in South Scotland* (RSSS), to cover the upper Nith valley in the area to the north and west of the squirrelpox outbreak area at Thornhill. This brings the Project Partnership's provision to RSSS to one Project Officer (Richard Wales) plus 3 GSCOs (Brian Gibson, Ian Kerr and Jim McColm) to add to RSSS's second Project Officer provided by the Southern Upland Partnership.

The SSRS website was launched in early November 2009 (www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk), although some work remains to fully develop every page and keep the site updated.

Plans are underway to improve the online reporting of squirrel sightings on a recording form, which will be located on the Scottish Wildlife Trust website, with links through from the SSRS website and the Scottish Squirrel Survey (SSS) website. It will replace the reporting form on the SSS website, although users will still be able to navigate easily via the SSS site to the new reporting page. The SSRS Project manager will shortly be calling for squirrel records collated by local squirrel groups to complete the long-delayed updating of the Scottish Squirrel Database.

SSRS's first annual Project Conference was held at Battleby on 10 February 2010. It was attended by 45 delegates consisting of staff, contractors and volunteers from SSRS, RSSS and *Feoragan Ruadh na Gaidhealtachd*, local squirrel groups, Project Partners, Forestry Commission Scotland GSCOs and other FC staff working closely with the Project, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park ranger and ecologist and colleagues from British Association of Shooting and Conservation, National Trust for Scotland and Red Squirrel Survival Trust. The day focussed on the practicalities of trapping and surveying of squirrels, with an emphasis on the importance of rigorous reporting of effort and results.

Most of the Project's procedures and mechanisms for managing and reporting are now in place, and the coming year (2010/11) will focus on establishing grey squirrel control and associated survey and monitoring in the target areas and critically reviewing the results of this to inform trapping strategy and tactics for the following year (2011/12). The grey squirrel control and monitoring protocol is yet to be finalised, pending feedback from UK experts on squirrel monitoring.

We will shortly be producing Project banners and leaflets, the development of which has been unavoidably delayed by health problems in SWT's Communications department. This will include an occasional newsletter which will be available via the website or by email to subscribers. We also plan to produce an update of the RSSS booklet "Woodlands for Red Squirrels" suitable for the whole of Scotland, as informal guidance to landowners wishing to do small-scale management to encourage red squirrels, and giving advice on where to go for more detailed information. Forestry Commission Scotland will be consulted to make sure advice is complementary to their own advice notes.

2. Fundraising Progress

SWT Fundraisers have been successful in raising the 46% funding shortfall that the Project started out with at its launch, subject to approval from the funders of the final grant.

3. The Project in Tayside

In Tayside Ken has recruited 16 estates to apply for Scottish Rural Development Programme funding for grey squirrel control in Tayside's target zone to the south of the Highland Boundary Fault, 8 of which have already received approval for the 2010/11 season. Several more applications are being developed for the summer Regional Proposal Assessment Committee.

The trap-loan scheme has over 160 traps out on loan to more than 20 estates and individuals.

The winter season GSCO has been trapping in areas around Blairgowrie – Dunkeld and Dunkeld-Pitlochry, where 147 grey squirrels were trapped between October 09 and end of January 2010. He will continue in this area for

the first part of the summer, while the second seasonal GSCO will cover the area from Blairgowrie to Kirriemuir initially.

A trapping training day was held at Trochry in October in partnership with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. Further training sessions are planned.

Negotiations with Scottish Native Woodlands has led to grey squirrel being included in the invasive species monitoring and control strategy of the Tay Western River Catchments project.

Monitoring by hair-trap feeder-box operated by volunteer landowners in two areas at risk from grey squirrel incursion is under way.

An alert was sounded in September when 3 independent grey squirrel sightings were reported to the Blair Atholl Estate Ranger from the area around Bruar, the furthest north that grey squirrel has been reported in this area. Despite a local publicity campaign and traps being on the ready, nothing further was seen of the animals.

In the coming year the PO will develop and active survey and monitoring programme, to be carried out by volunteers where possible, or by Project staff if necessary in key areas.

4. The Project in North East Scotland

(see below)

5. The Project in Argyll & Trossachs

Lewis Pate has been appointed as the new SSRS Project Officer for this area and started work on 22 February 2010. He is based at the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park headquarters in Balloch. He will 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.

Mel Tonkin
Project Manager

North East Scotland Update:

Grey Squirrel Control

- SRDP Agent ID has come through for PO, now have to find time to start the applications
- PO has contacted 70+ landowners across NE Scotland
- Strutt and Parker Property Managers based in Banchory have sent out 50+ letters to householders in Kincardine Estate, informing them of the project, the need for sightings and the trap loan scheme. Data collation of the trapping through the SNH contracts has taken a long time to put

together. It is now almost finalised and will be ready to put into GeoView very soon. PO is currently producing a land owner database (adapted from Leys Estate database); it is to include all relevant squirrel information about each estate, what they are currently doing to conserve the red squirrel and the relevant contacts. This will then be mapped out in colour codes on an OS map, using SNH's GeoView system.

- 07/12/09 Grey Squirrel Control Officer for Aberdeen City recruited
- 19 current total traps on loan in Aberdeen City A grey squirrel control campaign document for Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire has now been finalised.
- The grey squirrel control training workshop on the 9th October at Craibstone was a success with 10 people attending from rural Aberdeenshire (Ages 30+- 60+) and 8 people attended from Aberdeen City (Ages 20-60+).
- We now have permission to trap in council parks and woodlands. Including the Deeside Line. James Kennedy is working closely with Ian Talboys and the ranger service to get things underway.
- Discussions have gone ahead with the Forestry Commission regarding their contribution to grey squirrel control and a positive out come should be coming soon...

Feeder Box Surveys and monitoring

- 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.
- Survey Workshop 14 November at Craibstone- Scottish Agricultural College. 35 Attendees. 19 from Aberdeenshire, ages 20- 60+ and 16 from Aberdeen City. Ages 20- 60+.
- Number of volunteers willing to help: **74** (all responded to recent emails) + 25 children from Alford School and 25 from Banchory Primary
out of these volunteers...
Survey Workshop attendees: **35**
Volunteers with squares allocated, Total: **21**
Total squares covered so far: **16**
- 03/02/10 Grampian Squirrel Group and a work Experience Volunteer visited a school and volunteers in Alford. Survey training, info about the project and equipment was given. Now planned for FC Ranger to do the same at Banchory Primary.

- Squirrel Surveying Workshop for Rangers has been organised by the PO with assistance from the Forestry Commission and Scottish Agricultural College. Friday 30 April, 10am – 1pm Meeting place: SAC Aberdeen, Ferguson Building (Education Centre), Craibstone Estate, Bucksburn, Aberdeen AB21 9YA. Open to all Rangers across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. See below for further details.

Hollie Walker
Project Officer for North East Scotland

RED SQUIRRELS IN SOUTH SCOTLAND:

See attached report

6. Research Update

See attached report. Georgina Watson summarised new items that had been received by Brenda. The group was encouraged to let Brenda know of any additions to the research update when appropriate.

7. UKRSG update

Draft minutes are to be agreed soon and the final version will appear on the UKRSG web site. After the last meeting in London in January an afternoon workshop was held to look at red squirrel survey and monitoring. One early outcome of this meeting was the need to identify/agree a strategy for data management of records.

8. Data management

The Scottish Squirrel Survey (2004-2007) updated the Scottish Squirrel Database and collated records since 2000. However, this was a discrete project which was completed in 2007. Since then, MT has been hosting the site to allow members of the public to submit data to the Database. Unfortunately, due to a change in post, there has been limited time to validate and upload records submitted since June 2008.

MC has been considering how best to develop the resource and services required. A key question in this is whether the data is used and, if so, how best to record and store it. Responses round the table indicated that few people accessed the data, preferring to use local repositories for their information. Ayrshire were the exception to this as there is no local record centre to assist. However, not all SSG members were present at meeting.

Clarification is required on the following:

- What data is required?
- What management is needed?
- The Protocol of data usage i.e. frequency of record submission to main collection point, verification of data, etc.
- Is the name “Scottish Squirrel Survey” appropriate?

SNH have contracted Peter Lurtz and John Gurnell to review the data requirement for squirrel records. This short contract is due to finish in March. It will look at whether the collection of squirrel data will result in a useful tool for conservation and future action. Results of this and agreement on data management may feed in to revised SRDP due in 2013.

AP 4 MC will circulate a short questionnaire to clarify usage of the database as a basis for deciding how to take his forward.

9. Local Group updates and discussion

Enquires about potential re-introductions were being received by many local groups.

Commenting on windfarm applications (in terms of impact on red squirrels) was a key area of work for some groups: namely Ayrshire

Holly was disappointed at lack of success with WIAT application under Forests for People for the squirrel hide at Scolty Wood. This was despite significant input from the Scolty Woodland Park Association

Concern about the lack of claim payment for grey control contracts under SRDP. The claims made last March (2009) have still not been paid.

There is general concern that local authorities were perhaps not aware of the change in planning policy in which SNH are now only required to comment on planning applications if these pertain to national heritage issues of national importance. Responsibility now lies with Local Authorities when it comes to commenting on applications pertaining at all other levels. There is concern that until these changes are understood and accepted by all, a lack of objection from SNH might suggest that there are no serious environmental concerns, whereas an objection from a local authority might not have the same gravitas. The group were asked to supply examples of cases where we thought the change in policy has allowed a development to go ahead with adverse effects on the environment/wildlife.

10. AOB

None noted

11. DONM

Wednesday 1st September 2010, SNH Battleby

Ian Collier, 14th May 2010