

all about ❖❖

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RED SQUIRREL

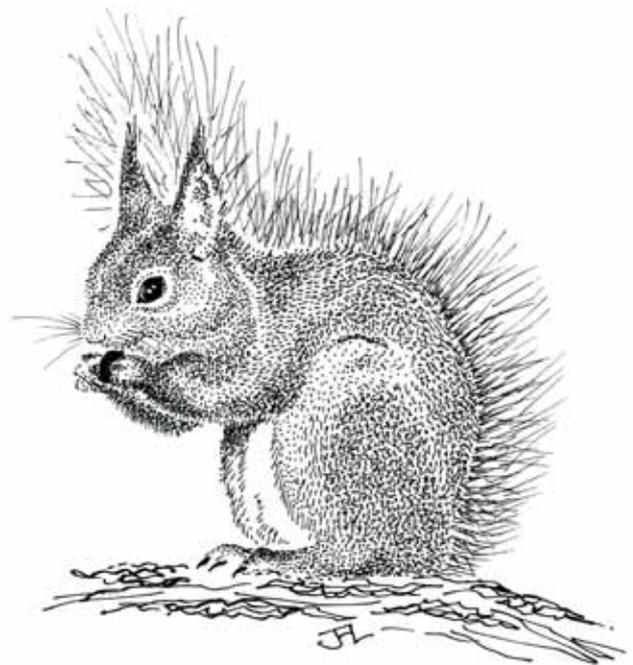
Sciurus Vulgaris

Red squirrels have deep reddish brown fur, large tufty ears which are more noticeable in winter, and big bushy tails, which can bleach in the spring. Adults grow up to 24cm long and weigh about 350g. A squirrel's tail is almost as long as its body – about 17.5cm. To help replace losses in British red squirrel numbers, squirrels from Scandinavia were introduced into Scotland early last century. These squirrels were darker and their ears and tails did not bleach. Both kinds have interbred, so now a variety of colours can be seen.

Lifestyle

Red squirrels like to eat the small seeds from the cones of Scots pine, larch and spruce. They also like to eat hazel nuts if and when these are available. Chewed pine cones and broken nut shells (often found on tree stumps) show you where squirrels have been eating. Red squirrels are clever little animals which can tell good nuts from rotten nuts. They can tell which nuts to open by weighing

them in their paws. Squirrels also eat tree flowers and the shoots of trees. Sometimes squirrels strip bark from the tops of trees, probably to get at the sweet sap beneath. The reasons for this



are unknown, but it might be because of high squirrel numbers and/or food shortages.

Many people think that squirrels hibernate. In fact, squirrels continue to forage throughout the winter, although

they do gather and store food ready for the winter.

During the breeding season (which usually starts in January) you can sometimes see squirrels leaping from tree to tree and running up and down and round tree trunks. These may be mating chases.

Female squirrels usually have one litter each year, with three young squirrels in an average family.

A squirrel's nest is called a drey. Red squirrels build their dreys in forks or hollows of trees. The dreys, which are made of twigs and leaves, are lined with soft hair and moss.

Where do red squirrels live?

Red squirrels live in all types of woodlands and forests. In Scotland, they are found in highest numbers in pinewoods. Woods which are particularly good habitats for red squirrels are those which contain a variety of species of conifer trees. The cones and seeds of these trees ripen at different times of year and provide a continuous supply of food. In a wood with only one species of tree there can be problems. If the trees have several bad seed years in a row, when not much is produced, the supply of food for the squirrels can run out.

Threats to the red squirrel

Red squirrels are now a threatened species in some areas. Red squirrels are the only species of squirrel native to this country and used to be a common sight throughout Britain. However, today they are found mainly in Scotland. Over the

last hundred years, their numbers have fallen a great deal. The reasons for this are not known and scientists are still studying this problem. Often the decrease in red squirrels is accompanied by an increase in grey squirrels.

Grey squirrels, the larger, heavier North American cousins of red squirrels, were introduced into Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. The number of grey squirrels is increasing. In Scotland, there are now about 200,000 grey squirrels but only about 120,000 red squirrels. Grey squirrels are less choosy in what they eat, so when there is a shortage of food they can usually cope better than red squirrels. Female red squirrels which don't get enough to eat may be unable to breed. If there are no young squirrels being born, the number of red squirrels will fall.

What is being done to help the red squirrel?

Looking after our woodlands and forests is vital for the survival of the red squirrel. New forests are planted with a variety of species of trees, including Scots pine and Norway spruce which are preferred by red squirrels. Many of the recently established forests in north Scotland are pinewoods, which will help to ensure the squirrels' survival in the future. In some areas, corridors of trees are being planted to connect one wood to another to allow red squirrels to travel over a wider area in search of food. Grazing animals are being kept out of native woodlands, allowing young trees to

grow.

Red squirrels have been included in the Scottish Natural Heritage Species Action Plan and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

How you can get involved

Become involved in a monitoring programme (a survey). Monitoring programmes are run by Biological Recording Centres (often museums) and by the Biological Recording in Scotland Campaign (BRISC). Send your records off to your local museum each year.

Join a group which is concerned about wildlife. One group is WATCH Scotland: the junior section of the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

To find out more about visiting a forest, contact your local Forest Enterprise Office or local Countryside Ranger Service.

Organisations

Forestry Commission, 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh EH12 7AT

Scottish Wildlife Trust, Cramond House, Kirk Cramond, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS

A poster of a red squirrel is available free of charge from either Scottish Natural Heritage or the Forestry Commission: Scottish Natural Heritage, Publications Section, Battleby, Redgordton Perth PH1 3EW.

Glossary

Habitat

A habitat is the place where an animal lives. The habitat provides the animal with the food and shelter which it needs to survive.

Native

Native is a word used to describe a species of animal or plant which is found naturally and has not been introduced by man.

Threatened species

An animal or a plant that is in danger of becoming extinct in some areas where it lives.

**SCOTTISH
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Forestry Commission
Scotland

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