

Scottish Squirrel Group

Tuesday 11th March 2008

Scottish Natural Heritage

Battleby

Final minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) (SNH)

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

Mel Tonkin, Scottish Squirrel Survey Co-ordinator

Jim Downie, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel Working Group

Brian Tasker, Dundee City Ranger

Juliet Robinson, Red Squirrels in the Highlands

Paul Gallagher, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Karen Pickles, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group

Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative

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

Ken Neil, Tayside Squirrel Officer

Sian Williams, Red Squirrel Stronghold Project Officer

Abbie Patterson, National Trust for Scotland

Richard Wales, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Shona Munro, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group

John Massey, Cowal Red Squirrel Group

Brenda Mayle, Forest Research

Louise Garthwaite, Perth and Kinross Squirrel Group

Stephen Willis, Grampian Squirrel Group

Stuart Brookes, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Richard Pow, Forestry Commission England

Apologies:

Paddy Garthwaite, Perth & Kinross Squirrel Group

Gordon Patterson, Forestry Commission Scotland

Jamie Farquhar, ConFor

Rhiannon Hatfield, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

James Pringle, Border Squirrel Management Group

Penny Johnstone, SSPCA

Peter Etheridge, Fife Squirrel Group

1. Welcome and introductions

The group welcomed Stephen Willis, the new Grampian Red Squirrel Officer, John Downie the new contact at Trossachs and Loch Lomond National Park, and Richard Pow, Regional Development Officer from Forestry Commission England.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

Action points from March 2005:

AP12: MC to invite North England squirrel contact to next meeting: *Discharged*

Action Points from September 2005:

AP4: MC to invite UKRSG up to a future next SSG meeting: *Carried over*

Action Points from September 2006 meeting

AP 5: BM to supply reporting sheet in DEFRA grey squirrel control project to members of the SSG: *Carried over*

Action points from January 2007 meeting

AP 5: MC to contact Pest Controllers organisation to clarify the law and to pursue the issue of the trap manufacturers including a notification of the legality about releasing grey squirrels when selling traps. *Carried over*

There was an agreement that more effort was required to control grey squirrels in Cumbria, as this is the source of grey squirrels moving up into south Scotland.

AP 6: MC to take this concern to the UKRSG: *Discharged*.

AP 7: MC to request detailed map of GB Squirrelpox cases to date from the UKRSG: *Carried over*

AP 8: MT to send Squirrelpox distribution papers to all: *Discharged*

Action Points from meeting on 12th September 2007

AP 1: IC to circulate BM e mail regarding use of warfarin and attach to minutes: *discharged* .

Warfarin

AP 2: MC to contact JNCC to ascertain what actions were required to extend the use of warfarin to other areas of Scotland, see below: *discharged*:

Non – Native Group

AP 3: MC to check with Angela Robinson regarding the position of grey squirrel within this group: *ongoing*

Guidance notes

AP 4: All: If anybody has any comments or case studies relating to Guidance note 33 ('Forest Operations and red squirrels in Scottish Forests – the law and good practice'.) please send to IC as soon as possible and he will then send on to GP; *discharged, (comments received only from Dumfries and Galloway)*

Communications

AP 5: IC to send copy of the SSG minutes to James Joicey in North England to maintain contact with North England: *discharged*

Habitat

AP 6: All to let SW know any thoughts on including large areas of SS (apparently not a good source of food?) as stronghold sites: *superseded.*

Research

AP 7: All each website managed by SSG members to include links to research references highlighted in Brenda's e mail. Link to be included in UKRSG web site.
MC to action: *discharged*

Up to date literature list:

AP 8: All to consider volunteering for this important task. Main list to be hosted by UKRSG web site **MC** to action: *discharged*

Squirrel Conference, Dundee

AP 9: MT to produce conference proceedings within the next six months: *ongoing.*

UKRSG

AP 10: IC to circulate latest minutes to SSG. *discharged*

Release of captive greys

AP 11: MC to take SSG concern to the next UKRSG meeting in October. *discharged*

Matters arising

Stewart Pritchard, SNH Statutory Framework Team, was contacted and asked to clarify the legal position regarding the use of warfarin to control grey squirrels. He advised that the Warfarin Order (1973) was not the legislation which needed changed. It appears that the Food and Environment Protection Act (1985) allows for changes to use in areas currently occupied by red squirrels and pine marten but, subject to the subordinate regulations, may require Ministerial approval. It may also be advisable to separate warfarin use for tree protection from use for protecting red

squirrels in order to clarify the legal position fully. Part of the 1985 Act contains a section for giving protection against “harmful creatures” which may assist with this. Stewart was still investigating the conditions imposed by the Control of Pesticides Regulations (1986), (CoPR) which are subordinate to the FEPA (1985). These may specify further restrictions or conditions on the use of warfarin for grey squirrel control relevant to the current interest.

Under current legislation, it was agreed at a previous meeting that the 10km data for red squirrels was incomplete and any changes proposed on the basis of this likely to be inaccurate or misleading. The choices, therefore, appear to be to collate more data to provide a more accurate basis for revising the existing map or to pursue changes in the law, subject to the conditions and restrictions which are imposed under the CoPR. The Group queried where this change would be applied and it was accepted that few areas would benefit from this change. It was not proposed to take this matter further.

There was general concern that some pest controllers appeared to be using warfarin in plastic boxes that could be easily accessed by squirrels. However, there was also some question as to whether the pesticide in question was warfarin or a second generation pesticide regulated through different (animal welfare) legislation.

AP 1: BM to check with the Pest Control Association

Licensing the release of grey squirrels:

MC took the concerns of the SSG to the last meeting of the UKRSG. Natural England (NE) have issued a statement in response to these concerns. This can be viewed on their website (http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/wildlife-management-licensing/docs/Release_of_sch_9_species_position_statement.pdf).

They consider that the licensing of grey squirrel releases is justified in order to release rehabilitated animals in areas remote from red squirrel conservation. Licences are also required for any research projects involving the release of grey squirrels. However, few licenses have been issued and these will be tightly controlled to ensure that it will not be allowed in areas which will impact on red squirrels, e.g. North England. This did not allay the concerns of some members of the SSG who remain concerned at the message that this sends to the public about grey squirrels.

3. Membership of SSG

No points raised

4. Local Squirrel Group updates

See local updates attached.

Aryshire Red Squirrel Group has produced a Red Squirrel and Woodland Education Pack. If any body wishes a copy can they please request by e-mail.

The Cowal Group will produce a report on the use of rope bridges.

AP2: JM will circulate to SSG members

5. Establishing and monitoring red squirrel populations

See Mel Tonkin's summary attached.

If group members require local maps please let Mel know. The next map update will be in a year's time.

6. Prioritising Woods where conservation work will be focused

See Sian William's presentation attached.

After a lengthy detailed discussion, the points raised can be summarised as follows:

- Information on tree species (incl. large/small seeded broadleaves) in the Candidate Stronghold Sites (CSS) will need to be clarified during consultation;
- The timing of the consultation is crucial and the group advised that owners need to be contacted prior to any consultation material being issued to the public. This may mean a consultation will have to be deferred until this has been completed;
- There were questions about the consistency of criteria used re grey squirrel presence. The overall 'strategy' accepted that grey squirrels would infiltrate most woodlands over time but the method focussed on areas which were remote from grey squirrels currently. This approach needed to be clarified/justified;
- Presentation is the key to success. Strongholds need to be put into context of an overall squirrel strategy in Scotland, including the function of the remaining Priority Woodlands and grey squirrel control, to justify the selection of 20 sites. The document also needs to set out the legal aspects of strongholds and the implications for developers or forest managers. It also needs to include some reference to the implications for resources and the emphasis which will be put on strongholds relative to other initiatives;
- It was felt that incorrect data used when identifying woodlands that contain red squirrels for the selection of candidate stronghold sites e.g. Cowal peninsula and mid Dumfries and Galloway. This needs to be resolved during consultation;
- The candidate list includes woodlands that may have a small, relatively fragile population of reds. The group suggested that a large robust population may be easier to sustain closer to grey presence rather than a small fragile population a great distance from greys. This may result in low-density populations being protected at the expense of high-density pops out-with strongholds (due to strongholds being large blocks of conifer with low density red populations);
- There was some concern that woodland networks were split arbitrarily due to the available habitat data. There was, therefore, the option to get feedback on areas which may be split or lumped;
- The document needs to reflect the fact that the list of candidate sites are only a proposal. Flexibility and pragmatism will be used for the final selection;
- The group queried whether the process had selected stronghold sites or red squirrel refuges and offered the latter as an alternative title to help set the context;
- The Keilder network should not be split Scotland/England; it is a network spanning across the two countries. Arran should be considered separate to mainland site selection;

7. Improving woodlands for red squirrels

No points raised

8. Minimise or reduce threat from grey squirrels – Squirrelpox virus – update and action

The new map showing the distribution of squirrelpox virus (October 2006 – February 2008) will be placed on the UKRSG web site ASAP.

9. Research into red squirrel conservation – update

See update from Brenda Mayle attached.

A revision of the FC Practice note 11 'Practical Techniques for Surveying and monitoring squirrels' is to be published soon.

No results are available as yet from the contract with Central Science Lab to identify the most humane method of culling grey squirrels.

10. Implement the strategy locally with central support – local group support

The proposed completion of the National Survey and raising awareness of squirrels by the use of Red Squirrel Conservation Officers has been overtaken by events:

- Government spending review;
- Lack of match funding being secured at this time;
- Finalisation of the Species Action Framework.

SB outlined the revised way forward. This took into account comments received, both by SNH and SWT, on the previous proposal and aimed to bring all squirrel conservation issues together. This project will offer a way forward for Squirrel Conservation in Scotland supported by SWT and SNH.

The proposal is for a 4 year project with Red Squirrel Conservation Officers, Grey Squirrel Control Officers and a Co-ordinator that will be wide ranging. It will include:

- Grey squirrel control;
- Survey – validation of key sites and wider surveillance of squirrels in other locations;
- Management Guidance, including support for private landowners on Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and demonstration woodlands illustrating the benefits of the techniques and policies available;

The project is likely to require c. £500K per annum.

It is intended that the project commences ASAP and, whilst the intention is to capitalise on the expertise available, existing RSCOs will need to apply for the new posts.

MT is working on an outline report which will be completed by the 21st March.

AP3 MT to complete report by the 21st March

AP 4 MC to circulate to interested parties and arrange a discussion meeting in April.

Comments from the meeting included:

- Consideration should go to a part time RSCO to allow funds to go further and savings go to more targeted projects within the overall plan;
- Such a large funding package may compromise or damage any other funding bids by smaller groups. SB responded that this was the reason that it would be beneficial for all to support a single package and not compete for limited resources.

11. Promoting the strategy and raising awareness of red squirrel conservation

No points raised

12. Monitor and assess progress of the plan - local groups views

No points raised

13. UKRSG update

See grey re- habilitation above. No other points raised.

14. AOB

None.

15. DONM

3rd September 2008, at Forest Research, Roslin.

Ian Collier

20th May 2008