

Scottish Squirrel Group

2nd May 2006

**Battleby
Scottish Natural Heritage**

Final Minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) (SNH)

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

Gordon Patterson, FCS

Jamie Farquhar, Forestry & Timber Association

Elly Hamilton, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Mel Tonkin, Scottish Squirrel Survey Co-ordinator

Gavin Skipper, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel Working Group

Brenda Mayle, Forest Research

John Wyman, Dundee City Ranger

Brian Tasker, Dundee City Ranger

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

James Pringle, Border Squirrel Management Group

Abbie Patterson, National Trust for Scotland

Colin McInnes, Moredon Institute

Juliet Robinson, Highland Red Squirrel Group

Ann-Marie MacMaster, Red Squirrels in South Scotland

Paddy Garthwaite, Perth and Kinross Squirrel Group

Louise Garthwaite, Perth and Kinross Squirrel Group

Stuart Brookes, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Paul Gallagher, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Apologies:

Jay Burkinshaw, Perth & Kinross Squirrel Group

Janie Steele, North Argyll Squirrel Group

Karen Pickles, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group

Neil Cowie RSPB

Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative

1. Welcome and introductions

The group welcomed Juliet Robinson the newly appointed Red Squirrel Conservation Officer for the Highlands and Ann-Marie MacMaster as the new Red Squirrel Conservation Officer for Dumfries and Galloway.

Paddy and Louise Garthwaite attended, representing the Perth and Kinross group. Invited guests were Colin McInnes representing the Moredun institute and Stuart Brookes and Paul Gallagher from Scottish Wildlife Trust.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

Action points from October 2004:

AP11 Nature Conservation Act : *Agenda item.*

Action points from March 2005:

AP5 IC to contact Gordon Patterson re Guidance Note on woodland management for red squirrels: *Discharged A practice guide is being developed.*

AP6 MT to circulate bibliography of all literature available relating to red squirrels: *discharged*

AP8 MC to find out further details regarding Non Native Group: *Ongoing*

AP12 MC to invite Richard Pow to next meeting: *Ongoing*

Action Points from September 2005:

AP1 EH to circulate sample letter: *discharged*

AP2 All groups to write to SE ASAP: *discharged*

AP3 MC to contact UKRSG regarding EH request: *discharged*

AP4 MC to invite UKRSG up to our next SSG meeting: (a joint SSG/UKRSG meeting at Battleby): *to be invited to another SSG meeting soon.*

AP5 MC to contact Chris MacGregor to ascertain the full picture: *Chris has now moved MT; to confirm new contact details.*

AP6 MT to contact potential key players in the areas of South Lanarkshire and Argyll: *discharged.*

AP7 IC to check how final minutes are progressing and circulate when they are available: *discharged.*

AP8 MC to book Battleby for the next SSG and invite UKRSG to attend as a joint SSG/UKRSG meeting: *discharged and see AP 4 above*

AP9 Mel to circulate a list of ideas and proposals for comment: *ongoing*

AP10 MT to issues new maps: *discharged*

AP11 IC to establish contacts in each Forest District and Conservancy: *discharged*

AP12 MC to contact FCS to explore the initial acceptance in principle from FCS: *discharged – red squirrel action plan being drawn up (agenda item 6)*

AP13 All to comment on the draft survey strategy to MT by end of September:
discharged

AP14 IC to ascertain whether transect surveys are fundable through SFGS; yes, see
guidance note 30 on FCS website under SFGS: discharged

AP15 All local groups to submit current squirrel records to Mel by end of October:
discharged

AP16 MC to chase guidance note: *discharged*

AP17 MC to send out questionnaire to local groups: *ongoing*

AP 1 from May 06 meeting: IC to circulate FCS contact list.

The following changes were requested to the last minutes:

Geva Blackett represents the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, not Invercauld Estate.

The FTA expressed disapproval that the grey squirrel is not classed as a predator under the Forestry Commission Grant Scheme. The point was discussed and it was concluded that the Scottish Group did not concur with the FTA's viewpoint.

Moreover, as the point was originally raised in connection with the SFGS, which is now closed, the Group agreed to note the FTA position but did not support any action.

AP 2 IC to change on file copy

3. Local Squirrel Group updates

Written reports were received from Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel in South Scotland Project, Dundee Red Squirrel Project and these are attached to these minutes. Members were asked to submit written reports if possible as this allowed more discussion on specific topics.

In addition to the written responses the following reports were verbally presented and in addition the following points were raised:

Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park – Red Squirrel Working Group

The local group report referred to the Trossachs /Queen Elizabeth Park district where it is **suspected** that pine martens **might** be the main reason why greys are declining so rapidly. The SSG stresses that caution should be exercised when making statements about predation by pine martens. A decrease in grey squirrel numbers locally could be linked to a number of causes and without robust evidence of a link could not be attributed to pine marten presence. Other members of the SSG noted similar reductions in grey squirrel numbers in other areas which did not support pine marten. A link with mast production was suggested as the underlying causal factor.

The group is proposing to commence a survey of squirrels using feeders and a team of volunteers recording activity at the feeders at set times. The pros and cons of this proposal were discussed. SSG advice was that surveying in dense conifer plantations and where the ground is very steep, the preferred surveying method should be feeding cone transects.

AP 3: EH to circulate feeder box details to all. EH to circulate advice on feeding cone transects.

Ayrshire Group

The FCS (South and Central Conservancies) have provided funding for this year that allows the project to proceed. There is still a gap for the second year but FCS have submitted an application for the following year. The group is now putting things in to place and hope to have a Red Squirrel Conservation Officer in Ayrshire from July onwards. Four Squirrelpox virus tests on grey squirrels from the Dalmellington area (next to Kyle/Carsphairn priority Wood) were all negative.

Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group.

Paddy and Louise attended on behalf of Jay Birkinshaw. There have been many telephone calls concerning planning applications and destruction of squirrel habitat and the group have made representations to the planning department as a result. Grey trapping has been of limited success and there have been problems for guidance on how to dispose of squirrel carcasses. The group wrote to the Abbey Building Society complaining about the use of grey squirrels in their recent advertisement campaign. The group received an apology and a cheque for £500. It appears other groups received similar letters and a cheque for the same amount. Abbey has stated they had tried to use red squirrels but were unable to source any captive reds for the advert. The advert was planned run was only till the end of April and has now finished.

Highland Red Squirrel Group

Juliet Robinson, the new Red Squirrel Conservation Officer for the Highlands, is now in post based at FCS Dingwall Conservancy. The first task will be to set up a volunteer survey team, led by regional surveyors. She suggested the formation of group, to correspond electronically, for all the Conservation Officers to keep in touch.

4. UKRSG update

See draft minutes distributed prior to this meeting and full minutes on JNCC web site

5. Membership of UKRSG

It was agreed that there is a need for representation of the Scottish Groups on the UKRSG (in addition to the SSG as at present). The representation would improve cross border linkage, reflect countrywide group views, ensure strategic input and

national co-ordination on the ground. It was felt none of the above was happening at present.

AP 4: All to make representation to Mairi Cole so she can take views down to next UKRSG meeting on 23rd May English Nature Office, London.

6. Red Squirrel Action Plan

The draft Action Plan had been circulated for consideration prior to the meeting. Subsequent discussion focussed on the following main points:

General points:

- There was general concern that the key actions were not ordered to reflect their importance. It was suggested that the plan should be re-structured to place grey squirrel control at the front. The Action Plan Working group responded that the Plan had been structured around the format of the Scottish Squirrel Strategy, published by the SSG in 2004, and that actions, as presented, did not reflect any importance ranking. However, it was agreed that the introduction should state this clearly and set out grey squirrel control as the most urgent action. It was agreed that a Gantt chart, setting out timing for each action, would be a useful addition to the plan.

The plan delivery options should be realistic within the five year timescale but should not aim for too low a standard of conservation action. The options for different levels of delivery should be set out clearly for the Minister with an assessment of how each would benefit red squirrel conservation. A recommendation should be made for a standard of commitment which will support enhancement of the current situation for red squirrels.

- One person /organisation should be identified to oversee the delivery and monitoring of the plan.
- There was general concern that the consultation period was not clear.

Specific points on key actions:

- National Survey

The Action Plan identified the involvement of volunteers to deliver the National Survey. However, it was felt that this action should be structured (and costed) to rely on professional delivery with contributions from volunteer groups where possible.

- Prioritising woods where conservation work will be focused:

The categorisation of priority woodlands for future conservation action needed to reflect the current distribution of red squirrels nationally. Defendability or cost-effectiveness should not be the sole criteria for selection of the top ranked woodlands. Identification of these rankings needed to be linked clearly to future management action, i.e. management planning, to ensure that the targets for each were clear (tie to the standard of care under general points and actions under the following section)

- Grey squirrel control

Much of BM work has focused on this Red Squirrel Action plan plus first stage of the fertility control studies.

It was noted that applications for SFGS were now closed. Given this, it was requested that funding for grey squirrel control should not rely solely on grant aid.

- Contribute to research in to red conservation:

It was suggested that further research on habitat management for red squirrels may be beneficial but there was no clear suggestion on specific topics. Grey squirrel behaviour in sitka dominated woodland was suggested.

AP 5: BM to consider and send suggestions to GP

- Promote Strategy locally

An action for extending the use of educational material was suggested, e.g. extension of the 'Nutcase' resource from Red Squirrels in South Scotland Project.

- Plan monitoring

The Action plan should be subject to an annual review.

7. Squirrelpox virus – update and action

There are two strands of work with the virus namely monitoring of blood samples in greys and research into the virus itself. Lack of funding is a big issue as well as the trapping of greys to get the samples

Research on detection of the virus in tissues has been progressed considerably and there is now a method available. However, a transmission study is urgently required as it is not clear how the virus is passed either between grey squirrels or from grey squirrels to red squirrels. When transmission route is identified, clear guidance can be issued to local groups and other stakeholders concerning appropriate field methods in areas where the virus is suspected. This is particularly important as grey squirrels do not show symptoms of the disease and it could be passed undetected.

It was stressed that priority be given to collecting samples from areas where the virus is suspected to be present. This is currently where grey squirrels are entering Scotland from north England. However, it has to be recognised that wider surveillance is required to detect any novel cases out-with this area.

Comments from the Group reflected a lack of knowledge about squirrelpox.

AP6: MT to send IC copy of Squirrelpox virus note for circulation to members.

8. Scottish Squirrel Survey/Co-ordinator update and Scottish Squirrel Survey Conference update.

See update attached from MT.

The South Argyll group will soon be up and running whereas the north Argyll area is very fragmented and may prove more difficult to establish.

The meeting was reminded of how useful the NBN network is, particularly when searching for accurate records of squirrel distribution.

AP 6 MT to circulate use of volunteer policy and procedures.

The proposed survey conference was discussed in depth. Main conclusions were

- The conference should be one day in duration and involve the use of workshops to cover relevant themes.
- It was agreed that the momentum of the surveying project should be maintained with emphasis on local group-led activities.

A change in date in light of possible winter weather conditions was requested.

The audience was seen to be:

- key players within Local Biodiversity Action Plans
- local squirrel groups
- Local Authorities
- Woodland managers

Workshops themes should include practical activities required by local groups, for example grey squirrel control, fund raising and community involvement.

Suggestions for talks should included:

- RSSS: 15 years of experience, development and change
- Red Squirrel Action update
- Dundee Project: engaging the public
- Anglesey case study: Craig Shuttleworth
- Summary of local groups activity by Mel Tonkin
- Squirrelpox virus: Colin McInnes (Moredun Institute) spread, research, control, disease containment (link with RSSS)

AP7 All to send any additional comments on conference proposals to Mel ASAP

Mel indicated that she was the only reliable member of the group and she should take total responsibility for everything.

9. Local Group Support

This followed from a previous meeting at which MC had raised the possibility of SNH providing support for a local group network. SWT had been invited to the meeting in order to discuss the practicalities of this. It was agreed that funding at this level would be beneficial but the meeting concluded, generally, that support should focus on the provision of Red Squirrel Conservation Officers. Groups present considered that this was a more assured method of delivering action on the ground as some did not have the infrastructure to make suitable use of funds provided directly. It was felt that provision of the RSCOs would substitute the need for local group funding but may help galvanise local involvement. Any funds required locally would be sought separately through fund-raising activities. It was noted that RSCSO support would probably have to cover more than one local group as it was not feasible to provide funding for each group to have a dedicated officer. As the structure would have to be linked to delivery of the Action Plan, it was agreed that no further progress would be made until the Plan had been finalised and approved.

10 Edinburgh Squirrel Conference Update

MC noted that there would be no proceedings of the conference as the Action Plan was to be the product of the discussions. Copies of conference paperwork can be obtained from Mairi Cole.

11. Nature Conservation Act.

Clarification of the protection afforded to dreys was requested. It is clear that further guidance is required but at the moment it appears that all dreys are a protected and no licencing is available for any exceptions (as is available for badgers). The issue is being actively pursued with the Scottish Executive. The Group will be kept informed of any developments.

12. AOB

Grey Squirrel Control

European deliberations on the use of warfarin were concluded and warfarin is to be retained as a legal method of grey squirrel control to prevent damage to trees. However, after April 2007 it will only be available as a pre-mixed bait. Anyone with stocks of concentrate should use them by April 08. Approval for use remains for tree protection only.

Updating of the Warfarin map is being progressed by Steve Gregory. This will rely on updated distribution of reds and greys and agreement to the update by statutory nature conservation agencies and landowners.

A preliminary report should be issued, on monitoring the effectiveness of grey squirrel control, by March 2008.

It was suggested that fishing clubs be contacted as they will be able to submit squirrel records along the river corridors.

With reference to SNH publication 'Making a Difference for Scotland's species – A Framework for Action' concern was raised, by BSMG, that grey squirrel was not included as an invasive non- native species but merely mentioned as a foot note. MC suggested that BSMG should submit their concerns about this directly to SNH as part of the consultation exercise.

A 'best practice guide for forest management and planning' is currently being drawn up by FCS.

Clarification was sought on how to correctly dispose of grey carcasses.

AP6 EH will contact Deer Commission for Scotland to enquire about approved methods of deer gralloch disposal.

13. Next meeting date:

6th September 2006 Roslin

Ian Collier

28th June 2006