

Scottish Squirrel Group

Wednesday 6th September 2006

Forest Research, Northern Research Station, Roslin

Final Minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) (SNH)
Ian Collier, (Secretariat) (FCS and Highland Red Squirrel Group)
Jay Burkinshaw, Perth & Kinross Squirrel Group
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
Juliet Robinson, Red Squirrels in the Highlands
Ann-Marie MacMaster, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Stuart Brookes, Scottish Wildlife Trust
Ranald Strachan, Fife Squirrel Group
Kate Morison, Fife Squirrel Group
Shona Munro, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Chris Waddell, Stirlingshire and Clackmananshire Squirrel Group
Linda Cochran, Angus Squirrel Group
Jay Burkinshaw, Perth and Kinross Squirrel Group

Apologies:

Abbie Patterson, National Trust for Scotland
Elly Hamilton, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Gordon Patterson, FCS
Jamie Farquhar, ConFor
Janie Steele, North Argyll Squirrel Group
Karen Pickles, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative
Graham Christer, Angus Squirrel Group

1. Welcome and introductions

The group welcomed Shona Munro: the (to be) newly appointed Red Squirrel Conservation Officer for Ayrshire and Ranald Strachan and Kate Morison who represented the Fife Squirrel Group.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

Action points from March 2005:

AP8: MC to find out further details regarding Non Native Group: *Ongoing (group has not been convened as yet)*

AP12: MC to invite Richard Pow to next meeting: *Ongoing (to discuss with UKRSG meeting in Sept. 06)*

Action Points from September 2005:

AP4: MC to invite UKRSG up to our next SSG meeting: (joint SSG/UKRSG meeting at Battleby): *Ongoing*

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

AP17: MC to send out questionnaire on funding needs to local groups: *ongoing*

Action Points from May 06 meeting:

AP 1: IC to circulate FCS contact list, *discharged*

AP 2: IC to change on file copy, *discharged*

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

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, *discharged.*

AP 5: BM to consider and send suggestions on grey behaviour in sitka woodland to GP, *discharged (judged as low priority at this time)*

AP 6: MT to send IC copy of Squirrelpox virus note for circulation to members, *ongoing*

AP 6: MT to circulate use of volunteer's policy and procedures, *ongoing.*

AP 7: All to send any additional comments on conference proposals to Mel ASAP, *discharged*

AP 8: EH will contact Deer Commission for Scotland to enquire about approved methods of deer gralloch disposal, *discharged.*

The following changes were requested to the last minutes:

Under AOB the new red squirrel guidance note should be described as 'Guidance on Disturbance and Forest Operations'

In relation to AP3 and cone transects it was agreed that an ideal project for student would be to look at energy values of cones. This information would be valuable being incorporated into cone transect analysis.

AP1 BM to approach Alice Holt Seed Branch to find out the current information they hold and to assess need for research into seed viability.

3. Local Squirrel Group updates

Written reports (attached) were received from Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel in South Scotland Project, Dundee Red Squirrel Project, Angus Squirrel Group, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group, Highland Red Squirrel Group, Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group and Central Scotland Squirrel Group. A copy of the report from Janie Steele of North Argyll is also attached to these minutes, as is a summary from Abbie Patterson from NTS and a summary from Grampian Squirrel Group. Fife Squirrel Group report is detailed below.

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

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park – Red Squirrel Working Group

AP 2 GS to send copies of scat analysis (from the ongoing project from Stirling and Glasgow University) data to BM.

Red Squirrels in South Scotland

ML detailed that the grey squirrel control programme was ongoing in tandem with the Red Squirrel Conservation Officer. A trap loan scheme is in place (funded by SNH) with training by Ann-Marie MacMaster.

JP requested that the grey squirrel control officers (soon to be appointed with funding from SNH) be funded after the current contract runs out. MC noted that the current funding had been obtained from an over-commitment in SNH budgets. It could not be committed beyond the end of the financial year (March 2007)

Fife Squirrel Group

RS: The group hopes to soon employ a Red Squirrel Conservation Officer funded by the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, perhaps part of a Ranger post.

Tentsmuir Forest (a Priority Woodland) will be the focus of raising squirrel awareness in Fife.

Future plan of action for the group will be two pronged: raising awareness of squirrels and grey control.

4. UKRSG update

The issue of Terms of reference of the UKRSG was discussed at the last UKRSG meeting in London. It was confirmed that the UKRSG is a policy group whereas the country groups are practitioners and operators.

As regards the members of the UKRSG, the concerns of the SSG were taken to the last meeting. It was suggested that an annual meeting/workshop be held with representative RSCO from each country being invited.

The SSG agreed with this way forward and MC will take this agreement to the next UKRSG meeting.

AP3 MC to take agreement to next UKRSG meeting.

A request was made for the lines of communication between the country groups and the UKRSG to be improved ensuring a two-way flow of information.

Any advice notes produced by the country groups should be in line with the UKRSG Advice notes.

5. Membership of SSG

IC circulated a map and e-mail list to bring the membership list up to date. Members were asked to provide up-to-date contact details for their area.

IC suggested that as he represented the FCS, Gordon Patterson would be copied in to main points and would be present at meetings if the Agenda required his particular attendance. This was agreed and could be extended to the Forest Enterprise Environment Manager: Moira Baptie. (based at Inverness)

6. Red Squirrel Action Plan

The plan has been submitted to the Minister. Officials at the Executive have indicated that the Minister is likely to invite the Action Plan Working Group to discuss the plan in October 2006. It was hoped this might give some guidance for the development of work to begin in 2007. The response to the plan may be withheld until the Species Framework is finalised in December 2006.

There is a need for a costed strategic model for grey control, which the action plan would implement. SNH and FCS support strategic, targeted grey squirrel control. In order to support this it is necessary to identify strategic areas where grey squirrel control will maximise benefits for red squirrel conservation nationally. Development of this approach is currently underway.

It was suggested and accepted that the headings/sections of the Action Plan should be used to steer discussion in future SSG meetings.

7. Squirrelpox virus – update and action

See BM update report on squirrel research and monitoring and refer to map attached to RSSS report for distribution of seropositive grey squirrels in Scotland. Anna Meredith at the Dick Vet School near Roslin is happy to take any dead red squirrels from Scotland, where the cause of death is unknown. She can perform post mortems and either test for/arrange for tests for squirrelpox. If a poxvirus red squirrel is found in south Scotland, RSSS will be notified quickly and a system will be in place to deal with a relevant press release. The first record of squirrelpox in Scotland would of course be an important issue and the relevant PR departments should highlight the need for funding to control greys.

8. Warfarin Map

(See consultation document dated 5th June attached.)

After detailed discussion including:

- There may be a case to change some green squares to red at this time pending improved data.

- A question was made as how some currently red squares could be transformed to green e.g. in Edinburgh.
- The use of hoppers will need more clarification/discussion.

The following was agreed to be taken to the next UKRSG meeting:

- The SSG is not in a position to offer comprehensive viable record data at this time
- There should not be a ban on the use of warfarin over the whole of Scotland, neither should the restrictions be lifted without further information.
- More time is needed to discuss this contentious issue.
- Any consideration for lifting of restrictions to be tied to future warfarin use being limited to use in improved hoppers with restrictive doors.

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

The Scottish Squirrel Survey was up and running:

<http://www.scottishsquirrelsurvey.co.uk/>

Since the start of the project 600 new squirrel records have been sent to the National Biodiversity Network.

A policy for working with volunteers is on the way.

A new location for the conference has been suggested as Dundee. The group agreed this and it may be possible for the conference to incorporate the next UKRSG meeting that would be the workshop/meeting that the RSCO would attend.

AP 4 MC to take this suggestion to the next UKRSG meeting.

MT will send her progress report ASAP.

10. Local Group Support

The SNH/SWT Framework Agreement is up for re-negotiation after December. It was the intention to provide further funding RSCO's under this concordat. However, this is subject to the response from the Minister.

11. Report from supplementary feeding meeting

(See meeting notes attached.)

South Scotland is in a unique situation being is the only area of the country currently exposed to the risks from squirrelpox virus. The meeting agreed that, under these circumstances, the benefit of using point source feeders to attract and remove grey squirrels outweighed the risks from transmitting squirrelpox virus at an enhanced rate. Moreover, any attempts to remove the use of these feeders was undermined by methods currently employed for pheasant feeding (the provision of food on the forest floor). As such it was agreed that feeding hoppers could be used to help grey squirrel control in this area. However, MC noted that SNH did not approve the use of feeding hoppers in mixed red/grey areas elsewhere.

12. Nature Conservation Act.

Discussion is on going (between SNH SEERAD and FCS) in relation to the protection of dreys and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

There was concern around the group that tree felling, particularly in relation to planning issues was allowed despite dreys being present in the area. As regards FCS approved fellings the key was to work with the FCS at an early stage such as in Forest Design Plans and Long term forest plan consultation and consultation for felling licences. There was agreement that we all had to work together to achieve an acceptable pragmatic way forward within the wording of the current legislation.

13. AOB

Grey control:

JP raised the subject of the BBC Wildlife article and asked if there was a need for scientific evidence to prove that grey control benefits red conservation. MC responded that to do nothing is not acceptable and would ensure the rapid demise of the red squirrel in Scotland. It was noted that the article argued that grey squirrels could be removed from the country at a later date and red squirrels re-introduced. MC noted that the ethical argument behind this was flawed, indicating that the removal of a much larger grey squirrel population was also questionable. It was agreed that information could be collected, by monitoring of existing grey squirrel control schemes. In particular these should include baseline information, detailed timesheets and records of red squirrel sightings.

BM is aware of a DEFRA control project that is being carried on grey control. See section 4 under red squirrels section in attached 'Update report on squirrel research and monitoring'

AP 3 BM to supply SSG with the reporting sheet for this project.

Red Squirrel Conservation

A Project Plan for mid-Scotland has been drawn up by the mid-Scotland Group and has yet to be implemented.

14. Next meeting date:

24th January 2007 at Battleby

Ian Collier

17th October 2006