

Scottish Squirrel Group

Wednesday 12th September 2007

**Forest Research
Northern Research Station
Roslin**

Final minutes

Present:

Mairi Cole, (Chair) SNH
Ian Collier, (Secretariat) FCS and Highland Red Squirrel Group
Mel Tonkin, Scottish Squirrel Survey Co-ordinator
Gavin Skipper, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Red Squirrel Working Group
Brian Tasker, Dundee City Range
Alice Broome, Forest Research
Juliet Robinson, Red Squirrels in the Highlands
Ann-Marie MacMaster, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Paul Gallagher, Scottish Wildlife Trust
Ranald Strachan, Fife Squirrel Group
Karen Pickles, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
Andy Wiseman, European Squirrel Initiative
Graham Christer, Angus Squirrel Group
Mike Libera, Crown Estates – representing Red Alert South West Scotland
Jamie Farquhar, ConFor
Ken Neil, Dundee City Ranger
Gordon Patterson, Forestry Commission Scotland
Sian Williams, Red Squirrel Stronghold Project Officer

Apologies:

Abbie Patterson, National Trust for Scotland
Cecilia Rogers, Grampian Squirrel Group
Marina Smith, West Argyll Squirrel Group
Richard Wales, Red Squirrels in South Scotland
Shona Munro, Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group
John Massey, Cowal Red Squirrel Group
Janie Steele, North Argyll Squirrel Group
Brenda Mayle, Forest Research
Jay Burkinshaw, Perth & Kinross Squirrel Group
James Pringle, Border Squirrel Management Group
Gavin Legge, Grampian Squirrel Group

1. Welcome and introductions

The group welcomed Sian Williams, the new Red Squirrel Stronghold Project Officer.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

Action points from March 2005:

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

Action Points from September 2005:

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

AP17: MC to send out questionnaire on funding needs to local groups: *Superseded*

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: *Carried over*

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: *Carried over.*

AP 9: MT to send electronic version of JNCC monitoring survey to IC for distribution: *Discharged*

Matters arising

Warfarin

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

There were general concerns that that has been no change to the current situation and a query as to whether the reason for this related to the need to change legislation

AP 2: MC to contact JNCC to ascertain what actions were required to extend the use of warfarin to other areas of Scotland.

Non-Native Group

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

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

Communications

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

3. Membership of SSG

No points raised

4. Local Squirrel Group updates

See local updates attached.

5. Establishing and monitoring red squirrel populations

See Mel Tonkin's summary attached.

6. Prioritising Woods where conservation work will be focused

See Sian Williams presentation attached.

There was general concern that, as the proposals stood, the SSG would not have the opportunity to comment on the criteria for stronghold selection before the proposed 20 sites went out to full consultation to stakeholders.

Following a detailed review of the proposed criteria, an agreement was reached that SW would carry out an initial analysis to demonstrate the workability of the criteria discussed. The resulting list of proposed stronghold woodlands (and the reasons) would be circulated to SSG members on Monday 24th September. The SSG group members would look at the selection and make comments direct to SW by Monday 1st October. Comments would be made on the principles of how the woodlands were selected and the criteria used. It was noted that the criteria would only be revised at this point if members of the SSG identified fundamental problems with the analysis: discussion in individual sites would not be sufficient reason for a review of the criteria.

There was general concern that the Priority Woodlands status would be ignored in subsequent policy. However, it was agreed that there is a need to have a second tier of woodland identified with clear guidance on the status of these woodlands and on operations/habitat management that would be supported. It was agreed that the presentation of the stronghold woodlands should be made within the context of the previous exercise to identify Priority Woodlands to demonstrate the potential different tiers of management across important woodlands

Comments were made on the criteria for stronghold selection is as follows:
(refer to Sian Williams paper and presentation)

Filters

Woodland network size and habitat composition

Greater than 2000ha was agreed with a minimum of 100ha per woodland in a network of more than 2000ha. (the 2000ha does not need to be a continuous block). Greater than 80% conifers was accepted with the caveat that it would include small seeded BL that are not suitable to support grey incursion. The accuracy of the species mix in the Native Woodland Inventory data could be an issue: the collation of local knowledge will be important aim of the consultation.

Presence of red squirrels

Accepted. However if the presence of one red in the last 10 years was to be a criteria for a woodland of more than 2000ha being selected then a check will need to be made by local groups on how reliable/up to date that record is.

Presence of grey squirrels

The proposals state that woodlands, which have recorded more than 5 grey squirrels within their boundaries, within the last 10 years, will be excluded. This caused concern with RSSS. SW will run the analysis as per consultation above, and will welcome comments on the criteria.

Squirrel pox virus will not be a criteria as it is already covered by the risk of greys entering an area.

Ranking Criteria

Level of threat

Accepted but this should take in regional differences

Conflicting management

No discussion

Regional Representation

It was accepted that this be an appropriate way forward as it is line with national BAP targets. The individual regions would be based on Forestry Commission Conservancy boundaries: Highland, Grampian, Perth and Argyll, Central Scotland and South Scotland. This would also ease the administration in relation to the Forest Design Plans and grant aid/felling licences. (see www.forestry.gov.uk)

Habitat quality

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

7. Improving woodlands for red squirrels

No points raised

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

The spread of Squirrel Pox Virus continues to be of concern, see Richard Wales' e-mail attached that details the situation in south Scotland. The furthest north seropositive grey squirrel is now at Innerleithen, south east of Peebles.

Modelling: SNH are funding analysis by Newcastle University of grey squirrel dispersal routes in Scotland to identify area most and least readily defended against grey squirrels. The report is due in October 2007.

9. Research into red squirrel conservation – update

See update from Brenda Mayle attached.

Group requested that that there be an improvement in the links from existing web sites in to the research references.

AP 7: All each website managed by SSG members to include links to research references highlighted in Brenda's e mail.

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

The grey squirrel control strategy will be completed by April 2008.

SNH is in discussions with the Scottish Wildlife Trust in relation to management of the Red Squirrel Conservation Officers. The primary purpose of these posts is to complete the national survey and encourage volunteer work. An April 2008 is anticipated. The areas to be covered by the RSCO'S have not been agreed to date. The RSCO work will not include grey squirrel control which will be dealt with as a separate (but overlapping) issue.

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

The group requested an up to date list of literature available on squirrels

AP 8: All to consider volunteering for this important task.

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

No points raised

13. Scottish Squirrel Survey (Conference) Forum

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

14. UKRSG update

AP 10: IC to circulate latest minutes to SSG.

15. AOB

Grey Squirrel control:

Questions were raised by members of the group as to Forest Enterprise role, as landowners, in grey squirrel control. *To clarify this issue on Forest Enterprise Scotland land, the statement below was received from GP after the meeting and serves as a valuable reference point on this issue:*

'Andy Wiseman asked what the position was on grey squirrel control for red squirrel conservation on the national forest estate. Concern was expressed by the group about the current lack of grey squirrel control by FES to support the squirrel pox virus project. GP said that the position remained as set out in the recommended option (3) in the 2006 Red Squirrel Action Plan (page 10, 3rd paragraph) namely that effective population control should be carried out by dedicated grey squirrel control officers working across both public land (including national forest estate) and private land within targeted areas. The NFE was available to the project trappers in the squirrel pox virus project.

GP thought the priority for squirrel pox virus project should develop a clear plan and rationale and secure adequate dedicated resources of full time trapper effort as recommended in the squirrel plan'.

Dispatch of greys

MC is preparing a contract specification to look at methods of humane dispatch of greys. The contract will last for 10 weeks and will be completed by the end of the financial year.

Red Squirrels in South Scotland.

In response to concerns from the Red Squirrels in South Scotland, MC stated that invitations were currently being invited from potential managers of Conservation Officers and the future of the RSSS was subject to this process. Funding was available until March 2008.

Release of captive greys

Great concern was expressed by the group about the release of re-habilitated greys into the wild. Licences have been issued by Natural England to release greys into areas in southern England that do not contain reds. This appeared to the thin end of the wedge to the SSG.

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

Thanks were given to Ann-Marie MacMaster for all her work with RSSS and the group wished her well in her travels.

16. DONM

11th March 2008 at SNH Battleby
3rd September 2008 at Forest Research, Roslin.

Ian Collier

25th October 2007