

Protecting Northumberland's Red Squirrels **A Conference to Promote Working Together.**

This conference, under the auspices of Castle Morpeth Borough Council, was held in Stannington Village Hall on 5th October. His Worship the Mayor, Councillor Milburn Douglas welcomed the delegates.

Lord Redesdale, from the RSPP, told us that the grey squirrel, *Sciurus carolensis*, is listed by the UN as one of the 100 most invasive species on the planet. Native to North America, they have been introduced into Britain and are rapidly displacing our native reds (*Sciurus vulgaris*). Because greys have evolved to feed on the large seeds of broad-leaved trees they can out-compete the reds which eat smaller, and therefore less energy-rich, foods. In addition, the greys carry the squirrelpox virus which is harmless to them but fatal to the reds. The RSPP has cleared Newcastle and Jesmond Dene of greys and hopes to eradicate them completely from Northumberland.

Richard Pow, from Red Alert North England and the Forestry Commission, then spoke. RANE started by trying to understand the ecology, behaviour and habitat preferences of the two species of squirrel, and the interspecies competition. After this research, it was decided to establish 16 reserves for reds, surrounded by buffer zones 5 km in depth. There is some discussion as to whether this depth is sufficient. Northumberland is of great importance to the red squirrel: of 14 000 in England, 9 000 are in Kielder.

Carri Nicolson of Save our Squirrels spoke about the complementary roles of RSPP and SoS, Nick Brodin talked about the implications of red squirrel conservation for the Regional Biodiversity Action Plan and Elaine Jaggs followed with its reference to the Northumberland BAP.

In the second section of the conference, Councillor Andrew Tebutt explained the importance of tree-planting policies to favour food sources for the reds and the provision of rope bridges over roads, to avoid road-kill. Richard Wales, of Red Squirrels in South Scotland, reminded us that 75% of the UK's red squirrels actually live in Scotland. In the UK as a whole there are 160 000 reds and 3 000 000 greys. Squirrelpox has only recently spread to Scotland by "English" greys travelling North carrying the virus.

Northumberland, as a border county, is therefore extremely important in the fight against the virus. There is a programme of blood sampling to determine whether any grey squirrels found are carrying the virus.

Sally Hardy and Penny Hewitt described how they had set up Ponteland Red Squirrels, conducting local surveys and raising funds to promote urban red squirrel conservation in Ponteland and Darras Hall. Philippa Mitchell informed the conference that SoS can give advice on obtaining and setting up rope bridges and on matters such as public liability insurance.

The afternoon programme consisted of 3 workshops: Philippa Mitchell and Carri Nicolson spoke of getting the public involved in reporting sightings and educating people to help reds. The telephone number to report sightings of reds or greys is 0845 347 9375.

Richard Wales and Gordon Robinson, the latter from the Squirrel Protection Partnership, gave instruction on trapping greys, sending blood samples off for pox analysis and running a trap loan scheme.

Save our Squirrels Conservation Officer Mark Wilkinson described land management for reds including tree-planting and felling schemes and the maintenance of amenity grounds to encourage reds and protect grey invasion.

Considerable thanks are due to the sponsors of the conference, including Lord Ridley, Groundwork Northumberland, Morpeth Town Council, NPIL Pharmaceuticals and Wansbeck District Council.

Further information about red squirrels can be found at www.saveoursquirrels.org.uk

Molly, October 2007