

14th March - Save our Squirrels!

In mid-March, we were treated to a wonderful talk about the habits and conservation of Red Squirrels in northern England by Philippa Mitchell and Mark Wilkinson of Save our Squirrels.

Red Squirrels are Britain's native squirrel, thoroughly at home in the tree-tops thanks to their double-jointed ankles for skilful climbing and bushy tails for balance. Although it is usually possible to distinguish them by colour from the introduced American Grey Squirrel, this is not totally reliable. If in doubt the Reds are smaller and rounder, with ear-tufts but without a halo of white around the tail. Red squirrels of course eat nuts, but also cones, berries, flower-buds, insects, birds' eggs, fungi and so on. Female Red Squirrels are only fertile for a single day in early spring, producing litters of 3 to 6 kittens a month or so later. In a good year there may be a second litter.

In the past loss of their deciduous woodland habitat was the major threat to Britain's Red Squirrels, but since Grey Squirrels were introduced in 1876 the interlopers now number 2.5 million and there are only 150 thousand Reds remaining. The larger Grey Squirrels can out compete Reds in deciduous woodland but, unlike Greys, Reds are able to survive in dense conifer plantations (even though this is not a such a good habitat). Unfortunately, where the two species come into contact Grey Squirrels tend to pass on squirrel pox to the Reds, a disease of little consequence for the Greys but (without veterinary assistance) always fatal to the Reds. Northumberland was until recently a stronghold of the Red Squirrel, but now Greys are moving in from the south and from the Edinburgh area. Worse, squirrel pox is endemic in the population of Greys to the south.

Save our Squirrels is therefore working to keep the Greys and Reds apart, concentrating conservation efforts on large conifer woods and taking particular care to prevent Greys gaining access to these areas by monitoring a buffer zone round the forests. Our Group is helping Save our Squirrels with a study in Kyoie Woods (if you would like to join in, please phone 01289 330591). Casual sightings of squirrels, Red or Grey, healthy or otherwise, are also of great help to the SoS team – please telephone the sightings hotline, 0845 347 9375 or e-mail

christine.westerback@northwt.org.uk

Molly

Berwick Wildlife Group

Indoor Talks