

Searching for Signs of Squirrels

It was a gloriously sunny afternoon on 19th April when Mark Wilkinson of Save our Squirrels and Elizabeth Bamford of the SoS Berwick Group led members of the Berwick Wildlife Group on a walk in Detchant Wood, looking for signs of squirrels.

Detchant, together with Kyloe and Shiellow Woods, is one of the last strongholds in England for our native red squirrel and is very important in its continued survival. Squirrels weren't to be seen in mid-afternoon, but there were plenty of signs to show their presence. Both red and grey squirrels strip the scales from cones to feed on the seeds, leaving the cones with a characteristic appearance. When mice chew the cones the remnants are much neater, so "squirrelled" cones are a good indication of squirrel presence. When mice eat hazelnuts they gnaw a hole at one end, but squirrels use their teeth to cut the shell in half.

To distinguish between red and grey squirrels, feeders filled with nuts and provided with sticky pads on the underside of the lid catch hairs from the squirrels' shoulders. Since grey squirrels do have red hairs (leading to the mistaken idea that the two species interbreed), the hairs need to be examined under a microscope. The reds' hairs show a groove while those of the grey are round.

It is even possible to estimate squirrel numbers. Elizabeth had set out a model cone transect, a tenth of the size of a real one, as a demonstration. A strip under the trees 5m (as opposed to 50m for the real thing) by 1m was marked out and cleared of cones. After a few days the total number of cones in the given area is counted along with the number of squirrelled cones. These figures are used to give a fairly accurate estimate of the squirrel population.

Elizabeth Bamford gave the group a brief history of the wood. It dates back to the 12th century and has been handed down through the same families. Around 1650 Charles I camped here on his way to Berwick. In the 1860's the wood was hit by a severe storm and over 3000 trees were blown over, mostly oaks. At one time part of the wood was mined for coal and the remnants of bell pits can still be seen.

Although there were no squirrels visible, there were roe deer and a hare in the neighbouring fields, a common lizard was at the edge of the path and the air was full of birdsong. Violets, primroses, sweet woodruff, golden saxifrage, wood anemones, wood sorrel and dog's mercury were in flower and peacock, comma, orange-tip and white butterflies were on the wing.

Molly Hardie.