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Case Study 8



ONGOING

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels: Developing Community Action Scottish Wildlife Trust



Photo: Raymond Leinster

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Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels: Developing Community Action Scottish Wildlife Trust



Background

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels – Developing Community Action (SSRS-DCA) is an innovative partnership project to secure the long-term future of red squirrels in Scotland by building capacity among communities of volunteers and land managers, empowering them to take on and take ownership of some of the essential protection measures required to save the nation's red squirrels.

The partnership project is led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, and includes NatureScot, Scottish Forestry, Scottish Land & Estates, Red Squirrel Survival Trust and RSPB Scotland. It is also supported by an extensive network of landowners working under Forestry Grant Schemes or voluntarily, as well as increasing numbers of volunteers. Over its first 8 years, SSRS established that it is possible to halt the decline of red squirrels over a wide area via strategically targeted and co-ordinated landscape-scale grey squirrel control. The initiative has enabled reds to re-establish in many areas.



Project aims

Since 2017, SSRS-DCA has aimed to galvanise communities of volunteers and land managers to act together to protect red squirrels in their area. In turn this will protect and enhance the legacy of increased red squirrel populations brought about by the work to date of the SSRS project, and enable people to make an important ecological impact, making the red squirrel population more resilient to changes and safeguarding important populations for Scotland.

In the current five-year project timeframe, SSRS-DCA aims to:

- 1 Develop and implement a programme of red squirrel protection capable of securing the long-term survival of core red squirrel populations across Scotland.
- 2 Recruit and equip communities to take on a vital role in the long-term protection of red squirrels in key areas across the country.
- 3 Protect populations of red squirrels across their current "red-only" range north of the Highland Boundary Fault and in key areas of south Scotland.
- 4 Manage the impact of the Squirrel Pox Virus (SQPV) if it ever reaches the Central Lowlands.
- 5 Monitor changes in Scotland's red and grey squirrel distributions over time.

In addition, SSRS has three different geographical regions of operation, each with its own aims:

- > In Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, the aim is to progressively reduce occupancy and abundance of grey squirrels with a long-term goal of eradication. The aim here is to develop a "rapid response methodology" to detect and respond to any remnant or resurgent populations.
- > In Tayside, Stirling and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, the aim is to prevent the northward spread of grey squirrels and squirrelpox, through a programme of targeted grey squirrel control coast to coast along the Highland Line.
- > In South Scotland, the aim will be to mobilise communities and landowners to act together to protect red squirrels in priority areas area, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in their role in the conservation of this charismatic species.



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Project Timescale

The current NLHF supported phase of the project (*Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels – Developing Community Action*) runs from 2017–2022.



SBS Objectives

The aims from the **2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity**:

1

To protect and restore biodiversity on land and in our seas, and to support healthier ecosystems.

The protection of red squirrels, a key and iconic species in Scotland, and enabling its expansion by the control of the invasive grey squirrel is clearly working to protect and restore biodiversity.

2

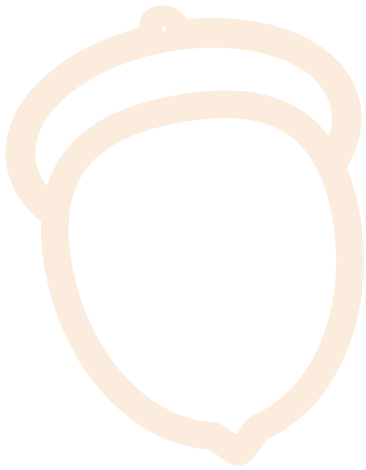
To connect people with the natural world, for their health and well being and to involve them more in decisions about their environment

The focus of this project is to achieve its biodiversity objectives through developing community and land manager actions. This ensures widespread connection with nature and involvement in the management of their environment.

3

To maximise the benefits for Scotland of a diverse natural environment and the services it provides, contributing to sustainable economic growth.

Although not a direct and explicit objective, a healthy and growing red squirrel population helps support tourism as such an iconic species. In addition, as an indicator of sustainable woodlands, the red squirrel is also an indicator of a healthy forestry sector.



Project Summary

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels focuses on working with local communities to improve conditions for native red squirrels across Scotland by combatting the spread of the invasive grey squirrel.

While 75% of the UK's remaining red squirrels are found here, their numbers have fallen drastically in the decades prior to SSRS to just 120,000. This is largely due to the spread of the non-native grey squirrel, which was introduced from North America by people in the late 1800s. Grey squirrels also carry squirrelpox, a virus that does not harm them but is deadly to reds. With the help of partners, landowners and local volunteers, the project is monitoring squirrel distributions across Scotland, managing the impact of squirrelpox, and combatting the spread of grey squirrels in strategic areas.



Climate Impacts

The project has little direct benefit for climate. However, as an indicator of healthy woodlands, red squirrels are a totemic species – whose conservation encourages the better management and expansion of mixed-age forests and native woodland. The project should, therefore, be seen as a key part of efforts to restore and expand Scotland's woodlands – and ensure they are managed well.

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From Left to Right: Jo Foo Wildlife Photography, Jazlyn Sparks, Jo Foo Wildlife Photography, Raymond Lehner



People Information

Direct employment:

- > 29 individuals (25.3 FTE) employed in 2021; while several core Scottish Wildlife Trust staff roles also contribute a proportion of their time to the project.

Volunteers:

- > Over 3,000 volunteer-days since 2017.
- > 1,077 volunteers registered on the SSRS on-line Community Hub (and many more who choose not to register).

Wider engagement:

- > 315 public engagement talks, walks, stall events, training events, press and media events and stakeholder meetings delivered over the last 4 years: and over 500 individual volunteer support or training sessions.



Successes and achievements

- > The SSRS partnership project has established that it is possible to halt the decline of red squirrels over many years and over a wide area and enable red squirrels to re-establish in many areas, via strategically targeted and co-ordinated landscape-scale grey squirrel control.
- > The SSRS-DCA project has built specialised on-line Community Hub linked to the project website to provide ongoing data capture and management, enabling volunteer groups to manage their own data and efforts, as well as providing training, support, feedback, monitoring to volunteers.
- > Between 2011 and 2019 SSRS has delivered 9 successive annual systematic surveys, delivered by volunteers, to enable comparative measures of impact of project work on red and grey squirrel distributions.
- > The squirrel sightings reporting facility has enabled citizen science to contribute to the long-term monitoring of red and grey squirrel distributions.



Issues and challenges

The key issues facing the Trust and project team have been:

- > The Covid-19 pandemic and the limitations it has placed on squirrel control work, monitoring and public engagement.
- > The high level of resource demand, especially staff time, to deliver the project. This raises an ongoing and a future funding challenge.
- > The challenge of who will take the project forward, and in what form – especially as ending the interventions risks a reversal of fortune for the red squirrels.



Funding

This current phase of the project has a budget of **£3,629,293** with the National Lottery Heritage Fund providing a grant of **£2,464,100**. The remaining funding has come through a wide range of organisations and individuals.



Further information

<https://scottishsquirrels.org.uk/about/>