The True History of Grey Squirrels in Britain

by John Bryant, Independent Wildlife Consultant

Anti-Red Squirrel Campaigns

Deforestation for agriculture, fuel and war caused red squirrels to become extinct in Ireland and South Scotland by the early 18th century, and rare in the Scottish Highlands by the early 19th century. Reds were reintroduced to Scotland from England, and in 1793 Scandinavian Reds were brought in to save the species. In 1837, 20,000 imported red squirrels were sold in London – many of whom escaped into the wild.

Robert Burton, in his book Animal Life (Equinox 1991), suggests that such reintroductions might have diluted the gene-pool of the 'distinct British race of squirrel'. He wrote: 'Even before grey squirrels were introduced from America, it [the red squirrel] had been swamped by introduced continental red squirrels.'

Boosted by the reintroduction of foreign Reds and by a massive reforestation of conifers replacing the Broadleaf woodland, red squirrel numbers recovered rapidly and by the late 1800s reached peak numbers - described to be at 'plague' proportions. Hence, they were slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands as woodland pests who strip bark, rob birds' nests and raid gardens.

'It invades gardens, and will take peas from their pods as cleanly as a man. In spring it turns carnivorous and eats eggs and young birds. It damages trees by biting bark and preventing the flow of sap.' (*Natural History – Animals*, by George Jennison, curator of the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens 1927)

Between 1900 and 1925, red squirrel numbers declined drastically under human persecution, which in Hampshire's New Forest officially ended only in 1927. Since 1876, the Reds had been slowly replaced by North American grey squirrels imported and released in various parts of England - particularly from Woburn Park from 1889. Over the next few years, Woburn Abbey sent grey squirrels to sites in Denbighshire, Yorkshire, Kew Gardens, Cheshire, Ireland and London Zoo, which in turn sent some to Dorset.

A series of hard winters and epidemic diseases, such as coccidiosis, added to the impact of continuing persecution by foresters and landowners, and had resulted in the disappearance of red squirrels over most of England. Parapoxvirus also hit Reds hard. It has been alleged that the disease was transmitted by Greys, who are immune to the virus. In fact, out of 44 districts where red squirrels were affected between 1900 and 1920, only four had grey squirrels present! However, the stronger Greys, more suited than Reds to British broadleaf woodlands, rapidly became more widely established as the Reds disappeared.

Anti-Grey Squirrel Campaigns

In 1931, *The Field* magazine launched an 'Anti-Grey Squirrel Campaign' and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) encouraged the destruction of the species. But by then, 10,000 square miles of Britain had been colonised. During the following six years, despite the campaign, the Grey's range doubled.

Between 1945 and 1955, County Agriculture Committees set up Grey Squirrel Clubs, which were provided with free shotgun cartridges by MAFF at taxpayers' expense. This mass culling failed to prevent grey squirrels increasing both in numbers and range, and in 1953 the Forestry Commission launched a 'bounty scheme', which encouraged the public to capture and kill grey squirrels, cut off their tails and take them to a police station to receive a shilling for each tail.

A 1953 shilling would be worth around £2 today. After three years of this subsidised slaughter the 'reward' for a Grey's tail was doubled and remained at two shillings until the scheme was abandoned in 1957. More than one million squirrels had been killed under the four year 'bounty scheme', costing taxpayers at least £3million and yet, at the end, the grey squirrels were more numerous than ever and covered an extended range, despite all the shooting and trapping.

By the 1970s, the Forestry Commission at last acknowledged in its Grey Squirrel Control leaflet:

'It is impossible to organise systematic, concerted control over its extensive range. The high rate of replacement which results from rapid breeding and quick dispersal makes it unlikely that any future campaign would be more successful.'

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And yet, in 1973, the Forestry Commission (following a highly successful media propaganda campaign that contemptuously labelled grey squirrels as 'tree-rats') launched an attempt to persuade the public and Parliament to accept mass poisoning of grey squirrels with the anti-coagulant Warfarin. The Forestry Commission assured the RSPCA that this poisoning would cause 'little hazard' to other woodland animals and that there was 'no evidence' of secondary effects on predators such as foxes, stoats and weasels. Yet we now know that anti-coagulant poisons have killed thousands of non-target domestic animals - mostly dogs - and contaminated the entire wildlife food chain. Anti-coagulant poisoning, which leads to victims dying slowly over many days from internal bleeding, is described by the government's Pesticide Safety Directorate as 'markedly inhumane'. It is particularly cruel for squirrels, with the Forestry Commission itself reporting that post-mortems of poisoned squirrels revealed that haemorrhage into joints was 'common'. Human haemophiliacs confirm that the pain of haemorrhage into joints is particularly intense.

With the Forestry Commission's anti-grey propaganda campaign, supported by the National Trust, having softened up public opinion and Members of Parliament, the Government implemented the Grey squirrel (Warfarin) Order 1973 permitting the poisoning of grey squirrels in England, except for eight counties where red squirrels could be affected. For the same reason, Scotland and Wales were excluded from the mass poisoning.

The campaign, like all others before it, failed, and in April 1994 a press release from the Forestry Commission announced that a 'control group' had been set up to 'encourage the effective control of this introduced animal from the USA, which has replaced our native red squirrel in the Chilterns'. The FC announced: 'The grey squirrel is probably the most serious threat to broadleaved woodlands in the Thames and Chilterns'. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that the FC wanted the public to join in the campaign, by capturing and killing squirrels in their gardens - a claim hastily denied by the FC. However, at the core of the FC campaign was its claim that more than 95 per cent of beech trees in the Chilterns had been 'damaged' by grey squirrels. In fact, the definition of 'damage' was that more than 100 sq mm of wood was exposed at one point – the size of a 5p coin!

Furthermore, in 1973 the FC had admitted that the level of damage to bark from squirrels was not necessarily an indication of any effect on the size, health or value of the tree!

A FC survey of sawmills in the Chilterns in 1973 found that five mills that purchased the best quality wood had encountered no squirrel damage.

Both Red and Grey squirrels strip bark and it can sometimes be serious. However, it is sporadic from year to year, and has been found to be nothing to do with food shortages and, indeed, was prevalent where pheasants were being reared for shooting and fed on grain in winter – providing an extra food source for squirrels.

Compared with the destruction of trees by human beings, damage from squirrels is insignificant – except for some mostly aesthetic flaws in high-value trees grown to more than 100 years of age for top quality furniture. In late 2014 in Kent, one minor re-routing scheme for the A21 destroyed around one hundred acres of irreplaceable ancient forest – involving the cutting down of tens of thousands of mature and immature trees – all to save drivers a few minutes' frustration at a long-standing traffic pinch-point. How many trees will be destroyed in the High Speed rail schemes, and the coalition government's recently promised road schemes?

Since the end of World War 2, we have destroyed 50 per cent of our British ancient woodlands, which were anyway only a tiny fraction of the forest that once covered Britain.

In November 1986, the Nature Conservancy Council (now Natural England) stated:

'…where the squirrels are inhabiting ancient woodland that is maintained for the amenity or conservation value rather than as a crop, there would seem to be little justification for carrying out an annual cull of squirrels on economic grounds, as there is no apparent benefit to balance the costs involved.'

Finally, in 2008, scientists at Bristol University's School of Biological Sciences posed the question: 'Is the culling of grey squirrels a viable tactic to conserve red squirrel populations?'

Their final report concluded: 'Culling of grey squirrels could lead to more problems than solutions. Culling may lead to an increased localised density and an increase in forest damage levels, and increase the spread of disease.'

The report added: 'Large sums of money are being spent on red squirrel conservation. However, this money is not spent wisely. Whilst red squirrels are native to Britain, many of the populations are recently introduced European stock, and so even if red squirrels do disappear from Britain, they could easily be reintroduced again.

'It is widely argued that controlling grey squirrel numbers is the best way of conserving red squirrels. However, there is little evidence to support this belief.' (S. Harris, CD. Soulsbury & G. Iossa. November 2008.)

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