



## The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum working together to save the Red Squirrel for Northern Ireland.

The Red Squirrel is under severe threat of extinction across Northern Ireland, there is still time to help this charismatic native species, but time is running out....

The red squirrel is native, its existence is threatened by the grey squirrel, an invasive alien species which was introduced 100 years ago in 1911 to County Longford from England where they had been established from their native North America several years before.



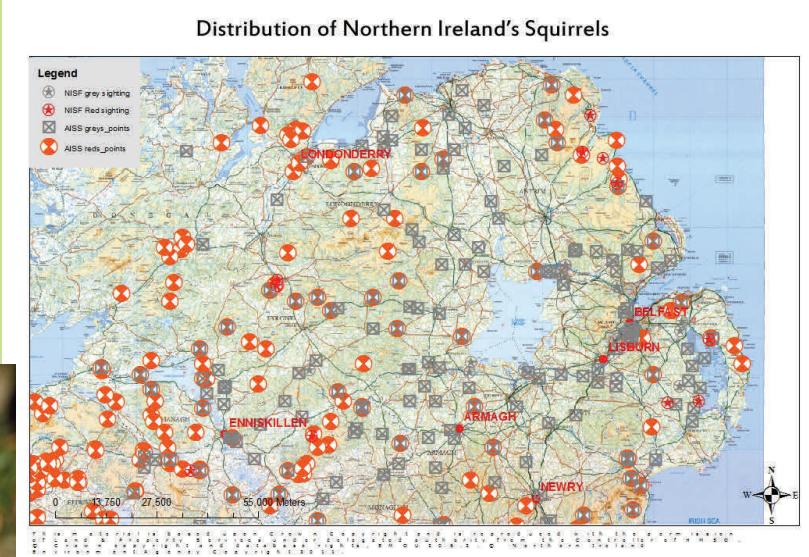
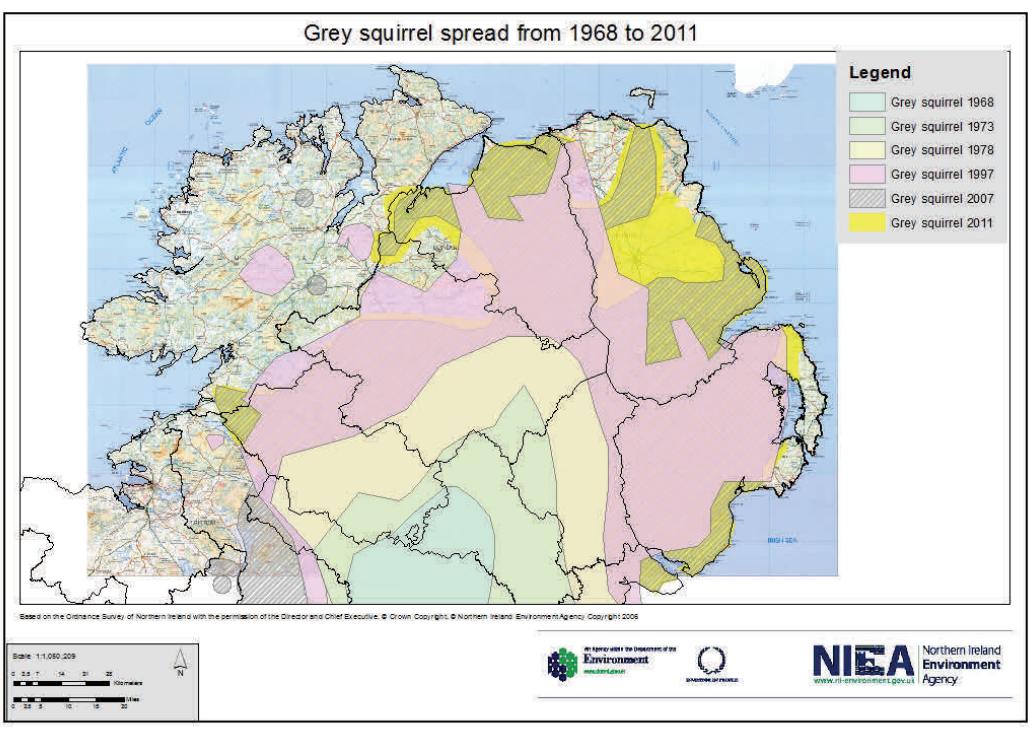
When the grey squirrel arrives in a red squirrel area, the red population usually disappears within 15 years. As the grey squirrel outcompetes the red for food, space and carries a disease, called Squirrel Pox virus that kills the red squirrel but has no known lasting effect on the greys. Where the presence of squirrel pox is confirmed, the local extinction rate of reds can be 20 to 25 times faster than that in pox free areas.

The primary issue is the spread of the grey squirrel because the greys can thrive in conditions that would be tough going for red squirrels: i.e. where habitat is lost to development or agriculture, whereas greys can continue to live in parks, gardens and hedgerows. Reds struggle in these 'poorer' habitats. Greys can eat seeds and nuts that are not ripe enough for the reds to digest so they get the food first. As the grey squirrel lives at considerably higher densities they also cause considerable damage to nesting birds and trees. In the urban environment grey squirrels raid bird feeders, bins and have been known to damage roofs.

**Solutions** The only sustainable way to conserve the Red Squirrel in the UK and Ireland is to remove the grey from the habitats suitable for reds. Ultimately the ideal way to secure the red squirrels future is the complete eradication of the grey from the land, however this is currently an unachievable target given the available resources and would certainly be very difficult without a 'magic bullet' solution. Several scientific solutions are being investigated currently but none of these are ready to be field trialled.



Photos by L Campbell.



Red and grey squirrel distribution across Northern Ireland.



## The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum.

The forum was established to bring together statutory and non-statutory organisations as well as representatives of country parks, private landowners and local volunteer organisations dedicated to protecting the red squirrel in Northern Ireland. The NISF provides an opportunity for the members of the group to feedback details of news, exchange ideas, new research findings, best practice on how to help con-

serve red and control grey squirrels. The NISF is chaired by the [Northern Ireland Environment Agency](#) (NIEA) and has representation from:

-Department of Agriculture (DARD), Countryside Management

-DARD Forest Service, Biodiversity Officers from:

-Omagh District Council

-Fermanagh DC

-Derry City Council & Strabane DC

-Larne Borough Council

-Belfast City Council

-Down DC, Newry & Mourne DC

-Coleraine, Ballymoney & Limavady BC

-Antrim BC

-The National Trust ,

-The Ulster Wildlife Trust,

-Belfast Zoo

-Abercorn Estates Ltd.

-Shanescastle Estate Company Ltd.

-Scottish Woodlands Ltd.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)

-The six local squirrel groups.

Tollymore RSG

The Glens RSG

Lagan Valley RSG

West Tyrone RSG

Derry & Strabane RSG

Fermanagh RSG



L. Campbell.

## The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum's Squirrel Pox awareness information.

**Squirrel Pox**—The squirrel pox virus, sometimes erroneously referred to as squirrel para-pox, is responsible for the disease known as squirrel pox which presents in red squirrels with a mange, scab or myxomatosis-like symptoms, leading to rapid loss of body condition and subsequent death. The animal's behaviour will also change especially toward the end. When they become lethargic and more approachable.

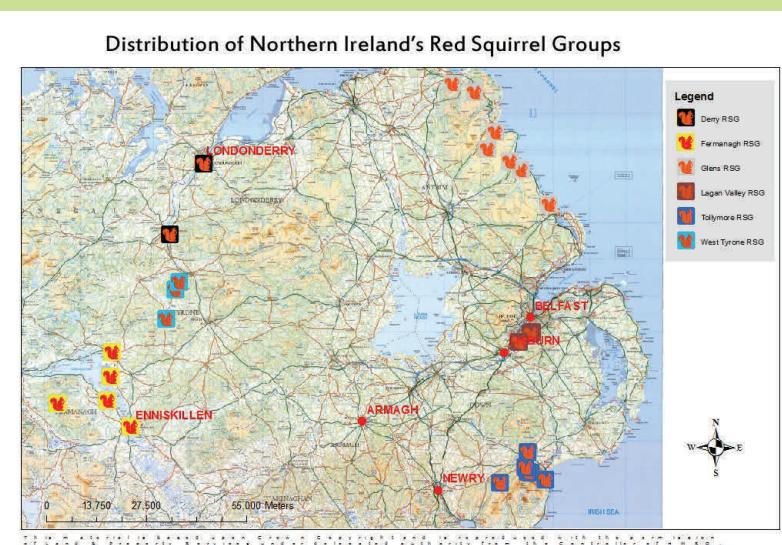
The virus appears to be endemic amongst the UK grey squirrel population and its effects, if any, on this species are unclear. Nearly all grey squirrels with pox antibodies do not display any outward symptoms. Pox-type viruses are fairly resilient and will survive outside the host for a considerable time if the conditions are favourable. Dry weather may mean the virus remains viable for over a month. Wet conditions will reduce its viable period considerably. Outside the host the virus can be killed by [good hygiene](#) procedures using anti-viral veterinary disinfectants.

Squirrel Pox was first discovered in Northern Ireland at Tollymore Forest Park during March 2011 and 3 months later in the Glenarm area of County Antrim. The reason for its sudden discovery in two locations within three months when it was not previously known in Ireland is unclear. We suspect that it has always been present but the last severe winter may have led to increased squirrel movements looking for food, which in turn lead to more contact between individuals. The exact mode of transfer of the virus between animals is unclear, but it is likely passed on directly from contact with body fluids such as saliva or scent gland secretions. There is also the possibility that parasites such as mites, fleas or ticks play a role in transmission. There is no known risk to Humans from Squirrel pox.

If you see a sick or dead red squirrel in East Antrim contact The Glens Red Squirrel Group 0871 315 7376

If you find a dead or sick Red Squirrel elsewhere in NI contact Jon Lees

E: [Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk](mailto:Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk) or T: 028 905 69551





## The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum's Squirrel Pox awareness information.

**Observations of Red Squirrels with Pox by the Tollymore Red Squirrel Group.** [www.tollymoreredssquirrelgroup.com/](http://www.tollymoreredssquirrelgroup.com/)  
These are the observations of an experienced red squirrel volunteer, who has watched the decline of the animals that visit her garden since March 2011.

**Eyes-** Early symptoms- pinkish, slightly puffy, pin prick spots or general roughness. Advanced- pus seeping from eye, red, swollen, crusty. Quite often one eye is infected, whilst other looks ok, check both sides.  
**Face/Nose** often one or both cheeks of squirrel look very swollen, as if it had its cheeks full of food. Swollen noses. Advanced cases seemed to have very swollen glands under the eyes running down towards the nose these almost looked like scars. There was clear loss of coordination. In some of the squirrels a dark spot and swelling directly under the chin. They are often blind.

**Mouth** Looks abnormal, seems to have a distinct dark discolouration and once this is noticeable they don't seem to be able close their mouth. Can't open hazelnuts in shells. Drink large volumes of water. Even squirrels with very progressed disease still attempting to eat.

**Head**—A lot of the squirrels seem to hold their heads at a strange/awkward angle. Hearing may be impaired.  
**Movement**—movement was very stiff, almost looked arthritic and painful. Front paws clenched and quite often blistered. Walked very low and measured with belly close to ground, enough with redness around the legs. Paws are often bald.

**General Observations**—Lethargic, unsteady. Coat of squirrel dull only with advanced disease, some lose fur.

Quite a few of the squirrels which have gone on to get the disease have been observed with feet and/or paws with no fur on them  
**Symptoms vary with individuals.**

**How can I help?** If you have grey squirrels entering your garden do not feed them!!! Make sure your bird feeders are squirrel proofed.

If you are lucky enough to have red squirrels in your garden and they are feeding on bird feeders you should disinfect all your equipment at least every couple of weeks following [NISF guidelines](#) by removing all waste and dirt, then using a broad spectrum disinfectant for at least 15 minutes and then rinse in cold water. This is good practice even if you don't have squirrels as diseases can spread between birds and other wildlife at feeding stations.



Tell us where you see a squirrel, we need up to date information on the locations of both Reds and Greys.

Join and support your local squirrel group, if there are red squirrels near where you live and there is no established group why not start one? – We can help!



Photos by Tollymore RSG

[www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/northern\\_ireland\\_squirrel\\_forum](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/northern_ireland_squirrel_forum)

Contact the NISF

✉ [Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk](mailto:Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk)  
☎ 028 905 69551

✉ Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum  
c/o NIEA Wildlife Team  
2nd Flr Klondyke Building  
Cromac Ave.  
Gasworks Business Park  
Lower Ormeau Road  
Belfast BT7 2JA.