



BIG FIVE KEY FACTS: THE RED SQUIRREL



* the red squirrel

- Scientific name:** *Sciurus vulgaris*
- Gaelic name:** feòrag ruadh
- Length:** (head and body): 18-24cm; (tail) 18cm
- Weight:** 300g average adult weight (grey squirrels can be up to 720g)
- Ear tufts:** The red squirrel's ear tufts are distinctive (grey squirrels don't have them) but may be absent in summer
- Typical diet:** They eat tree seeds all year round, especially from cones; tree shoots, buds and flowers in summer; fungi, berries, fruits; birds' eggs. Conifer seeds (including from Scots pine cones) are high in energy per gram. They'll also visit nut feeders in some gardens (some householders provide these for squirrels as well as for birds).
- Life cycle:** Their average lifespan is 3-4 years in the wild. They mate as early as December and as late as July in Scotland. They have one or two litters a year, typically in February-March and May-June or July. Female squirrels are only sexually receptive for a single day during each of the two mating periods.
- Litters:** Their litter sizes vary from 1-6 'kittens', but are typically 3-4. They are weaned at 8-10 weeks. Less than one quarter of juveniles survive their first winter.
- Territory:** They are not territorial and there is a lot overlap between the home ranges of different individuals. Males have larger ranges than females (to meet different potential mates) and home ranges for both sexes are larger in coniferous woodlands than in broadleaved woods.
- Habitat:** They live in coniferous, broadleaved and mixed woodland. They are less able to compete with grey squirrels in broadleaved and mixed woodland, including because of the grey's greater ability to digest tannin-loaded acorns.
- Status:** They are considered to be one of the most threatened mammals in the UK, following wide spread declines and shrinkage of their range since mid 20th century. They are under threat from competition with grey squirrels, deaths from squirrelpox virus and fragmentation of woods. There are an estimated 120,000 animals (75 percent of UK population) in Scotland.
- Future prospects:** They are the subject of species management action under the Species Action Framework 2007-2012 with public support for Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project committed until 2014. Action is being taken through Forestry Commission Scotland and others to encourage red-squirrel-friendly management in woodland refuges that may be more suitable for reds than greys (i.e. conifer rich and broadleaved poor).

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Spotting tips:



Look out for cones with most scales removed as possible evidence of squirrel presence (some vole- and mouse-chewed cones could be similar) and also for rounded structures made of twigs near the tree trunk high up in the trees.



These 'dreys' (squirrel nests) are used for shelter and to rear their young. If a squirrel is seen, stay very still.



Squirrels are quick to detect movement, but they may ignore stationary observers.

Art & culture:

In medieval times, squirrel fur or 'vair' gave soft and sumptuous cloak linings and hood trimmings for those who could afford it. Wearing of prized furs was governed by 'sumptuary laws', which stipulated, for example, that vair could only be worn by royals and nobles. Much of the aristocratic demand for squirrel fur in Scotland would need to have been supplied by import from Europe and Russia (as in the import of squirrel skins from Flanders to Scotland).

Beatrix Potter wrote 'The tale of Squirrel Nutkin', arguably the world's most well-known story about a red squirrel, when she lived in the Lake District. But before that, she had often stayed for long period at Dunkeld (a prime red squirrel location, then and now) and walked in squirrel-rich woods there as she sketched fungi.

Find out more:

There are many different regional and national groups working on red squirrel conservation. See www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8C8BLH Scottish Squirrel Group for names and contacts.