

Westmorland Red Squirrels

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Grizedale Red Squirrels

In 2012 and 2013 a 'Your Heritage' Lottery grant provided us with a wonderful opportunity to monitor and manage red and grey squirrels. The project focussed on the Forestry Commission's Grizedale Forest between Hawkshead and Satterthwaite. Our objective was to remove grey squirrels in order to protect existing populations of red squirrels. But we were also able to raise awareness about the plight of the red squirrels among residents and visitors as well as a host of partner organisations. All were invited to get involved by reporting sightings of squirrels or actively controlling greys. With a clear picture of the grey 'hotspots' a trapping programme caught more than 700 over the two year programme. 90 per cent were caught in broadleaf areas – a particularly good habitat for greys.

We gave extra attention to trapping where we knew there were populations of reds and logged all trap locations by global positioning system. There were widespread sightings of reds in 2012 though fewer in 2013, possibly due to the late spring and poor weather early in the year.

What did we achieve?

We certainly put red squirrel conservation back on Grizedale's agenda, an achievement appreciated by Forestry Commission staff as well as partners such as the National Park Authority and Cumbria Wildlife Trust. We were also able to show the cost effectiveness of a strategic approach within a large forest estate. The project undoubtedly improved dialogue between partners and landowners, resulting in better coordinated monitoring and grey control. It became clear that red populations can recover when there is effective and concerted grey control. Valuable lessons were learned not only for continuing work in Grizedale now the HLF funding has ended but also for extending the project into a wider area of the South Lakes. And the project was delivered on time and on budget!

Lessons learned

On reflection, we might have done even more to engage the general public and local communities and to publicise our achievements. But our media campaign at the beginning certainly helped with sightings and recording. We saw real benefits of creating an integrated network of grey control with landowners and volunteers working hand in glove. This will have wider benefits for management on neighbouring properties such as the extensive National Trust estate to the north and the National Park Authority's woodlands to the south. We have already seen knock-on benefits in the recovery of red numbers at Basecamp near High Wray, where many hundreds of National Trust volunteers have had the chance to see these charismatic creatures in real life. And the National Trust and National Park Authority are now working closely with us across much of our area.

In summary, the Grizedale Red Squirrel project has proved a terrific 'flagship', raising the profile of red squirrel conservation and increasing acceptance of grey control as the only effective way to maintain red populations. The recruitment of a network of grey control volunteers in the community has been critical and much appreciated. It is the key to maintaining momentum at a time when public sector funding is so much harder to find.

Next steps

Work is now actively underway to develop a successor project covering Grizedale and a wider South Lakes area. We have also started a complementary project in the southern part of our area in the Cartmel Peninsula between Newby Bridge and Grange-over-Sands with the benefit of funds from the Forestry Commission and the train company First Transpennine Express.

These initiatives will build on the Grizedale Red Squirrel Project's success. We know that in continuing to control greys our Red Squirrel populations are surviving in Grizedale and thriving right across our area. We must continue to keep grey numbers low and maintain control in surrounding woods so that places like Grizedale do not become a vacuum into which the greys are drawn from neighbouring woodlands. Only in this way will we establish continuous efficient grey control and flourishing populations of reds over the larger landscape.

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