



Westmorland Red Squirrels

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Annual Review 2021



Geoff Hetherington, Chairman

Welcome to our look at the past year's activities and preview of the year ahead. Thank you to all who have played a role in protecting our precious red squirrels,

as members, supporters or reporters of squirrel sightings. Without your participation, we would be sure to have lost our reds. The red squirrels sightings map on page 4, which also shows our newly extended patch, presents a heartening picture of red squirrel range. Coronavirus, however, continued to affect our ability to meet up, raise funds and attract new members. Nonetheless, we remain in a healthy position with good prospects.

Sadly, diseases and viruses of other kinds continued to threaten habitat and

squirrels. The impact of *Phytophthora ramorum* disease on Larch plantations has made a noticeable mark on our landscape and again we experienced cases of squirrel pox, passed from infected greys to our red populations. At the end of the year, Storm Arwen wreaked havoc in many woodlands across the south of the county, potentially disrupting red colonies and future breeding success.

Our work, and the importance of our work, will never cease. Thank you again for your support.

Making the future safe for our red squirrels

Westmorland Red Squirrels in 2021



419 Red squirrel sightings

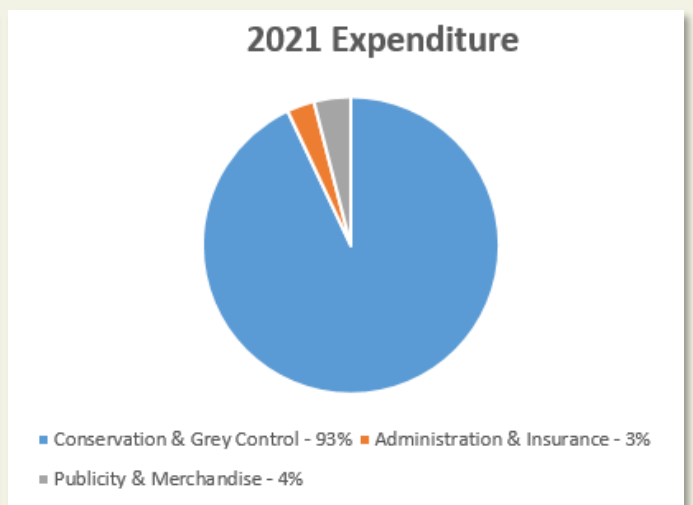
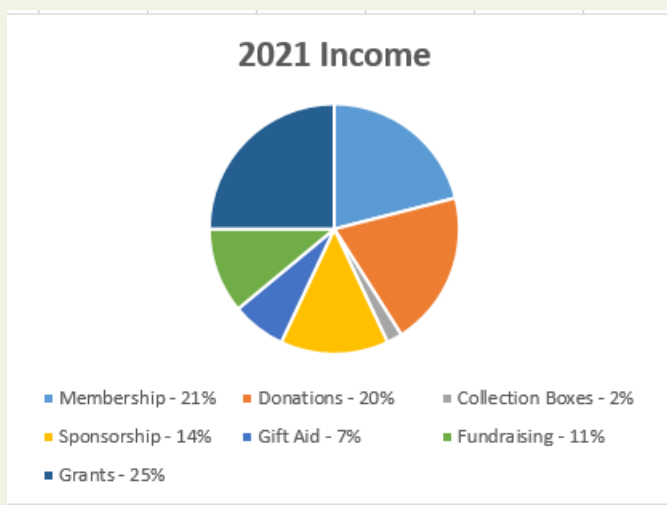


5,377 Greys caught or shot

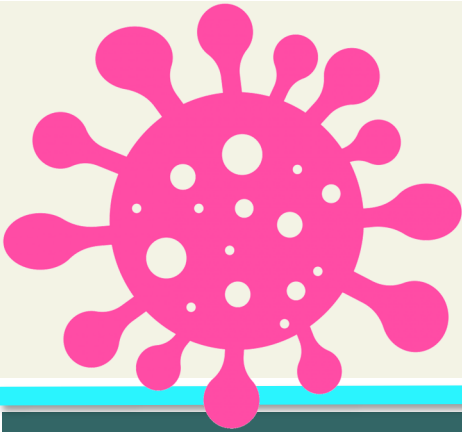
351 Members at the end of 2021



Financials — breakdown for the 2021 calendar year



Our most recently published accounts for the financial year 2020/21 show income as £29,076 and expenditure as £38,347. In response to the effects of Covid-19, trustees resolved to draw on reserves to maintain spending, particularly on grey control.



CORONAVIRUS rules and guidance once again restricted our activities, but mainly those involving direct contact with other people, such as at talks, shows and meetings. Many events were cancelled, but thankfully we were able to keep in touch with land managers and supporters by phone or Zoom call. Grey squirrel control continued unabated.

Events, meetings, courses and publicity



Westmorland County Show 2021

We attended:

- 6 Internal meetings
- 2 External meetings
- 5 Zoom meetings and webinars
- 1 Online conference
- 1 Media interview
- 2 Talks given to local groups
- 2 Local shows
- 2 Courses



851 Followers on Twitter



369 E-News subscribers



Neaum Crag - October 2021

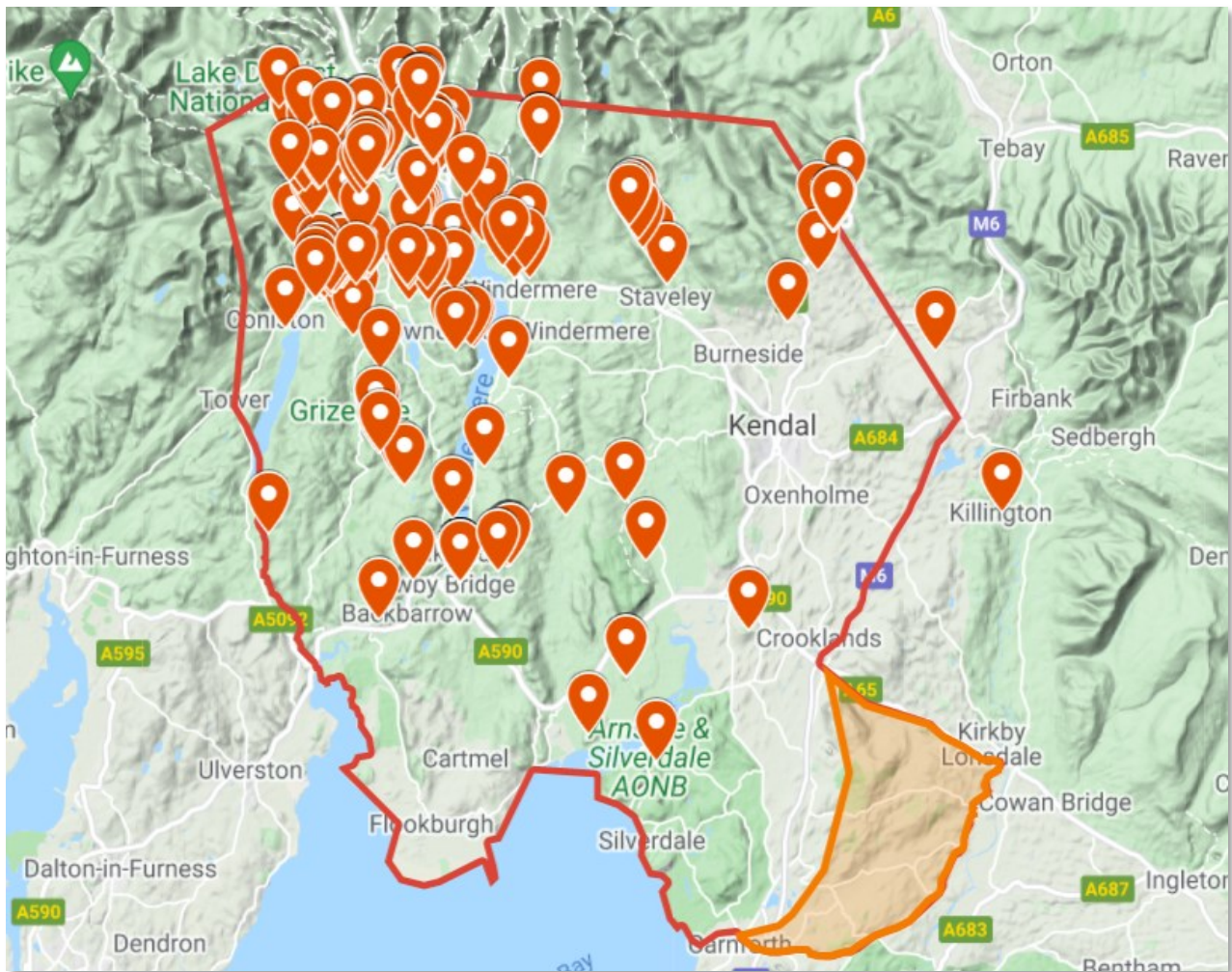


Tower Wood—August 2021



Troutbeck Bridge - July 2021

Red Squirrel Sightings in 2021



Our Patch

When we established ourselves as a charity in 2011, we confined our area of interest to southeast Lakeland. In recent years, we have extended our activities into the Arnside and Silverdale area, part of which lies in Lancashire. This in turn has created links with land managers further east, beyond Holme and Burton-in-Kendal, where currently there is no community red squirrel group. Additionally, we provide the secretariat for the South Cumbria Squirrel Management Forum.

To reflect our activities more accurately, members agreed by resolution at our 2021 AGM that we should amend our area and constitution to include south Cumbria and north Lancashire. The extended area is illustrated on the red sightings map above.

Annual General Meeting

In the light of Covid-19 guidance and concerns that members would be reluctant to attend such a meeting, trustees decided for a second year to hold the AGM by post/email. To deal with essential business, a vote resolved to approve the annual accounts and re-elect trustees and office-holders for a further year. As reported earlier, members also agreed an amendment to our constitution to extend our geographical area.

Grasmere to Grizedale (G2G)

We continued to benefit from the partnership with Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE), the National Trust and the Grasmere Red Squirrel Group to reinforce our defence of red squirrel

populations in the area, which are increasingly threatened by greys.

The RSNE's appointment of a full time red squirrel ranger continues to complement the efforts of our contractors, volunteers and public and private sector landowners. Red sightings across the area were encouraging, though there were worrying outbreaks of squirrelpox virus near Skelwith Bridge and in the Grasmere area.

We reviewed our deployment of volunteers operating around the north end of Windermere in the face of the apparent increased incursion of greys to Grasmere from the east side of the lake. Concerns remain, however, about the disturbance to habitat that might result from the widespread removal of Larch due to the effect of *Phytophthora ramorum*, and the impact of Storm Arwen.

Ambleside and Langdale

After a quiet beginning to the year, red sightings picked up through the spring and summer with encouraging regularity. Grey control intensified around the north end of Windermere and around Tarn Hows, with a greater emphasis on shooting: a bumper crop of hazelnuts seemed to mean that grey squirrels tended to occupy woodlands, with fewer venturing into traps in gardens.

There were several cases of squirrel pox virus in late summer and we widely publicized advice on feeder and trap hygiene. Fortunately, the outbreaks proved relatively confined and short-lived with little apparent impact on local reds.

The widespread felling of Larch plantations due to *Phytophthora ramorum* continued, with significant impact on the landscape and, potentially, on red squirrel habitat. We are working with landowners to monitor the effect and consider appropriate replanting proposals. The image below illustrates one of 50 lorry loads of Larch removed from Gill Bank, Colthouse.



© Akram Busaidy

Arnside and Silverdale

Work this year focussed on the Arnside peninsula, where we seek to clear greys before reintroducing reds. The collaborative effort, involving landowners, contractors and volunteers, removed more than 1500 greys.

A key aspect of the programme has been to monitor the likely corridors into the peninsula, using feeders and trail cameras. If we can keep the peninsula grey-free, we hope to join the red squirrel breeding scheme run by the

Welsh Mountain Zoo, establishing pens to house the squirrels prior to release.

Our hair tube survey supported by students from Cumbria University continued and researchers from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) trained our volunteers to carry out population assessment trials. This involved setting a number of trail cameras to monitor bait take-up and assessing the squirrel populations.



We hope to join the APHA's trial of the grey squirrel contraceptive in 2023. Meanwhile, at the APHA's request, we tested the effectiveness of the Good Nature A18 gas-powered traps. This trial proved very useful, with no evidence that the devices attracted non-target species.

Central Area

In recent years we have struggled to keep up with the level of grey control needed. Red squirrels were once common in the woods of the Lyth Valley and a beautiful part of life in the valley. Pressure from grey squirrels has vastly reduced the population of reds. Our Lyth Valley campaign to control the greys and ensure the reds can make a comeback is reported in more detail on page 6. A well-attended public meeting in Brigsteer led to a new group of enthusiastic volunteers, which is working with local landowners to control the greys. Our next steps are to:

- encourage similar groups of volunteers in Crosthwaite, Lyth and Winster;
- use contractors to cover woods not covered by volunteers; and
- ensure we have sufficient funds to control greys around the Lyth Valley.

Our activities on and around the National Trust's Sizergth Estate continue and we are grateful for their financial support.

Further north, in Kentmere, we are still seeing reds, but grey sightings are becoming more common. The lack of reports of reds in Longsleddale is a concern but we hope our recently recruited contractor operating in the northern valleys and Kendal area will raise awareness in the valley and ensure increased control of greys.

Coniston and Torver

Our small team of trappers and shooters are doing a good job in their areas. Sightings of greys tend to be from around the Park Coppice area.



We are encouraged to see reports of reds around Hodge Close and Tarn Hows, including a sighting at Yew Tree Farm.

Kendal

Grey control within the town continued to be a challenge. Some traps set on publicly-owned land with landowner approval were regularly damaged or stolen and had to be withdrawn. Nevertheless, wider public support for restoring red squirrels was heartening, with several new volunteers coming forward and many greys removed from traps in residents' gardens.

As described above, our new Northern Valleys contractor will operate in Kendal too, picking up new volunteers as he goes about his work.

UK Squirrel Accord

How can we feed an oral contraceptive to more than 2.5 million grey squirrels? Research led by Sarah Beatham of the Animal and Plant Health Agency for the UK Squirrel Accord, is in its fourth year. An important aspect is to design a bait hopper from which only grey squirrels can feed. We are actively participating through trials in the Arnside peninsula.

The feeding hopper being tested collects data on numbers of feeding visits by individual and enables optimisation of bait uptake by squirrels that will contain a contraceptive. Field studies have tested hoppers with a range of weighted doors that have to be pushed open by the animal. Each time the door lifts, the date and time is recorded. Remote cameras identify species that have lifted the door.

In some trials, novel colour sensor devices were fitted, which recorded the colour of squirrels' coats. The data tests if there is a detectable difference between red and grey squirrel coats and could be used to exclude red squirrels. Red squirrels quickly started to feed from open hoppers and when door weights were added, were visibly deterred and frustrated, swishing their tails in annoyance. However, some tenacious red squirrels persisted and managed to lift the doors.

This study provided important benchmark data to progress the research. Work will continue to exclude red squirrels from the hoppers, but this study has provided evidence that by using a simple, cost-effective design, hoppers could be used safely in areas where there are no red squirrels.



Lyth Valley Campaign



For several years, Ian Gregg, a resident of Crosthwaite (pictured above), has proved a generous benefactor in supporting our management of grey squirrels to make space for reds. At his suggestion, we began a campaign this year to engage more residents and businesses in and around the Lyth Valley and raise £5000 to establish a programme to recover diminishing red squirrel populations. A public meeting in Brigsteer attracted good support and

we established a new group of active volunteers, which is already making an impact. Covid-19 inevitably limited opportunities to maximise the campaign's initial impact but we are confident of accelerated progress in 2022 to recruit more volunteers, attract more members and raise additional funds to ensure a long-term commitment to the Lyth Valley's red squirrels.



South Cumbria Squirrel Management Forum

An important part of our work involves liaison with neighbouring volunteer red squirrel groups, landowners and other agencies to adopt a joined-up approach to protecting our red squirrels. One way we do that is by convening twice-yearly meetings of the South Cumbria Squirrel Management Forum. In 2021, we held one meeting on line with the second, happily, back round the table.

The Forum connects us with the Grasmere and South Lakes red squirrel groups, private and public landowners, and public and charity sector partners. By sharing expertise, we can identify resource requirements, priorities for action and potential funding sources.

For their active engagement, we thank Forestry England, National Trust, Lake District National Park Authority, Red Squirrels Northern England, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, Graythwaite Estate, Rusland Horizons Trust, Colton Parish Council and the University of Cumbria. Issues agreed included access to Grizedale Forest for surveys and grey control, a framework for monitoring, and data sharing on squirrel sightings.

Ed Watson

We are sad to record the death Ed Watson in October. Ed was a long-standing Westmorland Red Squirrels member and in recent years had played a key role in our organisation as the manufacturer of our feeders and bait holders - vital equipment in identifying squirrel hotspots.

Always on the lookout for jar lids to top and tail the feeders, Ed produced literally hundreds of cheap but effective pieces of kit. Here he is in the 'production department'. He is sorely missed.





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Rusland

Our contractor, supported by a committed group of volunteers and landowners maintained a comprehensive programme of grey control, the benefits of which are now apparent. We focused on woodlands around Finsthwaite and Lakeside, complementing the efforts of active private landowners.

Several red sightings were reported throughout the area, notably within Grizedale Forest and on the Graythwaite Estate. Thanks are due to them and to the Lake District National Park Authority, Woodland Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust

and John Strutt Conservation Foundation for their financial support.

We are also grateful for the publicity given to red squirrel conservation at the Grizedale Forest Visitor Centre and in the Graythwaite Farm Shop.

Troutbeck

We continue to see red squirrels at Kingate, in Troutbeck Bridge and at Priory Manor. A comprehensive ‘early warning’ system operated by residents ensures that all greys arriving in the area are quickly trapped and removed. The level of financial support we receive from residents and visitors through the sale of plants and other produce provides a real boost to our volunteers, for which we’re most grateful.

Windermere

The early part of 2021 proved a good period for grey squirrel control thanks to a mix of shooting and trapping in residents’ gardens. Thankfully, numbers seen since then have been low. A number of red sightings around Windermere and Troutbeck Bridge, including at Orrest

Head and St. Catherines, just north of the village, offer encouraging signs that we continue to make space for our reds to survive and thrive in this area.

Witherslack and Grange-over-Sands

Our contractor and volunteers have been busy and with local woodland owners have done work that is vital to the red squirrels of Chapel House near Staveley-in-Cartmel. Looking ahead, we need access to all woods in that area: the mass removal of larch due to the *Phytophthora* disease control programme is likely to diminish the seed resource for red squirrels, notably in those managed by Forestry England. Without action, reds would be displaced or lost entirely due to out-competition from greys.

Grange-over-Sands and Holker remain a concern. We have too few people controlling grey squirrels in these areas and grey numbers appear to be growing. In 2022, we plan to work more closely with landowners and like-minded organisations to recruit more support.



Looking ahead

Our thoughts turn first to the health of our members, supporters and volunteers. The past two years have disrupted every aspect of 'normal' life and we look forward to resuming our relationships with those who champion our work, promoting our work and continuing to protect our red squirrels. Happily, our key partners, despite their own challenges, have sustained their commitment. We look forward, for example, to working with Forestry England staff on more rigorous monitoring of squirrels in and around Grizedale Forest, not least in the face of widespread removal of Larch plantations. We will work with other landowners, particularly in the south of our patch, whose woodlands suffered devastating damage during Storm Arwen.

As we experience milder winters or years with bountiful harvests of hazel and beech, on which greys as well as reds feast, the need for effective landscape scale control becomes more urgent. Without it, greys will continue to out-compete the reds. We need all the tools in the toolbox, including the ability to shoot as well as trap and are grateful to those landowners that allow both. We welcome Forestry England's proposed trials of controlled shooting.

We also look forward to the publication of Defra's Red Squirrel Action Plan for England to promote greater engagement by the community and commitments at national level to secure nature recovery.

Finally, we hope you will join us at our Annual General Meeting at 7pm on Wednesday 25 May 2022. This will be held at The Villa, Levens LA8 8EA. Our guest speaker will be Terry Abraham, the award-winning broadcaster and photographer. Terry will be previewing his latest project *Cumbrian Red* and talking about his work as a volunteer with the Penrith and District red squirrel group.



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Westmorland Red Squirrels

Our thanks to **Cumbria Wildlife Trust** for printing this Annual Review and to **Vernon Ross** for the use of his images:

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