

Saving England's Red Squirrels

Progress through Partnership



Photo courtesy of Steve Wrightson





For the first time in a century, evidence suggests our native red squirrel population is being sustained across the English mainland through the partnership approach of Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE). Their recent work has generated a significant increase in conservation effort, established a systematic monitoring programme and strengthened community linkages. RSNE has assisted woodland owners and managers to utilise targeted support from the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme, while also securing further investment from other partners including Biffa Award, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the private sector. This document details why this matters to English communities and outlines what further action is needed to maintain this progress in the long term.

Crispin Thorn

Area Director Yorkshire and North East
Forestry Commission England

RSNE Project Management
Group Chair

The English Conservation Challenge

The red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) is the UK's only native squirrel species. Its range in the UK has been shrinking since the introduction of the non-native grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) from North America in the 1870s. Most grey squirrels carry squirrelpox virus, a disease fatal to red squirrels, and naturally displace red squirrels in many habitats through competition even in the absence of disease. In mainland England, red squirrels have been lost from all but seven northern counties. They also still thrive on the Isle of Wight and Brownsea, where community vigilance and cooperation keep the islands grey squirrel free and the red populations in great health.

There is a long history of red squirrel conservation action in northern England. Grass-roots community groups began to form in the 1980s, with conservation charities such

as the Wildlife Trusts later adding additional resources, principally through the strategic Red Alert and Save Our Squirrels programmes. The scale of the challenge faced by reds was recognised by their inclusion in the 1994 UK Biodiversity Action Plan and subsequent revisions. In 2006, 17 red squirrel reserves were selected for protection as safe havens. 60,000 hectares of this reserve woodland lies on the Public Forest Estate and includes the enormous Kielder Forest.

Around these reserves, the Forestry Commission designated strongholds in which landowners are able to apply for EWGS funding to carry out control work. This investment added further impetus to community-based conservation efforts, which matured into the autonomous Northern Red Squirrels group network. This long history of partnership work provided a strong platform for the current success of the RSNE project.



Squirrelpox virus. Photo courtesy of Corrie Bruemmer.

The RSNE Partnership

The RSNE partnership was established in 2011 in response to reviews by Natural England (2009) and Forestry Commission (unpublished) into conservation efforts. The four partners in the RSNE project are the Forestry Commission, Natural England, the Red Squirrel Survival Trust and the Wildlife Trusts.

The project aims to maintain red squirrel range on the English mainland through landscape-scale grey squirrel control and applied conservation science. The project team includes community facilitators, scientists and 11 rangers undertaking grey squirrel control in red squirrel range.

The project is currently financed through a range of private and public sources, including the Landfill Communities Fund, Heritage Lottery Fund, Forestry Commission EWGS grants, individual giving, business donations and tourism revenue.

The team works alongside 500 landowners and 2,000 autonomous community group volunteers, making this initiative currently the largest non-native species management project in England. This integrated conservation effort is monitored and assessed each year, enabling all involved to continue to learn from and encourage each other.

Conserving red squirrels is such varied and fascinating work. The ongoing pioneering research at Liverpool University is very exciting and working with the local people, who are all so passionate about red squirrels, is really motivating. The most rewarding part though is seeing the monitoring results and the continued increase and expansion of the red squirrel population here in Merseyside.

Rachel Miller

Red Squirrel Field Officer
The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire,
Manchester and North Merseyside



The RSNE team. Photo courtesy of Adam Seward.

Grey Squirrel Control

The RSNE Ranger team carry out humane and systematic grey squirrel control across 80,000 hectares of privately-owned woodland. However, grey squirrel control by the RSNE team is just one part of a far greater red squirrel conservation effort, in which community groups, landowners, gamekeepers and foresters all take part.

Case Study – Grasmere, Cumbria

Grasmere was once home to a thriving population of red squirrels, until the arrival of grey squirrels caused their near-extinction in this area. Building on the previous work of the Grasmere Red Squirrel Group and the Westmorland Red Squirrel Society, RSNE used Forestry Commission English Woodland Grant Scheme funds to employ a full time Ranger. RSNE Ranger Mike Green works with the local groups to control grey squirrels and monitor reds across several estates in the area. Subsequent to this coordinated landscape-scale approach, red squirrels are now recorded frequently in parts of the project area from where they have been absent for over ten years.



RSNE Ranger at work.
Photos courtesy of Adam Seward.



Photo courtesy of Stuart Nicol.

We are very lucky to have red squirrels back in our garden but this has only been possible due to the voluntary work we both do, Phil at ground level doing the grey control and me behind the scenes coordinating. Being so passionate about their protection has now taken over our lives, but in a very good way as focusing on their conservation helps me cope with my disabilities.

Phil and Julie Bailey
Northern Red Squirrels
Cumbria



Photo courtesy of Will Browne-Swinburne.

We don't have the economy and wealth to compare with the south east or other prosperous regions. However, we have real riches in the nature we still enjoy, which so many other places have now lost. I have been delighted and encouraged by the support the landowning community have given to the Northumberland Squirrel Levy, and am proud to be part of the fight to save our red squirrels.

Will Browne-Swinburne
Capheaton Estate
Northumberland

Monitoring and Research

It is not enough to control grey squirrels without measuring the impact the work has on red squirrel populations. Following recommendations made in an independent review of red squirrel conservation in 2009, RSNE established a systematic survey of squirrels within the project area, which has been running since spring 2012. With the help of over 100 volunteers, more than 300 woodland sites have been surveyed twice a year for the presence of red and grey squirrels.

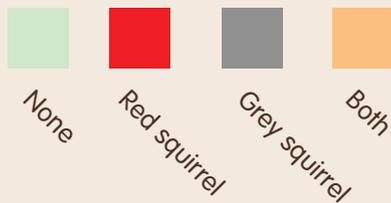
Citizen science is fundamental to the project, with 1,500 people sharing their conservation data and red squirrel sightings every year. In addition to our monitoring programme, RSNE are partnering with Newcastle University and Liverpool University on a series of long term research projects, which will help to guide and refine our conservation efforts.

A team of volunteers and trainees from Natural Ability, a charity which supports people with learning disabilities, were keen to help RSNE survey the local red squirrel population. The team pride themselves in being active in their community, undertaking work which is meaningful and worthwhile and they enjoyed setting hair tubes to count and monitor their local squirrels.

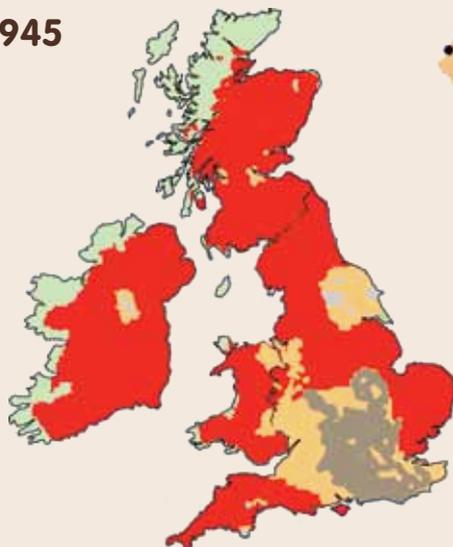
Natural Ability
Allen Valleys
Northumberland

Squirrel Range in Northern England

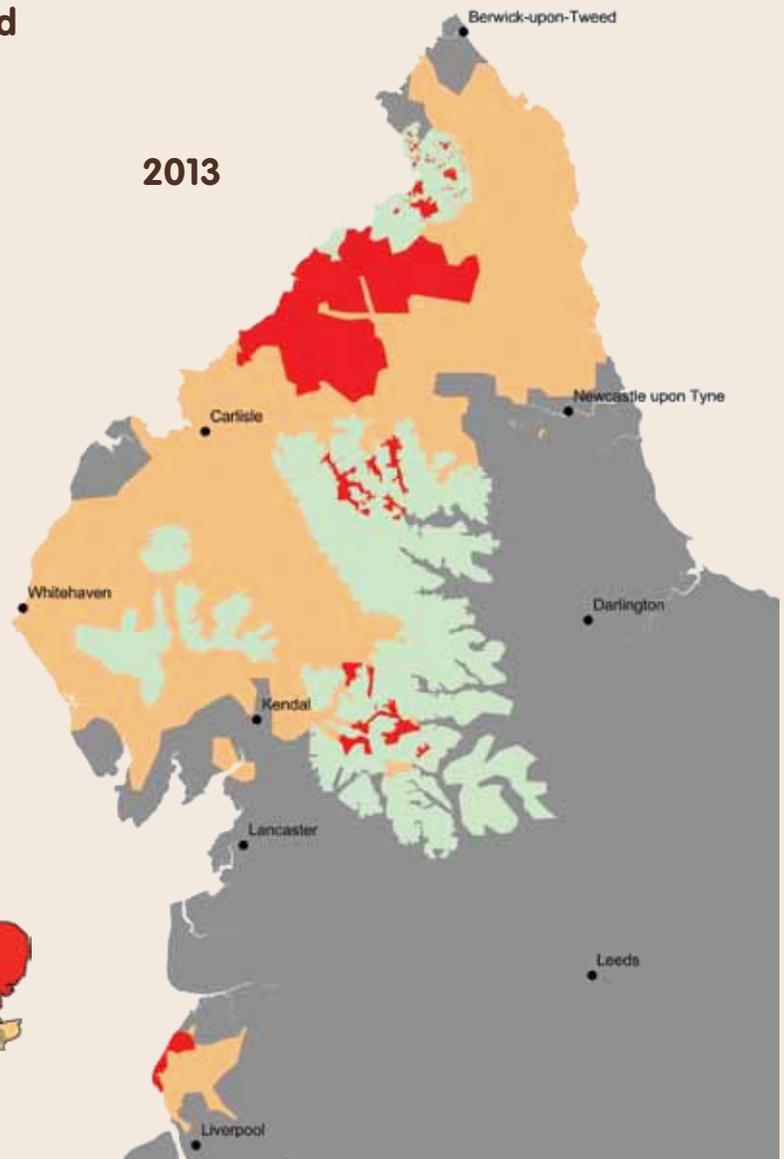
Since beginning monitoring in spring 2012, RSNE have recorded a steady increase in sites occupied by red squirrels following decades of decline.



1945



2013



People and Communities

Engagement with the natural world has many proven physical and mental benefits. Recent studies have shown that taking part in conservation activities can significantly increase mental wellbeing, social engagement and connection to nature. Red squirrels are a part of our national heritage and remain a valued local asset to the estimated 2.2 million English residents living near these beautiful native animals. The tourism sector also values reds highly, with many accommodation providers and attractions contributing to the cause to help ensure their visitors can enjoy red squirrels at close quarters.

We seek to work with all sectors of the community to educate and inform by holding events, giving talks and visiting schools. We are active on social media, allowing people to communicate directly with us in an informal manner, sharing their passion and enthusiasm for red squirrel conservation.

There are more than 40 independent community groups in the north of England protecting their local red squirrels. These groups are represented by the independent Northern Red Squirrels network, which continues to grow every year as communities become more organised.



Outdoor learning. Photo courtesy of Katy Cook.



Photo courtesy of Paul Hewitt.

The National Trust is proud to be doing our bit towards the survival of an iconic species for northern England and we very much see the red squirrel as a flagship for all our conservation work. As one of the 20 most visited National Trust properties in the country, we can really see the benefit of having red squirrels as part of our visitor offer. We are determined to make Wallington one of the places in the north to be able to come and easily see red squirrels.

Paul Hewitt
Countryside Manager, National Trust
Wallington Hall



Photo courtesy of Gary Gallagher.

I had the pleasure of having red squirrels in my garden for the last year, until the entire colony was wiped out by squirrelpox virus. We have to do everything we can to prevent this happening to all reds in England, before it's too late and we no longer have red squirrels to protect.

Gary Gallagher
Volunteer, Choppington
Northumberland

The Future

Red squirrel range in northern England appears stable for the first time in a century and extends across seven counties, far beyond the red squirrel strongholds. The community organisation and science central to the RSNE project mean red squirrels can be secured as a cultural asset for communities and visitors in northern England to enjoy. Maintaining this valued asset through the RSNE project currently costs £700,000 per annum. Continuously securing new investment at this scale will be essential in the long term to keep northern England red.

We hope reading this document encourages you to:

- » **Recognise the value of red squirrels for communities' health and wellbeing.**
- » **Contribute to the mix of long-term public, private and community financing essential for effective conservation.**
- » **Maintain a policy environment that recognises the impact non-native species can have on native wildlife and encourages partnership action across communities.**



Photo courtesy of David Baird.



Photo courtesy of Katy Cook.

I like red squirrels because they are part of nature and very nice animals. We should all look after them!

Tabitha Johnstone
Harbottle C of E First School
Northumberland



Photo courtesy of Adam Seward.

From early beginnings in the 1980s, the volunteer network of Northern Red Squirrels now provides opportunities for everyone from to be involved in protecting 'our' native red squirrel. It is a way of life which becomes addictive and passionate, rewarding us and, importantly, the reds!

Jackie Foott
Cumbria Co-ordinator
Northern Red Squirrels

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Cumbria Monitoring Volunteers. Photo courtesy of Adam Seward.

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