



Advice Note

Supplementary feeding

August 2004

****Please do **NOT** put out food if both red and grey squirrels are present****

Feeding red squirrels

The UK Red Squirrel Group does not generally recommend that people put out food for red squirrels; there has been no evidence to suggest that this actually aids in their conservation. Additionally, there are risks to red squirrels by enticing them into your garden, or other premises. These include disease transmission (see Poxvirus Advice Note), as well as unintentional hazards such as road casualties, where squirrels cross a road to reach food, and risks from cat predation or drowning in water butts. The provision of supplementary food may also encourage grey squirrels into the area. However, we appreciate that people do wish to see, and continue feeding, reds in their gardens and they may be attracted to bird feeders already present. In this case, please follow the guidance below to ensure that you help keep as healthy a red squirrel population as possible.

Feeding squirrels in your garden.

Gardens offer a host of resources to squirrels including being a source of water, moss for bedding and providing a variety of food stuff from garden plants and possibly bird feeders. If red squirrels are already coming into your garden then you can put out supplementary food to help them through the toughest times, summer and winter.

The best foods to provide them are similar to those they might encounter foraging in the wild:

- Hazelnuts in their shells,
- Beechnuts
- Sweet chestnuts
- Sunflower seeds,
- Pine nuts
- Apples and carrots (other native fruit & vegetables)

A diet rich in peanuts may cause calcium deficiency, as will sweet, dried food such as raisins and sultanas. The best option is to put out mixed and varied food supply to help keep the squirrels healthy.

It is important to provide an extra source of calcium, especially if there are young and breeding females in the area. This can be in the form of cuttlefish, bone meal or a supplement such as 'Zolcal D' or 'Calcium lactate' added to a dish of drinking water (see product details).

How often should you feed them?

No evidence suggests that red squirrels become dependent on supplementary food, but it is best to feed in small amounts rather than having food constantly available. Only put food out every 3-4 days, replacing the food when you do so that it doesn't go mouldy. In order to avoid artificially boosting the red squirrel population beyond the capacity of their habitat (which if supplementary feeding were to stop would cause considerable problems to individuals) it is best to feed sporadically and at different times of the year with frequent gaps.



Red squirrel feeding,
courtesy of J. Milburn, EHS

This should ensure the squirrels do not inadvertently become dependent and their delicate balance with the natural environment is not disturbed.

Location of feeders

Apart from competition with grey squirrels and habitat loss, major causes of mortality to red squirrels are cat predation and road death. It is therefore important to site any feeding station in a place that will not encourage red squirrels to cross either open ground or roads. If your garden is on the opposite side of a road from the woodland, consider placing supplementary food adjacent to the woods.

A feeding station should ideally be placed where the red squirrels can easily escape. Being predominantly tree dwellers the best site is up a tree or near a high wall, ideally about 5-6 ft off the ground.

The exact placement of a feeder will depend on the area the red squirrels visit. If you have observed the squirrels entering your garden from a particular point, consider siting the feeder along that route. Using wire or straps around the tree to secure the feeder would allow it to be easily removed for cleaning and replenishing food stuffs or to re-site if it is not attracting any squirrels.

Red Facts

- ✧ Red squirrels are left or right handed when eating pine cones.
- ✧ They can be choosy eaters; you will soon get to know their favourite foods when putting out a varied mix from the recommended list.
- ✧ Red squirrels do not hibernate, hence they cache foods underground for these tougher months.
- ✧ Contrary to popular belief, unlike greys, red squirrels are not very good at digesting acorns due to their high toxin level. Hence greys squirrels fair much better in the majority of our woodlands.
- ✧ A red squirrel's natural diet may include: pine, spruce, larch and fir seeds, sweet chestnuts, and beech nuts, hornbeam, hazelnuts, rosehips, fungi, flowers, buds, shoots and occasionally insects and birds' eggs. Having Scots pine trees in your garden will provide food and shelter for a visiting red squirrel.

What to do if grey squirrels enter the garden

If grey squirrels appear in your garden please contact your nearest Red Squirrel Conservation Officer or local group (see contacts list).

Stop all supplementary feeding as some populations of grey squirrels may carry squirrel poxvirus, a debilitating disease fatal to red squirrels that has little or no effect on greys. Although it is unknown how the disease is transmitted, it is most probably through contact, making a feeding station a likely focal point for transmission between the two species. Squirrels (red and grey) may also suffer from, and pass on, other diseases such as pneumonia and coccidiosis which is why it is important to regularly clean and disinfect feeders.

If you have wild birds in your garden that rely on the food you provide, try to move the food supply every day and clean the feeders regularly to minimise the risk of disease spreading, there are also squirrel proof feeders that may deter persistent grey squirrels.

Important points

1. Provide a source of water
2. Avoid sweet, dried fruits and too many peanuts to prevent calcium deficiency
3. Place a feeding station at head height, preferable on a tree trunk or wall so the squirrels do not have to cross open ground – cats are one of the main predators of squirrels in the UK and account for a high number of fatalities
4. Provide an alternative calcium source
5. Ensure the feeder, food and water dish are kept as clean as possible to help prevent the spread of disease. Also change any food before it goes mouldy.
6. If grey squirrels start entering your garden please report it to your nearest Red Squirrel Conservation Officer or local group, and remove any feeding station(s).

Contact Us

In order to carry out effective conservation work it is important to know the numbers and spread of both the red and grey squirrels. So please, let us know how your feeding programme is going, how many squirrels you encounter and pass on this advice to anyone else you know of wanting to feed red squirrels. The following is a list of Red Squirrel Conservation Officer about the UK:

Cumbria Wildlife Trust

Jason Reynolds and Simon Lloyds

Red Alert North West

Plumgarths

Crook Road

Kendal

Cumbria LA8 8LX

Tel: 01539 816300

Email: red.alert@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk

Lancashire Wildlife Trust

Fiona Robertson
Seaforth Nature Reserve
Port of Liverpool
L21 1JD
Tel: 0151 920 3769
Email: lwildlife@cix.co.uk

Northumberland Wildlife Trust

Louise Bessant
Garden House
St Nicholas Park
Gosforth
Newcastle Upon Tyne NE3 3XT
Tel: 0191 2846884
Email: Louise.Bessant@northwt.org.uk

Wight Squirrel Project

PO Box 33
Ryde
Isle of Wight
PO33 1BH
Email: wightsquirrel@hotmail.com

Scottish Borders

Red Squirrel Conservation Officer (Borders)
Elly Hamilton
Lindean Mill
Galashiels
Selkirkshire
TD1 3PE
Tel: +44 (0)1750 23446
Email: ellyhamilton@redsquirrels.org.uk

Dumfries and Galloway

Red Squirrel Conservation Officer (Dumfries and Galloway)
Zoe Smolka
Barony College
Parkgate
Dumfries
DG1 3NE
Tel: +44 (0)1387 860442
Email: zoe@red-squirrels.org.uk

Wales

Countryside Council for Wales
Maes-y-Ffynnon,
Penrhosgarnedd,
Bangor,
Gwynedd LL57 2DW
Tel: 01248 385500

Northern Ireland

Environment and Heritage Service
Natural Heritage
Commonwealth House
35 Castle Street
BELFAST
BT1 1GU
028 9025 1477

Products and supplies

The majority of the foods and disinfectant products can be bought from good supermarkets, health food shops and some wild bird food suppliers through out the countries. Mixtures of suitable food can also be bought from pet shops sold for pets such as chipmunks.

There are many disinfectants available on the market. You need to ensure that it is not harmful to wild mammals and is preferably a virucide. For example, VirKon and VetArk's Ark-Klens are both suitable products. Generally, a mixture of 1:10 disinfectant to water to scrub clean, at least every 2 months should be suitable to keep the station hygienic. Also regularly remove any food that has gone mouldy.

Similarly calcium supplements can be found in pet shops for small mammals or VetArk's online shop for Nutrobal and Zolcal D.

Please ensure you follow the directions on the labels of the disinfectant and mineral supplements.

For further advice and where to go to get the most competitive priced products, contact your nearest Red Squirrel Conservation Officer or local group.

VirKon Disinfectant:
SPH Supplies
Lowers Painshill Farm
Murcott
Oxford
01869 323995

VetArk
P.O. Box 60
Winchester
0870 2430384
www.vetark.co.uk

Solway Feeders Ltd,
Main Street,
Dundrennen,
Kirkcudbright,
Dumfries & Galloway, DG6 4QH
Tel: 01557 500 253

Additional fact sheets on how to build and set up your own red squirrel feeding station and nesting box are available by contacting the Cumbria Wildlife Trust's Red Alert North West, see the address and telephone number above.

If you have any queries about the information in this advice note please contact:

Countryside Council for Wales (CCW)

01248 385500

Environment & Heritage Service (EHS)

028 9052 0841

English Nature (EN)

01733 455000

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)

0131 554 9797

UK Red Squirrel Group
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