



PROJECT BACKGROUND

Our Mission

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels - Developing Community Action (SSRS-DCA) is a project to secure the long-term future of red squirrels in Scotland by building capacity among communities of volunteers and land managers, empowering them to take on and take ownership of some of the essential protection measures required to save the nation's red squirrels.

Introduction

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels - Developing Community Action (SSRS-DCA), focuses upon one of our most charismatic and well-loved mammals – the red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). Once widespread, red squirrels have undergone a catastrophic population decline primarily due to competition from the non-native invasive, American grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*). There are now only c.160,000 red squirrels remaining in the UK of which 120,000 occur in Scotland – 75% of the remaining UK red squirrel population. Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) was formed to reverse this decline and create the conditions for this mammal to thrive in future.

Over the last 8 years this innovative SSRS partnership trial project has established that it is possible to halt the decline of red squirrels over a wide area via strategically targeted and co-ordinated landscape-scale grey squirrel control. The initiative has enabled reds to re-establish in many areas.

We have now reached a point where we are beginning to understand the scale of the conservation challenge we face, and more importantly, how much it might cost to secure the future of red squirrels in Scotland and the UK in the longer term. A 'silver bullet' solution such as an oral vaccine for Squirrelpox, a contraceptive for grey squirrels, or a natural predator favouring grey squirrels over reds as prey (e.g. pine marten) is likely to be many years away. A continued grey squirrel control programme will need to be deployed long-term, alongside any new techniques that come on-stream, if we are to secure the conservation gains we have achieved to date.

The SSRS-DCA project is aimed at developing a sustainable way to deliver this programme in the long term

Public and community support for the work of Saving Scotland's Red Squirrel has been key to many of the achievements to date. However, to reach a point where communities are capable of taking over significant parts of work that currently relies on paid staff requires a step-change in the level of engagement and training provided by the project.

During the proposed SSRS-DCA project we will invest increased financial resources in communications, engagement, training, systems and strategies which will enable communities and volunteers to take on the vital role for the long-term protection of red squirrels in key areas across the country. We aim to ensure that communities develop the organisational and management capabilities to support these networks in the long-term. This enhanced investment in communities will enable local people to make an important ecological impact, making the red squirrel population more resilient to changes and safeguarding important populations for Scotland.

This will enable the project to refocus its core control work by paid staff to the highest strategic priority (defending the Highland Line), whilst supporting local community groups to protect red squirrel populations in southern Scotland and Aberdeen City.

SSRS Achievements

Over the last 8 years SSRS has established a successful grey squirrel control and surveillance network across Aberdeenshire, northern stretches of the Central Lowlands and widely across the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway in accordance with the Scottish Squirrel Strategy and the Scottish Red Squirrel Action Plan. This has been implemented primarily using professional staff, augmented by householders participating in a trapping scheme and landowners accessing agri-environment funding for grey squirrel control. This work has been enabled by SSRS becoming a widely recognised and trusted brand.

What We Have Learned

SSRS activity during the trial has established that:

- Control work has halted the decline of red squirrels in project areas:
- We have significantly reduced the geographic spread of grey squirrels in Aberdeenshire, and
- We have prevented their further spread northwards from the Central Lowlands into red-only populations of highland Scotland.

Whilst our evidence has shown that sustained control produces ongoing reductions in the grey squirrel population, it is important that this successful scheme of trapping is sustained in order to prevent reinvasions from un-trapped grey squirrel populations.

In southern Scotland:

- We have slowed the northward spread of Squirrelpox disease,

- Our work has allowed red squirrels to recover and thrive in southern Scotland landscapes where grey squirrel densities are kept very low, even with the widespread presence of Squirrelpox.
- We have learned that grey squirrel control is unlikely to do more than slow the rate of spread of Squirrelpox disease through grey squirrel populations. The virus is very difficult to contain altogether and an inexorable spread from southern Scotland towards the Central Lowlands is expected.

The Vision

The vision for SSRS-DCA throughout its delivery phase and beyond is as follows:

“Red squirrels are thriving in South Scotland, the Highlands, Argyll, northern Tayside/Stirling and the north east and have become a successful symbol of Scotland’s ongoing commitment to protecting wildlife for future generations.”

Red Squirrel Strategic Priorities in Scotland

SSRS-DCA project activity is divided into three distinct areas: North East Scotland (Aberdeenshire and Moray), the Central Lowlands (Argyll, the Trossachs, Stirling and Tayside) and South Scotland (the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway), which have different aims.

North East Scotland

In the isolated grey squirrel population centred on the City of Aberdeen, where grey squirrel abundance and spread has been significantly reduced in the trial phase of SSRS, the aim is to continue to systematically reduce occupancy and abundance of grey squirrels in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City by adaptive grey squirrel control supported by systematic monitoring.

Here, the need for intensive control activity is anticipated to decrease over the SSRS-DCA project period. The focus for the SSRS-DCA project in this area will therefore be to develop a community-driven “rapid response methodology” to reliably detect and respond to any remnant or resurgent populations of grey squirrels.

Central Lowlands

In the Central Lowlands the aim is to prevent the spread northwards of grey squirrels and Squirrelpox virus (SQPV) into Scotland’s core red squirrel populations north of the Highland Line. This will be achieved via a programme of strategic and co-ordinated grey squirrel control in a zone running coast to coast along the Highland Boundary Fault designed to keep densities reduced to a level which minimises transmission rate of Squirrelpox disease should it ever reach this area. To aid detection we will track any geographic spread of SQPV by systematically taking grey squirrel blood samples annually across the landscape to detect disease presence by testing for SQPV antibodies. We will continue to work with scientists on population and disease modelling aimed at quantifying the minimum level and coverage of grey squirrel control effort required to prevent their future spread into red squirrel populations north of the Highland Boundary Fault, potentially carrying with them the additional risk of Squirrelpox disease.

We also aim to carry out an education and awareness campaign to alert the people of the Central Lowlands to the potential of SQPV infiltration over the coming years, and to the action that can be taken to secure Scotland's red squirrel populations in the presence of the disease.

South Scotland

In Southern Scotland, intensive conservation effort will now be focused on eight priority areas for red squirrel conservation (PARCs). In these areas we will facilitate a move away from reliance on paid staff towards communities and landowners motivated and capable of acting together to protect red squirrels in their local area. There will be a strong emphasis on engaging and supporting local people to take on responsibility for the practical conservation work involved in looking after their local red squirrel populations, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in their role in the conservation of this charismatic species.

All areas

We will need to continue the promotion, collation and verification of national public sightings records for publication on the National Biodiversity Network (NBN), and the implementation of the scheme of presence/absence monitoring across areas of Scotland in which the project is active.

Key Organisations in Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

The central partnership consists of the Scottish Wildlife Trust as voluntary conservation body, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) as statutory agency, Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) as major land and forest owner and forestry regulatory body, Scottish Land & Estates (SL&E) as influential landowner representative organisation, RSPB Scotland as a leading nature conservation body, and Red Squirrel Survival Trust (RSST), the UK's only dedicated red squirrel conservation charity.



Our funders

