

Red Squirrels Northern England

Shap Community Event - 5th Nov 2016

Notes from the FR-led session with 50+ volunteers

Discussion questions:

- What are your aspirations for red squirrel conservation in the Northern England?
- What do you see as the key challenges for red squirrel conservation in the Northern England?
- Why did you start volunteering? [we would like to document your story]
- What keeps you motivated to volunteer?
- What challenges do you face in your volunteering role?
- How could your volunteering experience be improved?

1) Aspirations for red squirrel conservation in Northern England

Aspirations chiefly centred on the maintenance and expansion of red squirrel populations into new areas, and the complementary eradication of greys. Achieving these aspirations would help to realise other hopes, such as 'securing the future of reds', 'being able to see reds most days, not just in [current] strongholds' and 'putting reds back in peoples' gardens'. For some volunteers aspirations are very localised (e.g. Grassmere) where a desire to ensure that grey squirrels can never gain a foothold was expressed. In other cases, volunteers thought more about the landscape level, hoping that greys could be controlled or removed from all areas and counties, including the public parks. Similarly, aspirations for more corridors between red strongholds emerged, as well as a hope that one day only reds could be found to the north of an east-west line across the country. Occasionally aspirations went beyond squirrel conservation and control, reflecting not only a desire to remove invasive species but to re-wild uplands so that tree cover could increase and species such as the pine marten could return.

Away from the ecological aspirations, volunteers also aspired to reach a point where the general public were aware of the issues concerning squirrels, for example through education. Particular topics to emerge included the damage caused by greys, the fact that greys are non-native, and the ecology of reds.

Volunteers also wish for wider and more regular publicity for their work, as well as celebrity endorsement. Similarly, there is a desire for RSNE to continue acting as a focus for volunteer efforts and to provide the scientific evidence to quantify volunteers' effectiveness. Such measures could help to raise the groups' profile, gain recognition and assist in educating the general public about the issues at hand.

In order to sustain efforts and effectiveness it is widely recognised that resources (some combination of time, money and people) must be maintained, or preferably increased. Long-term funding dedicated to controlling grey squirrels and an increase in institutional funding were both suggested aspirations. Without this, volunteers recognised that their numbers would need to be increased, through for example the expansion of the volunteer network (with more help from government bodies) and/or greater youth involvement. Finally, it was noted that an increase in landowner participation would prove extremely beneficial, with some volunteers going so far as to wish that all landowners should be required by law to allow squirrels to be controlled on their land.

2) Key Challenges for red squirrel conservation in Northern England

A lack of funding and resources were the most commonly reported challenges for conserving red squirrels in Northern England. These shortfalls are perceived to undermine grey squirrel control and the retention of rangers – both of which are considered necessary for red squirrel conservation. Such challenges are perceived to be exacerbated by Brexit and the continued governance by the Conservative Party. More broadly, it is felt that these political circumstances will lead to a wide range of environmental issues being ignored or underfunded. Additionally, there is concern about how land use will change as a result of pressure from housing and fracking. Such pressures parallel challenges to red squirrel habitat suitability and connectivity (i.e. a lack of corridors).

Participants also regarded the extent of the grey squirrel's distribution as a substantial challenge to conserving reds. The sheer scale of the grey's coverage means that there is a need for constant control, leading some to conclude that there are in fact so many greys that eradication is unrealistic, despite this being an aspiration for many. The challenge of controlling greys is further complicated by a lack of access and control in large woodlands and private estates. It is thought that if such large areas are allowed to remain as havens for grey squirrels, efforts to stem their dispersal into red strongholds will remain a constant battle. In the same way, the apparent absence of a coordinated effort at the national level raises questions over the sustainability of one region's efforts. In contrast to concerns about the presence of too many greys, some volunteers also warned against complacency in areas where reds are thriving and greys are absent.

The other key challenges to emerge centred on raising public awareness around the need for red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel control. In some cases the public are described as apathetic about such issues, whereas in others there is opposition, particularly around the use of lethal controls. Those with a lack of exposure to red squirrels are thought to be the most challenging group from which support can be garnered, whether that is the younger generation, or those from grey dominated areas (e.g. urban areas). Educating these people about the non-native, invasive status of the grey squirrel and its impacts on native red squirrels, woodland and birds so that they 'recognise grey squirrels as the enemy' was a similar challenge to emerge. Active engagement and leadership from key agencies (FC, National Trust, National Park Authorities etc.) is considered one means of addressing this issue, but this is said not to be happening, much to the volunteers frustration. Relatedly, it was suggested that if the public were better informed about the accessibility of sites further interest in red squirrels may be generated.

3) Reasons for starting to volunteer

The most common reasons why people begin to volunteer are underpinned by an interest in protecting red squirrels, which they hold dear. For some of the older volunteers it is possible to remember a time when only reds were present in the area. The influx of greys has in these cases been directly observed as a threat to something they do not wish to lose. These observations range from a reduction in red sightings and the apparent loss of all reds in an area due to SQPDV, to more direct conflicts such as witnessing greys fighting with reds. Wider impacts of greys were also forthcoming, including a report of greys killing long-tailed tits, robins and wren chicks in a volunteer's garden. While contact and exposure to red and grey squirrels proved an impetus for many of the volunteers, one also got involved with the aim of seeing a red squirrel for the very first time (wanting to do so before turning 50 years old). For others, there is pleasure to be had in helping others (e.g. youths) to experience the thrill of seeing reds.

The fact that the grey is an alien, invasive species and the red is a threatened native species further cements people's conviction on the issue. Many volunteers noted their desire to make a positive contribution (conservation conscience), a belief that they could make a difference, and the need to 'remove intruders'. A couple of volunteers perceived themselves to be particularly well placed to act owing to their sizable landholdings. One of these was already controlling greys before officially joining as a volunteer, demonstrating that they and the Red Squirrel Group shared a common goal. Another volunteer sought out a group in order to receive advice about how to conserve reds on their land. While some volunteers are primarily concerned with the conservation of reds at a very local level (i.e. their own land or individual village) others reported wider interests in the countryside and increasing biodiversity.

A number of volunteers reported the influence of others in their decision to get involved. For example, conversations with the rangers on the ground, and a chairman of one of the groups. Others were attracted by hearing a talk by RSNE staff, which struck a chord because of the presence of red squirrels in their garden. Some volunteers described that they were not exclusively dedicated to working for red squirrels, but the groups' aims were found to overlap of those with their volunteering roles elsewhere (e.g. for Cumbria Wildlife Trust and in the Yorkshire Dales).

Aside from wanting to make a difference to the conservation of red squirrels, volunteers also commented on personal benefits brought about by starting to volunteer. These included keeping fit and active, having contact with others who share similar views and the opportunity to put their hunting hobby to good use.

4) Drivers of continued motivation among volunteers

A majority of volunteers noted that their motivation to continue in the role corresponded to their initial reasons for becoming involved, i.e. primarily their passion for securing or expanding the endangered red population, and anger towards greys which they feel must be removed. The fact that their aspirations for these issues had not yet come to fruition – and a belief that they someday might – was often deemed ample motivation for volunteers to continue with their efforts. One volunteer proudly described this as 'cussedness'. Continued or increased sightings of red squirrels

also emerged as a factor - in some cases volunteers are regularly enjoying seeing and feeding reds. Similarly, increased awareness and exposure to the problems caused by grey squirrels plays a role. Experience of successes has served to boost the volunteers' morale, for example, the expansion of reds into new or historic areas as greys have been removed. Observing the results of their efforts and having these recognised is important to some volunteers, as is witnessing examples of public interest in the issue.

Volunteers expressed a range of additional reasons for why they continue to stay active in their role. Some simply expressed their enjoyment for and interest in the work. Others reflected on the satisfaction they gained from knowing they were doing a good job (e.g. in controlling greys). This belief that they are making a difference echoed comments about feeling useful, believing they are making a positive contribution, or perceiving themselves to be putting something back into the community. Beyond this volunteers remarked that nobody else appears willing to get involved, and so others come to rely on their contributions. Thus, a sense of duty develops. Meeting with other passionate and enthusiastic volunteers emerged as an important motivator for many volunteers, while a few also mentioned their eagerness to support the well-regarded rangers.

5) Challenges faced in volunteering role

Many of the challenges volunteers reportedly face in their role are iterations of the challenges described in conserving red squirrels in Northern England. For example, attempting to overcome public apathy or opposition, particularly in respect of lethal controls, and the fact that the many people would rather see grey squirrels than no squirrels at all. Gaining traction in the public arena was specifically brought up as a challenge, and one that was undermined by the comments of influential figures (e.g. BBC's Springwatch et al.). Some volunteers even referred to the challenge of communicating to friends and family that they are involved in culling. Another volunteer remarked that there was a lack of reassurance and correspondingly a lack of confidence that they were doing the right thing.

The lack of support shown by agencies was a further reiteration of an aforementioned challenge. Volunteers repeatedly pointed to the lack of interest and support, along with comments that agencies need to realise that volunteers are helping them to achieve the policies they allege to embrace. Similarly, there are claims that funders are reluctant to support killing (of greys), when this is currently the only effective means of preventing spread into new areas. As a result it is difficult to get backing from all agencies. Furthermore, a lack of cooperation between organisations is regarded as a challenge. The issue of restricted access brought about because of a lack of landowner participation or cooperation also reemerged.

Expressions of the challenges more specific to the volunteers themselves were dominated by the issue of insufficient time to carry out their duties, or similarly, a lack of people to share the workload. For some, time is an issue because of competing demands for their involvement in other volunteer groups. In one sense volunteers recognised that they could become victims of their own success; their hard efforts could result in fewer greys, which could result in a perception that less subsequent action would then be required. Ultimately this could result in fewer volunteers, less

public interest and a resurgence of grey squirrels. Volunteers also noted the demoralisation brought about by the spasmodic reappearance of greys when they believed that reds were 'winning'.

Elsewhere, receiving feedback on how their data fits into the wider landscape was said to be a challenge, as was the broader issue of keeping in touch with others involved.

6) Improvements to volunteering experience

Relatively few comments were received about how the volunteers' experiences could be improved. Unsurprisingly there were once again calls for more encouragement and support of agencies including the Forestry Commission and RSPB. In parallel to the challenge volunteers face in allocating time, and the benefits volunteers gained from interacting with others of the same ilk, there were suggestions that getting more people involved would positively impact their experience. On a related note, volunteers expressed their desire for more social networking and interaction within and between groups.