

## Island offers Red squirrels a Lifeline

Conservationists are heralding the Welsh island of Anglesey as a modern day Noah's Ark for the endangered red squirrel. A pioneering project to clear the islands' woodlands of the non-native grey squirrel is entering a final and decisive phase, as red squirrels are now being reintroduced across a range of woodland sites during this winter.

Squirrels from a number of Zoos and private collections across the UK are being gathered together for release onto Anglesey . Wildwood Trust in Kent, Paradise Park in Cornwall, Kilnsey Park in Yorkshire, Dudley Zoo, Banham Zoo in Norfolk, the Hawk Conservancy in Hampshire and members of the Norfolk Red Squirrel Captive Breeding Group, have all contributed animals through a programme being co-ordinated by the Welsh Mountain Zoo, Colwyn Bay. Many of the animals are genetically unique and are the only surviving individuals from populations that became extinct long ago as grey squirrels steadily swept through England from the 1960s onwards. Anglesey already contains animals from Cumbria , Scotland , and the Thetford forest in East Anglia , and it is anticipated that the island will soon contain the most genetically diverse population of red squirrels in Great Britain .

The red squirrel is our only native squirrel species, but it has undergone a drastic decline and is becoming increasingly endangered on the mainland as a result of competition from grey squirrels. It is now clear that grey squirrels not only dominate woodland habitats, but that they are also involved in the spread of the 'squirrel pox' virus into red squirrel populations where it can lead to devastating disease outbreaks.

Dr Craig Shuttleworth, Project Leader of the Anglesey Red Squirrel Project said: “ The problem is that grey squirrels not only compete for the same resources as red squirrels, but they also pass on disease to the reds, and this second factor means that even a handful of grey squirrels pose a significant threat to local red squirrel populations .”

“ Because Anglesey is an island it is possible to eradicate grey squirrels completely, whereas on mainland sites conservationists face continued re-invasion of woodlands from grey squirrel populations further a field. Regular re-invasion means continued risk of 'squirrel-pox' outbreaks, and therefore casts doubts over the future sustainability of many mainland populations. ”

Maintaining captive collections of red squirrels is one of the key elements in the national strategy to conserve the species. Through the use of a 'stud-book', the history, location and bloodline of every individual animal is recorded. This information can be used to help conservationists to select animals for release into the wild.

Nick Jackson, Zoological Director of the Welsh Mountain Zoo is delighted to be involved in the conservation of red squirrels: “In 1989 the Welsh Mountain Zoo started keeping

red squirrels and we became captivated by the charm and beauty of the species and alarmed by the threats it faces in the British Isles .”

“In the early 1990s we started the UK 's first nationwide co-ordinated breeding programme and studbook for the species. Our research in 1996/7 pioneered the principle of captive breeding and release for red squirrel reintroductions. We are delighted that this work is now supporting Dr. Craig Shuttleworth and his colleagues on Anglesey in their last-ditch efforts to save the red squirrel in Wales .”

The Anglesey project is a partnership between a range of rural and countryside organisations including the National Trust, Forestry Commission Wales, North Wales Wildlife Trust, Countryside Council for Wales , Anglesey County Council and those institutions involved in the captive breeding of red squirrels.

David Woolcock, Curator at Paradise Park Wildlife Sanctuary is a strong supporter of the Anglesey reintroduction project: “ Paradise Park in Cornwall has a long history of working with and breeding Red Squirrels and it is really rewarding to know that some of the young which we have bred will be in the forefront of this exciting project. Let us hope that Anglesey is just the beginning of what will ultimately see the return of the Red Squirrel to other former haunts .”

Over 6,000 grey squirrels have been removed from Anglesey since 1998, and today it is estimated that fewer than 100 exist. In July 2006, the Anglesey Red Squirrel Project received over £400,000 of funding from GrantScape in order to completely restore red squirrels back across the islands' 700 km<sup>2</sup> area.

Elizabeth Payne, Grant Manager for GrantScape said: “ The project was awarded significant funding with the aim of establishing Anglesey as a haven for UK red squirrels. Introducing genetically diverse captive bred red squirrels, to create a robust population on Anglesey , is critical to the success of the project. ”

Dr Craig Shuttleworth, Project Leader of the Anglesey Red Squirrel Project, was encouraged by the results of the work carried out so far: “ Anglesey may eventually be the last stand for the red squirrel in Wales and is one of a handful of long term refuges for the red squirrel in Britain as a whole. ”

“ It is absolutely fantastic to see native red squirrels back in habitats where for decades only grey squirrels were to be found. The UK strategy is almost universally focused upon maintaining red squirrels only with commercial spruce forests, but here on Anglesey we can look forward to having red squirrels back across the whole spectrum of habitats which they once used including hazel copses and oak dominated broadleaved forests, it really is an exciting prospect. ”

Miles Barne, chairman of the European Squirrel Initiative, welcomed the continuing success of the campaign to re-establish red squirrels on Anglesey: “ American grey squirrels have displaced our much loved native red squirrel across most of England and

Wales .” He said. “ Only in the north of England and in Scotland do significant numbers of red squirrels remain and even these are likely to become extinct within 20 years unless the advance of the grey squirrel can be checked .”

“ Anglesey highlights the vital role which island refuges will play in conserving red squirrels until they can be safely restored once more to the mainland parks and woodland they inhabited for thousands of years before the American grey arrived. ”

Information about the Anglesey red squirrel project can be found at [www.redsquirrels.info](http://www.redsquirrels.info) and this site also allows the public to get actively involved in red squirrel conservation.

Notes to Editors

For more information about the Anglesey project, including digital images, please contact:

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The red squirrel is our only native squirrel species. This century it has undergone a drastic decline and is now mainly confined to northern England , Scotland and parts of Wales .

The main cause of this decline is competition with the introduced American grey squirrel. The grey squirrel typically weighs 550-800g, and is much larger than the red squirrel which is 260-350g.

Grey squirrels are adapted to broadleaved habitats, particularly woodlands which contain significant amounts of oak. However, they will colonise coniferous plantations. If this happens, and the grey squirrels are not controlled, then red squirrel populations are at risk of extinction.

It has been estimated that there are 120,000 red squirrels in Scotland , 30,000 in England and less than 1,000 in Wales . There are an estimated 2.5 million grey squirrels in Britain .

A recent independent scientific report produced by Professor Stephen Harris of Bristol University has highlighted the fact that Anglesey is one of the best locations where complete grey squirrel eradication is currently achievable.

In a report entitled 'Is culling of grey squirrels a viable tactic to conserve red squirrel populations?' Professor Harris states: ' The most successful eradication of grey squirrels has been on Anglesey, Wales , where the removal of 6,000 squirrels in five years has allowed red squirrel populations to increase. The success of this effort has been in part due to the geography of Anglesey; being an island with limited connections to the mainland has meant grey squirrels were unable to repopulate culled areas. '

Anglesey is now the only location in Wales where red squirrels are found living in broadleaved woodland.

There are currently 150 red squirrels on the island and this population is now expanding rapidly.

This autumn around twenty red squirrels are being released.

A previous successful release took place in Newborough forest during 2004 and 2005.

The European Squirrel Initiative is committed to the total removal of grey squirrels by non-lethal means and the restoration of red squirrels to their former range.