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Farming

'Cull grey squirrels' to save unique Welsh red

Dec 6 2005
Steve Dube, Western Mail

CONSERVATIONISTS are calling for grey squirrels to be culled in order to save the native red squirrel from extinction.

A meeting organised by the European Squirrel Initiative in Builth Wells last week heard experts from throughout Wales describe the damage being done to the dwindling red squirrel population by the alien grey.

Lord Livsey of Talgarth told the gathering of conservationists, landowners, foresters and government agencies that greys were now present throughout Wales and urgent action was needed to protect the reds.

"Effective control of the grey squirrel is the only option," he said.

"The time for action is now and we should challenge the government to take this matter seriously and commit resources to developing an effective way of removing grey squirrels from Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom."

The call has been backed by the wildlife expert and television presenter Iolo Williams.

"I would like to see the greys eradicated from the whole of Britain," he said.

Grey squirrels were introduced to Britain from North America in the mid-19th century and increased rapidly to the detriment of the smaller native red.

The Welsh red squirrel, which has a unique genetic make-up, now numbers fewer than 1,000 and populations are largely restricted to only three areas - Anglesey, and the Clocaenog and Tywi forests.

A project on Anglesey, supported by the Countryside Council for Wales, is eradicating the greys to make a safe haven for red squirrels on the island.

But the story is different in the rest of Wales where the grey squirrel is encroaching on remaining red squirrel areas.

"It is vital that we secure the future of the Welsh red squirrel, which is now on the verge of extinction due to the activities of the grey," said European Squirrel Initiative chairman Miles Barne.

"Not only does the grey carry the disease squirrel pox, which is deadly to the red, but the grey's size, appetite and numbers mean that it can out-compete the red for food."

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Delegates at the meeting also expressed concern over the impact of the greys on birds.

Last year the British Trust for Ornithology blamed grey squirrels for accelerating the decline in woodland birds by raiding nests for eggs and newly hatched birds.

Grey squirrels are also known to take over caches of winter food stored by jays, and their diet of insects, buds and seeds brings them into conflict with species such as nuthatch, hawfinch and bullfinch.

They also ruin young trees by stripping them of bark.

Dr Craig Shuttleworth who runs the Anglesey Red Squirrel project said red squirrels were now being reintroduced into several Anglesey woodlands following the eradication of the greys.

"The red squirrel population on Anglesey is steadily increasing and the work that we are doing shows that reds can re-establish themselves once the grey squirrel has been removed," he said.

"Although the threat from the grey squirrel is being tackled on the island, it is imperative that government agencies start to manage the forests where the red squirrels are found in a manner that is much more sympathetic to the needs of the species."

Forestry consultant Huw Denman from the Tywi forest Mid Wales Red Squirrel Project called on the Forestry Commission to take a lead in controlling greys.

"The Forestry Commission in England recently announced the creation of 16 special sites where the red squirrel was to be protected by a buffer zone in which grey squirrels will be removed by trapping and shooting," he said.

"The same should happen in Wales, particularly on Anglesey and the two mainland areas where there are known to be red squirrels."

The issue has been raised in the National Assembly, where countryside minister Carwyn Jones said the Welsh Assembly Government was waiting for the results of American research into a contraceptive vaccine for the greys.

"A research project is currently underway to develop an oral bait that will be administered to the grey squirrel," said Mr Jones.

"The Forestry Commission has also separately identified the range of work that might be required in order to develop an effective, species-specific contraceptive.

"There are no plans to introduce contraception for grey squirrels in Wales in the immediate future. We await the evaluation of the research projects currently being undertaken."

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