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Farming

Foresters on the track of red squirrels

Sep 20 2005
Sally Williams, Western Mail

CONSERVATIONISTS are tracking a growing population of red squirrels in a Welsh forest to find out more about the secretive and rare rodent.

And they are also keeping tabs on the not-so-popular grey squirrels that some farmers and foresters view as "American tree rat vermin" that damage deciduous trees and could pose a health threat to the reds.

Iolo Lloyd, conservation manager at the 5,000-hectare Clocaenog Forest, near Ruthin, Denbighshire, says the Forestry Commission's main concern is to preserve the rare national treasure - the red squirrel - and in the process, during high population peaks within the forest, culling grey squirrels is a "feasible option".

He says the forest contains around 80% of Wales' red squirrel population; there are believed to be at least 300 of them there and the forest population could be as many as 1000.

Only 100 grey squirrels have been caught there but they could carry a disease, called squirrel pox virus, that the reds are less resistant to in densely populated areas.

He said, "We are trying to conserve the red squirrel because she has lost so much of her ground over the years and she is down to populating only a handful of sites in Wales.

"I get people in their sixties and seventies telling me, 'When I was a youngster, we only ever had reds'."

But as everyone knows, red squirrels are now notoriously hard to find, so Mr Lloyd has been using radio-tracking to monitor their movements.

Mr Lloyd, said, "We have been radio-tracking the red squirrel so we can follow them around the forest. They are very secretive but we are getting an idea of the areas they like and their habitats. We can't always see them but we know where they are."

Red squirrels spend 80% of their time in trees, so since 1992, when the Woodlands Strategy for Wales was adopted, conservationists have changed the way that they manage the forests and it appears to be paying off.

They ensure that at least half of the forest has continuous canopy cover, to keep the red squirrels happy.

Mr Lloyd doesn't think there is any evidence of grey squirrels attacking red squirrels but he stressed that they do pose other threats to them and their habitat, even though they can appear cute in parks and eat out of people's hands.

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He said, "The greys only seem to come into the forest when there is a particularly good food supply so it doesn't really impact on the reds.

"Greys find it harder to sustain their body weights than reds and the seeds in conifer cones are only very small.

"Reds are just over half the body weight of the greys, they don't need as much food so they have the edge in competition.

"Different conifer trees cone at different times so by planting mixtures of conifer varieties and providing matrix of canopy corridors, the reds always have food."

He added that the management of the forest was a long-term project that could take more than 50 years to produce significant results.

Meanwhile, the inaugural meeting of the new Wales Squirrel Forum, that has been set up by Forestry Commission Wales and the Countryside Council for Wales, took place in Welshpool last week.

The forum has been established to enable effective red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel management in Wales, as part of Red Squirrel Week (September 10 to 18).

Other members of the forum include Anglesey and Mid Wales Red Squirrel Projects, European Squirrel Initiative and Wildlife Trusts.

This group will develop a Welsh red squirrel conservation strategy by drawing on their collective knowledge.

James Laing, environment adviser FC Wales, said, "The creation of this new forum will help to consolidate our efforts."

In partnership with Anglesey Red Squirrel Project, FCW has also been implementing an introduction programme in Newborough Forest on the island over the past three years, and red squirrels are now successfully breeding in the forest.

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