

SQUIRREL FAQs

Until the late 19th century the red squirrel (left) was the only native British squirrel but in 1876 a new fashion was started when a pair of grey squirrels was released in Cheshire.

People liked the 'look' of the new squirrel and the trend continued for the next 50 years, resulting in a dramatic decline in red squirrel numbers all over Britain between 1900 and 1925. Red squirrels seem unable to survive in the presence of greys.

Grey squirrels are common throughout most of England and Wales, and are beginning to become established in Scotland. In Avon only the grey squirrel occurs. Red squirrels are found mainly in Scotland, the Lake District, and take refuge on a number of islands, most notable the south coast islands of Brownsea and the Isle of Wight.

Where do squirrels live?

Individuals have been found living in fields, near to motorways or in rabbit holes, but, of course, old woodlands are most popular and important tree species include oak, beech, hazel, ash, and yew. Dreys, which are the most common type of nest, are typically domed and situated in the fork of trees, while dens lie in tree hollows and are often made in the vacated homes of hole-nesting birds like woodpeckers. Nests are lined with soft hair and moss and may be shared by several local squirrels.

When do squirrels breed?

Breeding begins in January and continues throughout the summer, depending on the weather and how much food was available the previous autumn. Individuals are mature at 11 months but do not form stable pairs - The female is responsible for raising the offspring.

Are squirrels protected?

Red squirrels are strictly protected by law and may not be trapped, killed or kept, except under licence from English Nature. The grey is officially classed a vermin.

What do squirrels eat?

Squirrels are opportunistic. They can make use of any new food supply including peanuts, bulbs and eggs, but their main food is tree seed, particularly hazel nuts and seed from conifer cones. They also eat tree flowers and shoots, and in winter they take fungus from under tree bark. Towards autumn seed is stored for future use by burying it below the soil surface and leaf litter in a cache. Individual squirrels will have large numbers of caches, each containing two or three items.

How should I attract squirrels to my garden?

Of course, the biggest attraction is food, though a garden pond will provide water, a mown lawn moss for nest lining, and a nest box home. Squirrels often pillage bird tables for nuts and seeds, and it is advisable to have separate tables for birds and squirrels if you wish to attract both. A bird table can be made squirrel proof by using a slippery pole with a squirrel proof collar, and placing it in the centre of the garden away from trees and hedges. Place the squirrel table near a hedge, bush or tree and keep your offerings as natural as possible.

Why are squirrel populations controlled?

Grey squirrels can cause serious damage to trees by bark stripping during early spring. Research has shown that squirrels are not searching for food, but to reach the phloem - which carries nutrients to other parts of the tree, under the bark, and since stripping sometimes occurs at the base it occasionally results in the tree's death. Over the years a number of methods of control have been used throughout the country, including cage traps and shooting, but research shows that only poisoning reduces tree damage. The anti-coagulant warfarin (rat poison) is the most commonly used poison. Most organisations involved in woodland management have a squirrel control policy, and for many it is the final course of action where all other attempts to limit damage have failed.

