

# Good Practice Guide: protecting Red Squirrels during woodland management and forestry operations

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If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, then you:

- **must** take [reasonable avoidance measures to protect Red Squirrels](#)
- **should** follow as many of the [Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Red Squirrels](#) as you can.

## Introduction

The Red Squirrel is one of Wales's most endangered mammal species. Historically widespread across Welsh woodlands, its population has suffered severe declines over the past century due to habitat loss, competition from the invasive Grey Squirrel, and disease, particularly the squirrelpox virus, which is fatal to Red Squirrels but carried asymptotically by Grey Squirrels.

Today, Red Squirrels are restricted to three main population strongholds in Wales:

- Anglesey and parts of Gwynedd – on Anglesey Grey Squirrels have been successfully eradicated, leading to a strong and expanding Red Squirrel population. Red Squirrels are now spreading in North Gwynedd, bolstered by conservation efforts and releases of captive bred animals ([Red Squirrels Trust Wales](#)).
- Clocaenog Forest (North-East Wales) – a long-established population supported by targeted conservation and reinforcement efforts ([Clocaenog Red Squirrels Trust](#)).
- Mid Wales (Tywi Valley and surrounding forests) – the only population that has persisted naturally without reintroductions, and is genetically distinct ([Mid Wales Red Squirrel Project](#)).

These are the focal sites for Red Squirrel conservation in Wales – see the [Red Squirrel conservation plan](#). Red squirrels are likely to be present in woodlands in these areas. These populations remain isolated and vulnerable but are stable in areas with active management and Grey Squirrel control.

Each focal site also has an associated buffer zone where management, like Grey Squirrel control, is targeted.

Red Squirrels can inhabit coniferous, broadleaved, and mixed woodlands, and are occasionally found in parks and gardens. But on mainland Wales where Grey Squirrels are present Red Squirrels are largely restricted to upland conifer forests. Their diet is varied, with tree seeds and fruits forming the core, supplemented by buds, flowers, fungi, berries, lichens, and insects, especially caterpillars taken by females before breeding. Woodlands with a mix of tree species provide a more reliable year-round food supply, and in mixed coniferous forests, home ranges are closely tied to seed availability.

## How are Red Squirrels protected?

Red Squirrels are a UK protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This means you must take reasonable measures to avoid harming them in a way that would be an offence, such as intentionally killing or injuring them, or intentionally or recklessly damaging, destroying or obstructing access to their dreys or disturbing them whilst they are using their dreys.

Whilst you should always aim to avoid any harm to protected species, a defence is available if harm to Red Squirrels occurs as the 'incidental result of a lawful operation' and 'could not reasonably have been avoided'. To rely on this defence, you will need to be able to demonstrate you took all reasonable measures to minimise the impact of your operation on the species. Showing that you followed the measures in this Good Practice Guide is one way to demonstrate that you did this.

Appropriate woodland management has an important role to play in maintaining the habitat conditions required by Red Squirrels. However, forest operations can also be harmful if not managed sensitively.

It can be very difficult to locate dreys. Evidence indicates that around 85% are not visible from the ground. Even having identified one, it will be hard to determine whether it is active, or whether it is a Red Squirrel drey rather than a Grey Squirrel drey or the nest of another species. Therefore, when working in a Red Squirrel focal site, or another area where Red Squirrel are known to be present, avoiding felling in their breeding season is likely to be the only effective way to avoid destroying active dreys. If you do fell in the breeding season, you will need to be able to demonstrate that it was reasonable to do so, and what additional measures you took to manage the increased risk of harm.

If you cannot avoid an offence by following this guidance, a competent ecologist may be able to develop alternative, site-specific, ways of working to enable you to keep within the law.

NRW does not have the power to issue licences permitting harm to UK protected species for the purpose of forestry.

## Are Red Squirrels using your woodland?

With the Mammal Society, we have produced a guide [\*Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales\*](#), containing specific advice on how to carry out surveys to check for protected species.

## Checking for records

First you should check whether your woodland is within one of the focal sites for Red Squirrel conservation in Wales. You should assume that Red Squirrels are present in woodlands within these areas.

If you are not within the focal site but are within a buffer zone, you should check for records of Red Squirrels within 2 km of your work site and assume presence if you find any.

If there is a local Red Squirrel group, they may be able to provide advice.

If you apply for a felling licence, NRW will check for records. If your woodland is within a focal site, or we find records that suggest the presence of Red Squirrels, we will usually add an environmental condition to your felling licence requiring that you follow the measures in this guide.

## Walkover survey

If you are within a buffer zone, but have not found any records, you should still use your walkover survey to check for evidence of Red Squirrels, assuming presence if you find any.

If Red Squirrels are assumed to be present, we strongly recommend that you do not carry out any felling in the breeding season. If you cannot do this, your walkover survey will need to identify any active squirrel dreys within the work area that need to be protected, and this may be difficult.

Unless you are in an area where Grey Squirrels are absent, it will be difficult to distinguish between dreys used by Red and Grey Squirrel. Techniques such as camera traps can be used to confirm the presence of Red Squirrels, although this may take significant time and may not be feasible in all cases.

Red Squirrels can build a new drey in only a day or two, so it will also be necessary to carry out a pre-commencement survey shortly before felling commences to ensure there are no new active dreys in any coupe that is to be worked in the breeding season.

[\*Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales\*](#) will assist a competent person to do this.

Before you can implement the avoidance measures in the next section, you will need to have established the following:

1. Whether you are within a Red Squirrel focal site, or whether records, field signs or other evidence indicates that Red Squirrels are using the woodland, if so, and you intend to fell in the breeding season:
2. The location of any active Red Squirrel dreys.

# Reasonable avoidance measures to protect Red Squirrels

If you are relying on following this good practice to keep within the law, you will need to adhere to the following measures. If you cannot do this, a competent ecologist may be able to suggest site-specific mitigations that may allow you to deviate from these standard measures without causing an offence. If this is not possible, you may need to change your plans.

If you unexpectedly find evidence of the species during work, you should consider whether you are able to apply the measures in this guide or seek advice from a competent ecologist.

When working in a woodland within a Red Squirrel focal site, or where evidence indicates that Red Squirrels are present, the following must be adhered to:

## 1. Protect active dreys during the breeding season

- Unless it cannot be avoided, do not carry out any felling operations in Red Squirrel areas between 1 February and 30 September.
- If you must work during this period, ensure that felling of trees with active dreys does not take place in the period 1 February to 30 September.

## 2. Plan any clear-felling so that Red Squirrels can move into retained woodland

- Felling (at any time of year) should progress towards an area of retained woodland so that any squirrels are able to escape into a safe refuge and do not become trapped in the work area.

# Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Red Squirrels

Managing your woodland in line with the UKFS can deliver significant benefits for wildlife. The actions below would be particularly valuable for Red Squirrels, and will also support many other species:

## 1. Ensure year-round food supply

Maintain a mix of tree species that provide seeds, fruits, buds, flowers, berries, fungi, and lichens throughout the year. Include species that host caterpillars, these are important as females consume them before breeding. When creating felling plans retain beneficial tree species. A sufficient mix of tree species needs to be left standing to ensure year-round food supply.

## 2. Plan re-stocking for squirrel needs

In order to reduce competition between Red and Grey Squirrels, different approaches are needed where both species are present.

On Anglesey, where Grey Squirrels are no longer present, re-stocking can focus on planting and retaining large-seeded broadleaves (oak, beech, Sweet Chestnut, hazel, lime, rowan). Pine species (Scots and lodgepole), Sitka or Norway Spruce and other conifers will add diversity and also provide important food sources.

In mainland focal sites, Norway Spruce, and pine species (Scots and Lodgepole) should be combined with small-seeded broadleaves like birch and willow. Within conifer forests on the mainland Norway Spruce, and pine species (Scots and Lodgepole) should make up approximately 12 percent of the forest area.

### **3. Maintain arboreal connectivity**

Avoid fragmentation and isolation of key foraging areas. Use Low Impact Silvicultural Systems and Continuous Cover Forestry, including long-term retention areas, natural reserves, and connected restocking sites of various ages.

### **4. Maintain diverse age structure**

Ensure there is a mixed age structure to provide a sufficient area of trees at seed-producing age on an ongoing basis. Promote structural diversity to provide consistent food and nesting opportunities.

### **5. Control of Grey Squirrels**

Within focal sites and their buffers, the monitoring for and control of Grey Squirrels will help safeguard populations and facilitate expansion.

## **Further information**

You can find more useful information on survey techniques and positive management approaches for Red Squirrel:

[Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#)

Red Squirrel Forum's 2018 [Red squirrel conservation plan](#)

Welsh Government's 2018 [Grey Squirrel Management Action Plan](#)

Read more about the species on: [Red Squirrels Trust Wales](#)