



Squirrels in Yorkshire

Once common across the UK numbers of red squirrels have declined rapidly during the 20th Century and it is now estimated there are between only 10,000 to 15,000 red squirrels left in England compared to three million grey squirrels.

Although they were once abundant red squirrels are now very rare in Yorkshire and are generally only spotted in the far North of Yorkshire.

Red squirrels

The red squirrel is classed as a native species to the UK, with the earliest evidence appearing at the end of the last Ice Age (10,000 years ago). Red squirrels spend most of their time in the treetops and their preferred habitat tends to be mixed deciduous woodland with occasional conifers.

Red squirrels were once the only squirrel species in Britain and were widely distributed. However, during the early 20th Century huge colonies of the red squirrel population were wiped out by a virus. They were also hunted for sport up until 1927. However, it cannot be denied that a major cause of their drastic population



Red squirrel - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)

decline was the introduction of the non-native grey squirrel which began during the late Victorian period.

Red squirrels are very rare in Yorkshire, however, if you do believe you have found one then you can report it here: <http://northernredsquirrels.org.uk/sighting.htm>

Grey squirrels

The grey squirrel is native of north-east America and is classed as an invasive non-native species in the UK. They were first introduced in 1876 by the Victorians, who regarded the grey squirrel as an exotic species.

Grey squirrels eat mostly nuts and seeds. Their front teeth are continually growing, and to prevent them getting too long, they need to constantly nibble on something to grind them down. One of the more destructive habits of the grey squirrel is to chew the bark on trees to get to the fleshy green wood underneath. This can sometimes kill the tree and makes grey squirrels unpopular with foresters.

Grey squirrels adapt really easily and can be found in



Grey squirrel - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)



areas of woodland as well as parks and gardens. Unlike red squirrels they also tend to spend more of their time at ground level and have adapted to scavenging in towns.

How to spot the difference

Red and grey squirrels are not always easy to tell apart so below are few ways to make the distinction:

- The main difference between red and grey squirrels is their size; red squirrels are around half the size of grey squirrels and weigh approximately 250g instead of 500g
- Red squirrels can be recognised by their distinctive ear tufts, which are elongated and pointy whereas grey squirrels ears are small and rounded, almost like a rats
- Despite their names colour isn't always a definitive way of telling apart red and grey squirrels; some grey squirrels can have coats that appear to be red and some red squirrels have coats that look quite grey, especially in shaded forest areas and during the winter.

Why does the grey squirrel do better?

Many believe that grey squirrels have directly killed off red squirrels, however, this isn't really the case and direct conflict between the two species is virtually undocumented. However, there are a number of reasons for grey squirrels doing better than red squirrels.

- Grey squirrels are more adaptive and inhabit our countryside and towns, whereas red squirrels prefer specific conditions and very high trees



Grey squirrel - Credit Naomi Caunce

- Grey squirrels carry the squirrelpox virus, which they are largely immune to. However, it can be deadly for red squirrels and some estimate this disease to be the main reason why red squirrels are on the edge of extinction in mainland England and Wales.
- Grey squirrels are much larger and as a result have a higher body fat content meaning they are able to survive the tough UK winters more easily
- When red squirrels are under pressure, they will not breed as often, whereas the grey squirrel can continue to breed under harsh conditions
- Dietary studies have revealed that grey squirrels are better able to extract the proteins and energy stored in acorns than red squirrels
- Unlike grey squirrels, red squirrels cannot digest seeds with high tannin content, such as acorns, which limits their food sources.

Find out more

If you are not a member then find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and how to become a member, plus more about the work we do for Yorkshire's wildlife by contacting us in the following ways:

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Red squirrel - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)