



*Ask anyone to conjure an image of Scottish wildlife and they'll probably think of that great monarch of the glens: the red deer. Standing on heather-clad hills with antlers probing the all-too-familiar Scots mist, it embodies the spirit of a nation. Fortunately, the red deer is thriving, with a healthy population spread across the country. At the opposite end of the scale in terms of size is another of Scotland's great wildlife icons: the red squirrel. Like the red deer, it has been part of Scotland's natural landscape for centuries. Yet its survival hangs in the balance as a consequence of man's interference in the natural world.*

The story begins in the late nineteenth century, when wealthy Victorian landowners who enjoyed easy access to the far-flung corners of the globe flaunted their wealth and status by populating their gardens with flora and fauna from distant lands.

Because of them, Scotland is fighting today to control several invasive species that have adapted all too readily to their new home. Japanese Knotweed, Rhododendron and Himalayan Balsam are all spreading out of control. These species alone cost Scotland millions of pounds a year to clean up and mitigate the environmental damage. North America's grey squirrel was also prized for its novelty, and it is this animal that sadly now is ringing

the death knell for its distant cousin, Scotland's native red squirrel.

Grey squirrels were introduced to both England and Scotland. Unfortunately, some of those introduced into England carried the deadly squirrel pox. The first recorded case of the disease was in Norfolk, England, in the early 1980s. Alarm bells started ringing in the 1990s when it became apparent that large areas of England were devoid of the once commonplace red squirrel.

As ecologists prepared maps of those parts of the UK where reds and greys existed, it became clear that England's green and pleasant land was dominated by greys, with hardly a red to be found. Today, the red squirrel is virtually extinct in England save for small numbers in the north of the country. Scotland hosts around 120,000 or 90 per cent of the UK population of red squirrels. Grey squirrels in England now number around 2.5 million. As the grey squirrel's march is northwards and the reds are rapidly succumbing to its advance, Hadrian's Wall, the Roman legacy that separates Scotland and England, has once again become an important battle line.

A particularly nasty virus, squirrel pox is carried by grey squirrels, but they have developed immunity to the disease and appear unaffected by it. Sadly, red squirrels have no immunity. Once a red squirrel comes in contact with the virus it develops weeping lesions and sores around the eyes, nose, mouth and genitalia. These spread, and the animal struggles to see and feed. Death is slow and painful and

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occurs about two weeks after infection. There is no cure and it is believed to carry a 100 per cent death rate. Since 2005, there have been localized squirrel pox outbreaks with devastating results at several locations just inside the Scottish border. Rapid action halted these outbreaks, but southern Scotland is now on high alert for any suspicious deaths of red squirrels.

The man charged with saving Scotland's red squirrels, Ken Neil, Project Officer (Tayside), told Celtic Life that the pox is currently found only in the south of the country and that it's hoped various strategies will contain new occurrences.

"Long-term plans are in place to have strongholds for red protection," Neil says. "These are a series of very large woodlands in presently grey-free areas that would be managed to be of benefit to reds."

It sounds as if the reds will be confined to isolated areas, but Neil believes this can be avoided.

"We hope that the work being done on the ground, coupled with the science being undertaken by researchers to find a vaccine for pox, and even an effective contraceptive for greys, will bring the reward of maintaining the red squirrel's present range."

The squirrel pox is the principal factor in the decline of red squirrels, but halting the spread of greys is equally important, for they are larger, live longer, eat more and migrate more easily than reds. They out-compete reds in almost every way. Wherever greys appear, reds disappear, irrespective of disease. Squirrel pox just makes the process more unpleasant and faster.

Neil says Scotland is putting resources and commitment into stopping the greys.

"In Tayside alone, we have over 60 large estates and farms working together with our project," he explains. "The effect has been clearly measurable. As this network of supporting parties grows, there will be few, if any unmonitored and uncontrolled grey migration routes. This way, the spread that has been happening for decades will be halted."

For now, things are under control, but if the situation changed and this icon of Scottish wildlife disappeared from the country as it has elsewhere, the impact would be disastrous.

As Neil notes, "Red squirrels are top of the list of "must see" wildlife for visitors. Their loss would be enormous in terms of the value of sharing our woodlands with such a bright, lively, joy-bringing little creature.

