

WILDLIFE

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FEEDING SQUIRRELS IN YOUR GARDEN

The Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum does not generally recommend that people put out food for red squirrels within their gardens unless they are prepared to follow these guidelines. Squirrels will often venture into gardens neighbouring their forests. We appreciate that people do wish to see, and continue feeding, reds in their gardens. This document aims to guide members of the public on how best to care for these squirrels.

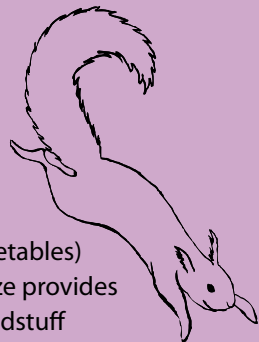
Gardens offer a host of resources to squirrels including being a source of water, moss for bedding and providing a variety of food stuff from garden plants and possibly bird feeders. If red squirrels are already coming into your garden then you can put out small amounts of supplementary food to help them through the toughest times; hot dry summers and very cold winters.

Supplementary feeding increases risks to individual red squirrels by enticing them into your garden, or other premises. These include disease transmission, as well as unintentional hazards such as crossing roads, and risks from domestic cats and other predators. The provision of supplementary food may also encourage grey squirrels into the area.

Please follow the guidance below to ensure that you help keep as healthy a red squirrel population as possible. The best foods to provide are those similar to those they might encounter foraging in the wild:

A MENU FOR RED SQUIRRELS

- Hazelnuts in their shells,
- Beechnuts
- Sweet chestnuts
- Sunflower seeds,
- Pine nuts
- Apples and carrots
(other native fruit & vegetables)
- Additionally yellow maize provides a cheap high energy foodstuff



RED SQUIRREL



GREY SQUIRREL

A diet rich in peanuts may cause calcium deficiency, as will sweet, dried food such as raisins and sultanas. The best option is to put out mixed and varied food supply to help keep the squirrels healthy.

It is important to provide an extra source of calcium, especially if there are young and breeding females in the area. This can be in the form of cuttlefish, bone meal or a supplement.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU FEED THEM?

It is best to feed in small amounts rather than having food constantly available. Only put food out every 3-4 days, replacing the food when you do, so that it doesn't go mouldy. In order to avoid artificially boosting the red squirrel population beyond the capacity of their habitat (which if supplementary feeding were to stop would cause considerable problems to individuals) it is best to feed sporadically and at different times of the year with frequent gaps. This should ensure the squirrels do not inadvertently become dependent and their delicate balance with the natural environment is not disturbed.

LOCATION OF FEEDERS

Apart from competition with grey squirrels and habitat loss, major causes of mortality to red squirrels are cat predation and road death. It is therefore important to site any feeding station in a place that will not encourage red squirrels to cross either open ground or roads. If your garden is on the opposite side of a road from the woodland, consider placing supplementary food adjacent to the woods, once you have the written permission of the landowner. A feeding station should ideally be placed where the red squirrels can easily escape. Being predominantly tree dwellers the best site is up a tree or near a high wall, ideally about 1.6-2.0m above the ground. If you do not own the trees, do not fix your feeders to the trees with steel or iron nails, as these can damage timber and saws! You can fix feeders using old bicycle inner tubes, cable ties or rope, these methods would allow it to be easily removed for cleaning and replenishing food stuffs or to re-site if it is not attracting any squirrels. The exact placement of a feeder will depend on the area the red squirrels visit. If you have observed the squirrels entering your garden from a particular point, consider siting the feeder along that route.

WHAT TO DO IF GREY SQUIRRELS ENTER THE GARDEN

If grey squirrels start to enter your garden they will start to displace the reds and potentially spread diseases such as Squirrelpox. Stop all supplementary feeding, as most diseases are spread through contact, making a feeding station a likely focal point for transmission between the animals. It is important to regularly clean and disinfect feeders (see below or the NISF feeder hygiene document). You may wish to consider some grey squirrel control measures – contact the NISF or your nearest Red Squirrel Group (see below).



GREY SQUIRREL

If you have wild birds in your garden that rely on the food you provide, try to move the food supply every few days and clean the feeders regularly to minimise the risk of disease spreading, use 'squirrel-proof' feeders that may deter grey squirrels.

KEY POINTS

- Don't feed the grey squirrels.
- Provide a source of water, & keep it clean and fresh.
- Avoid sweet, dried fruits & too many peanuts to prevent calcium deficiency.
- Place a feeding station at head height, preferable on a tree trunk or wall.
- Think about siting the feeder so that squirrels don't have to cross roads.
- Provide an alternative calcium source e.g. cuttlefish bone.
- Ensure feeders, food and water dishes are kept as clean as possible to help prevent the spread of disease.
- If grey squirrels start entering your garden, STOP feeding them & please report it to your nearest Red Squirrel group or the NISF.

RED FACTS

- Red squirrels are left or right handed when eating pine cones.
- They can be choosy eaters; you will soon get to know their favourite foods when putting out a varied mix from the recommended list.
- Red squirrels do not hibernate, so they cache foods underground for tougher months.
- Contrary to popular belief, unlike greys, red squirrels are not very good at digesting acorns due to their high toxin level.
- A red squirrel's natural diet may include: pine, spruce, larch and fir seeds, sweet chestnuts, beech nuts, hornbeam, hazelnuts, rosehips, fungi, flowers, buds, shoots and occasionally insects and birds' eggs.
- Scots pine trees in your garden will provide food and shelter for a visiting red squirrel.



In order to carry out effective conservation work it is important to know the numbers and spread of both the red and grey squirrels. So please, let us know how your feeding programme is going, how many squirrels you encounter and pass on this advice to anyone else you know of wanting to feed red squirrels.

FEEDING STATION HYGIENE

Good feeding station hygiene should be observed at all times. Especially where there are both red and grey squirrels in close contact. Not only does this reduce the risk of squirrelpox transmission but it reduces the risk of other diseases and vectors coming into contact with red squirrels. Always wear good quality waterproof nitrile gloves to protect your hands when working on or around squirrel feeders.

- Empty and bin all uneaten & spoilt food
- The feeder should be scrubbed with a mild solution of detergent and water to remove greasy residues. Use detergents with little or no perfumes then rinsed.
- The feeder should be liberally sprayed with fresh 5-10% solution Sodium hypochlorite (the primary agent in bleach) in solution and then rinsed (other veterinary disinfectants are available see below).

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/approved-disinfectants-march-2010.pdf>
http://disinfectants.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Location=None&module=ApprovalsList_Sl



RED SQUIRREL



GREY SQUIRREL

PRODUCTS AND SUPPLIES

The majority of the foods and disinfectant products can be bought from good supermarkets, health food shops, hardware stores and some wild bird food suppliers through out the country. Mixtures of suitable food can also be bought from pet shops. There are many disinfectants available on the market please follow the advice of the NISF - Squirrel Feeding Station / Trap Hygiene advice note.

Please ensure you follow the directions on the labels of the disinfectant and mineral supplements.



RED SQUIRREL FEEDING

SQUIRRELS IN YOUR GARDEN

THE FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF RED SQUIRREL CONSERVATION CONTACTS IN N.IRELAND:

Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum

c/o The Wildlife Team

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Klondyke Building, Cromac Avenue

Gasworks Business Park, Lower Ormeau Road

BELFAST BT7 2JA

028 905 69551

Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group

TollymoreRSG@googlemail.com

Lagan Valley Red Squirrel Group

belvoir_redsquirrelgroup@inbox.com

The Glens Red Squirrel Group

Group Secretary Denis McBride:

denis.mcbride1@btinternet.com

The Wildlife Team (BDU)

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Klondyke Building

Gasworks Business Park

Lower Ormeau Road

BELFAST BT7 2JA

028 905 69551

Jon.Lees@doeni.gov.uk

We are always interested to talk to and support groups who wish to help red squirrels in their local areas. We need new groups especially in the west of Northern Ireland.
Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum May 2010

This document has been largely adapted from the UK Red Squirrel Group's UKRSG C1 - http://www.snh.org.uk/ukredsquirrelgroup/pdfs/rs_supfeed_v5.pdf

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural environment and built heritage for the benefit of present and future generations.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

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