



# THE GREY ISSUE

Pete Brookes explains how grey squirrels came to be living in the UK – and why airgun hunters should be placing them under their crosshairs

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**M**aybe we have a lot to thank the grey squirrel for. It gives us an incentive to get out of our beds on cold early mornings and catch the splendour of first light, a justification to be about in woodland and the opportunity for us all to partake in a national conservation project by assisting in the control of a destructive invasive species.

That said, the term "invasive species" is potentially misleading when you think of how this small tree-dwelling mammal actually came to be on these shores. It is not that the grey squirrel scrambled onto beaches from longboats landed on the north coast, ransacking and burning red squirrel tree villages to the ground along the way.

More so they were unwittingly deposited in this country as unwilling pets around the late 1800s, brought across from their native North America. Without falling into the trap of judging history by our modern day beliefs and ideology, you could say the only dumb animals involved in this ecological disaster were the human ones who thought it was a good idea at the time.

So the grey did not cause the problem, we did, and it is therefore right that as airgunners we get actively involved and assist where we can in their management and control. As

## 👊 THE COMPETITION FOR FOOD AND TERRITORY PUSHES THE SMALLER RED OUT INTO MORE WILD AND REMOTE AREAS 🗡️

ethical and responsible shooters, if we are engaged in the lethal control of any animal then to protect our sport it is proper that we fully understand the reasoning of our actions. I am not saying we should always be sucked into the arena of social media, or spend time in debate with self-opinionated opponents giving them the spotlight they crave. That would take up far too much of our valuable time when we should be outside with our rifles, but at least have it in your head the justification for what we do.

There are specific elements to all land use and unfortunately the grey has a paw in all of these. The Forestry Commission (FC) is a good working example of this, formed in 1919 to build up timber stocks depleted by the trench warfare of the First World War.

Then, it was purely financially driven to produce a home-grown resource with fast-growing uniform conifer plantations, devoid of any biodiversity and out of bounds to the public in many places. As a non-ministerial department, the FC is driven by government guidance and therefore public

opinion, so over the years since its creation that financial drive now also includes in equal part the perceived wealth of our woodlands, so not only the commercial value but also the benefit to the environment and to society via positive and sustainable management.

Financially it is estimated that the grey is annually responsible for around £16m worth of damage to our national timber resources which ties up a further £6-8m on control measures, not including the cost suffered by privately owned woodland.

Ecologically, greys and deer are the greatest threat to our broadleaf woods and forests (that's if we turn a blind eye to human expansion and the resulting fragmentation of our countryside). It's all well and good having a scheme to plant millions of trees, but unless the two aforementioned species are effectively controlled then in many areas trees will not reach maturity and broadleaf forests will just not happen.

We now bring the conflict between the non-native grey and the indigenous red squirrel firmly into the equation. Reds are native to this country, having been here since the land bridge between Britain and Europe disappeared at the end of the last Ice Age around 11,000 years ago.

It is not that greys attack and kill reds, but the competition for sources of food and territory pushes the smaller red out into more wild and remote areas. Add the transmission of the deadly squirrel pox to the red by the

grey, itself immune, then our American compadre is doing itself no favours.

On a side note, the red squirrel is not as innocent as its small fluffy appearance may appear, and even though at one time common throughout the UK, historically it was persecuted in large numbers for the damage it did to trees. Around the end of the 19th century thousands were killed, with red squirrel culling groups formed.

In the New Forest in Hampshire between 1880 and 1927 some 21,352 reds were shot as forest pests, whilst around the same era over a 15-year period the Highlands Squirrel Club culled a staggering 60,500 in just one area alone. Equating the damage between the red and the grey, then the latter is the greater culprit due to its higher population densities, whereas the lower densities of the red can be beneficial to woodland assisting with the spread, regeneration and structure of tree species and the dispersal of several types of fungi.

Whilst difficult to place any actual monetary value on the red, if we can





# WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

prevent a native species going into extinction and at the same time reduce the loss of our broadleaf woodland, then surely balancing that with lethal control of a non-native destructive species such as the grey squirrel must be a no-brainer?

So as airgun shooters what can we do? Where reds are present there are several conservation groups doing brilliant work to protect them by culling the greys, not just by shooting, but also live trapping along with sound habitat management.

The airgun is the weapon of choice in most cases, being efficient, discreet and less damaging to trees as opposed to a smoothbore shotgun. Airgun manufacturers have been keen to support such projects, Brocock being one example, who is doing an excellent job of actively supporting three of the projects based in Cumbria, Cornwall and their home county of Staffordshire.

There is no real national synchronised approach to grey control, so perhaps this is something we could bring together through the close-knit airgun community. Why not get together with others in your area – or do it on your own and develop a coordinated method for controlling and managing greys?

Set yourself a task and record the numbers of the greys you take on your permissions. Even if you are not within an area inhabited by reds, or ever likely to be,



**Brocock is an active supporter of organisations such as the Staffordshire Squirrel Project and its quest to bring down the numbers of non-native greys**

you will still assist in red conservation by reducing grey numbers along with helping to maintain our woodlands. However, I do not think we should have an actual mindset and expectation for killing all greys.

I do receive criticism for saying this, but with an estimated increasing population of 2.5 million in this country we do not have the means or capacity to cull every grey, so why some organisations set that as a policy that can never be achieved is beyond me.

We must also understand that to many people, especially regarding those living in more urban areas, the grey is one of the very few wild mammals they encounter, thereby potentially evoking an enjoyable interaction with nature. What are we to do in their cases – go around city parks, public spaces and municipal areas slotting any wild greys that we happen to see? I think not. Better that we direct resources in containing the grey in less sensitive financial and ecological regions.

The actual concept of rewilding I find both admirable and exciting, but in a country where actual wilderness is all but gone, the return of large land mammals back into the 'wild' is debatably unrealistic.

Consequently then, does this unfilled gap offer the red squirrel an achievable niche back into the countryside more in balance with the modern world? Through no fault of its own, the grey, whether we like it or not, is here to stay, and as an adaptive mammal that has thrived against sustained adversity over a period of 150 years, grudgingly I offer it some credit.

Personally, I have no animosity towards the grey, but I would like broadleaf woodland to remain and I would like to see the red return to my county, and for those reasons the lethal control of an invasive species such as the grey squirrel, in my mind, is very much justified. ●



**A powerful, if secondary, benefit of tackling grey squirrels with an air rifle is the simple fact that it gets us out and about in some glorious countryside**

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