

Red squirrel

Shy and rarely seen, the red squirrel lives a solitary life in conifer forests

Sightings of red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*) are rare because these cute critters are extremely shy and spend a lot of their time in treetops.



They are often detected by sightings of scratch marks on the bark of trees and the presence of chewed pine cones that then resemble apple cores. Red squirrels can also be detected by the 'chuk-chuk' noise that they make and the sound of foot tapping, a behaviour that indicates that the squirrel is agitated or angry.

There are estimated to be 140,000 red squirrels in Britain. This number has dropped dramatically as the species is threatened by the more aggressive grey squirrel. Comparatively, there are around 2.5 million grey squirrels in Britain.

HABITAT

The red squirrel is native to Britain, found across England, Scotland and Wales. They prefer to live in conifer forests in which they build large nests called dreys, building them in the forks of tree trunks for stability.

Red squirrels are usually solitary, only coming together to mate, but members of the same family will sometimes huddle together in dreys during winter to keep warm. The species does not restrict itself to one territory, ranging widely especially when looking for a mate.

DIET

Red squirrels predominately eat seeds, with their preference being for pine cone seeds. The squirrels do not hibernate so it is important for them to put on weight during the plentiful months of autumn so that they are able to last through winter when food will be scarce. To assist with this they store fungi and other plant matter in trees so that they have a continued food source over the winter months.

OFFSPRING

Female squirrels raise their young alone. On average a female will have two to three kittens, but litters can be up to six. The female gives birth in spring but if conditions are right, she can give birth to a second litter in summer.

At birth the kittens are blind and they develop quickly. They are weaned off their mother's milk at eight to 12 weeks because by this time they will have developed a complete set of teeth.

CRITTER LAND



● Red squirrel distribution



SURVIVAL

Between just 20 and 50 per cent of kittens survive to adulthood.

TEETH

A squirrel's teeth never stop growing so that they don't get worn away by constant gnawing.

DREY

A group of squirrels is called a scurry or a drey.

DIET

Squirrels are omnivores and have been known to eat eggs, bark and baby birds.

SPECIES

There are more than 2000 squirrel species in the world, but there are none presently in Australia.

Website: www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/redsquirrel

■ This poster complements the Mercury's BBC Earth David Attenborough Wildlife Collection NIE kit. DVD to watch is *Life of Mammals: Chisellers* (G).

Compiled by Georgina Cook.
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