



About grey squirrels....

Grey squirrels are native to North America but were introduced to about 30 sites in England and Wales in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They have subsequently spread throughout most of England and Wales and much of Scotland, replacing the native red squirrel.

They are most numerous in broad-leaved woodlands containing oak, beech, sweet chestnut and hazel but will occur in a wide range of habitats such as parks, gardens and urban areas where there are some suitable trees. They mainly eat seeds and plant material such as buds, shoots and flowers but will also eat insects and sometimes birds' eggs. When food is abundant they may bury seeds in many places, for times when food is scarce. Retrieval may be mainly by smell but squirrels may also have some form of mental map of locations. However, many of the buried seeds are not rediscovered and this helps the dispersal and germination of new plants.

Usually two litters of young are produced a year - one in February/March, the other in June/July. Litter size averages three. The young start to leave the nest at about seven weeks old. They are weaned at eight to ten weeks and then quickly become independent at about three months.

Grey squirrels are not, strictly speaking, 'territorial' but there will be a 'pecking order' amongst the animals in an area with some animals being dominant to others.

Incidentally, grey squirrels are not always grey! Some squirrels are black or melanistic and in some parts of south-east England true albino squirrels are quite frequent. Some greys also have a very red-tipped coat colour and are mistakenly identified as red squirrels!

Many people enjoy seeing grey squirrels and feeding them in parks or their gardens but others regard them as a serious nuisance and want to discourage or kill them. They can cause considerable damage to trees through stripping bark and if they enter houses may cause serious problems by chewing service pipes or electricity cables. As a consequence the questions asked cover 'both sides of the coin' - either asking about encouraging squirrels or deterring them.

Your questions answered....

What food can I put out for squirrels?

Before encouraging squirrels do consider whether it is a good idea if they might subsequently cause problems. If you would like to offer your local squirrels a little additional food, **unsweetened** and **unsalted** nuts are the favoured food during any season. Hazelnuts, walnuts and almonds seem to be top of the list but peanuts are also taken. The addition of chopped apple, carrots, spinach, green beans, bean sprouts and celery will also be welcomed.

If you are having problems with grey squirrels digging into your lawn, avoid peanuts and other hard foods. Try providing shredded food items instead. This may help to discourage them from burying it for later consumption.

Can I provide nest boxes for squirrels?

Studies of squirrel populations have found that the provision of nest boxes can increase grey squirrel densities. However, an increase in the number of squirrels will lead to an increase in the demand for suitable sources of food and shelter and therefore perhaps increase future conflict with people in the area. It may therefore be advisable to leave the squirrels to select the most appropriate sites that are naturally available in the area for building their dreys. Lightweight summer dreys are shallow platforms of twigs. They are built in June, usually by the juveniles. The larger winter dreys are more robust and are usually built in far more sheltered locations.

If you decide to provide a wooden nest box as a potential winter nesting site, it needs to be a larger version of a bird nest box with a hinged sloping roof. The height of the back should be about 60cms, with the height of the front approximately 50cms, the width 28cms and the depth 25cms. Provide an entrance hole, approximately 7cms square, in the top back corner of a side panel rather than in the front of the box. Securely place the nest box high up in a tree.

How can I remove grey squirrels from the loft of my house?

Prevention is easier than resolving such problems after they have arisen! The eaves, soffits and the rest of the roof should be kept in good repair to prevent access by squirrels. It is also advisable to cut back any branches that overhang the roof which could provide the squirrels with easy access to the property.

If squirrels have gained access to the loft (and you're sure it's not mice or birds), try and find out if the squirrel has built a nest and is rearing young. If there are young then, if at all possible, delay action to deter the squirrels until they have left the nest. Wait until the whole family is safely able to survive outside, i.e. the young have been seen foraging for food outside for two to three weeks. If there is no nest present, make sure the squirrel is outside before blocking off the points of access. Grey squirrels tend to be more active during mid morning and mid afternoon, when they are probably away from their nest foraging. These are clearly the best times to carry out the exclusion work. In autumn, it is also advisable to take action sooner, rather than later, to exclude squirrels and to encourage them to prepare nests outside the property for the winter.

Points of access to the loft should be blocked with **strong** wire netting (e.g. weldmesh or hexagonal mesh of 16 gauge and no more than 25 mm size mesh) firmly fixed over or wedged into the openings. Any loose tiles, missing bricks or rotten soffits should also be repaired. Garden centres or hardware stores may also sell an approved animal repellent that can be used to help to deter squirrels.

Can I deter grey squirrels from my garden?

Grey squirrels, as with other wildlife, are attracted to areas where they can gain access to food and shelter. To discourage them try to reduce the food available. For example, if you feed the birds use squirrel resistant bird feeders rather than putting food out loose. When planting bulbs cover them with wire mesh to allow the plants to grow whilst deterring the squirrels from digging them up. Block possible access points to buildings.

Can I relocate the grey squirrels to another area away from my garden?

It is sometimes suggested that grey squirrels can be trapped in live-catch traps and then relocated to another site. However, it is illegal to release grey squirrels. Additionally, such action may not be humane since a squirrel moved to a new area is likely to have difficulty in settling into an established population and may either die or keep travelling. In suburban situations a displaced squirrel is more likely to be killed by a car, a dog or a cat. If grey squirrels were released into areas where there are still red squirrels it might even lead to the demise of the reds.

How can grey squirrels be legally controlled?

Wherever possible the RSPCA would always prefer alternative solutions and only if there is a serious problem and alternative means are ineffective or impractical should killing be contemplated. In this case control should be carried out legally, precisely targeted and carried out by the most humane method available in the circumstances. Killing squirrels is also unlikely to be a long-term solution, as their biology is such that other squirrels may very quickly replace any that are removed from a garden - perhaps within as little as a month. Alternative approaches to address what is attracting them to the garden may be more effective. A leaflet from Natural England - *Urban grey squirrels (TIN056)* - provides more information on control and can be obtained by calling their Wildlife Licensing Unit on 0845 601 4523 or downloading from the Publications section of their website (www.naturalengland.org.uk).

Grey squirrels can legally be caught and killed by a variety of methods, including live-catch cage traps, approved spring traps or a specific rodenticide poison that is only approved for use against grey squirrels by a local authority or professional operator. However, such methods may not be legal in areas where red squirrels could also be at risk. For example, it can be an offence to kill, injure or take a red squirrel, or to damage or obstruct its place of shelter.

If a live-catch trap is used, it must be checked several times a day and any captured grey squirrels humanely killed. It is an offence if any unnecessary suffering is caused to captured animals. Squirrels can inflict a nasty bite and the proper dispatch of captured squirrels requires skill and experience. The RSPCA would not normally advocate that ordinary members of the public try to capture and/or kill grey squirrels, because of the various risks involved. If you decide to proceed with the control of squirrels on your property we suggest that you contact a reputable pest control contractor.

What should I do if I find a sick, injured or orphaned grey squirrel?

Resist the temptation to pick it up. Remember that squirrels use their teeth to crack open nuts, so they have a very strong bite! There may also be a disease risk. It is currently illegal, except under licence, to keep or release grey squirrels. Euthanasia may therefore be the most appropriate course of action to prevent further suffering. Call the RSPCA or your local vet for advice.

However, if you are advised to transport the squirrel to a vet, do not attempt to do so unless it can be safely contained, for example, in a secure metal or plastic pet carrier. Otherwise, if the animal becomes active *en route*, it could quickly chew its way out of a cardboard box and be loose inside your car! Lining the carrier with a thick towel can provide some padding and insulation.

To report an injured or sick squirrel to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on
0300 1234 999