



RED ALERT

Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel Project

'They're just like wee scalectrix cars, whizzing round the garden, nose to tail, within 6 inches of each other. When one alters course the other one's right behind him – they even go on the vertical plane round and round in circles on the fence. They're so determined to stay behind each other. It's fantastic to watch. Two of them chased each other along the 3 mm wire on the top of the fence, at 100 miles an hour, without deviating once.'

Rosie and Jimmie Reid, Dundee

They are irresistible. You're not asking people to look out for rare flora or fauna, which though beautiful can't put on a good show, or even a shy bird or vole which will disappear the moment you catch sight of it. Squirrels are cute, and if you're lucky, and know where to look, you stand a good chance of getting more than just a

glimpse.

But not everyone is as fortunate enough to have a wealth of wildlife in the woods behind their home. Most people would have to go out to the woods to see the squirrels, deer and woodpeckers which Rosie and Jimmie can see from their back window. So how can the majority of the population be persuaded that it's worth going for a walk and helping to look out for the dwindling red squirrel population? There's nothing wonderful about having to cull greys even if it is helping the reds survive. And there are only so many great marketing lines you can put in the press or on posters to catch people's attention. So how do we go about stirring up interest?

Countryside Rangers are renowned for their knowledge, dedication, and passion for their subject. They're really good at the people stuff and others in the field suggested we talk to the guys in Dundee – so we decided to ask them.

The 'Sustain Dundee Red Squirrel' project is one of many groups across the country who feed data into the Scottish Squirrel Survey. Dundee is the only city in the UK with a stable population of reds and they've worked hard to win funds which pay for a dedicated 'Red Squirrel Project Officer' during six months of the year. The current officer is Ken Neil and I spoke with Ken and his colleague Brian Tasker who has also held the post of 'squirrel man' in the area.

In the course of conversation, they gave us some good solid practical advice which we reproduce in the box below, but what actually came over was this:

Ken Neil 'There are magical moments when you're talking to people, and at first you might feel you're talking past them and then you say something or you make a metaphor and they go 'ah' or they just go 'click' and there's that wee moment sometimes when you're talking away to someone and you just realise, you've engaged them.

After that you just think 'that's the door open for them', not for you, you've opened the door because you're talking to them, but they're engaged and they go 'ah, I know what that's about, I understand that' It's like a wee lightbulb and sometimes you see it. Then they start talking about it or asking about it and you feel 'it worked, it worked' and you go away and it's almost like fuzzy bunny hugging, you get a wee warm glow inside. It's up to them after that, but if you've put the enthusiasm in there, shared your enthusiasm and people say 'he loved doing that, maybe I could too' That's when you know you're winning.'

The ability to share their personal enthusiasm is what many rangers seem to have that's special – their laughter and knowledge blend together and grab hold of you so you can't help listening to what they're saying and becoming interested. They're 'people folk' and this is why the public listens to them. It comes over on the phone, in the way they write their press articles and of course, face to face.

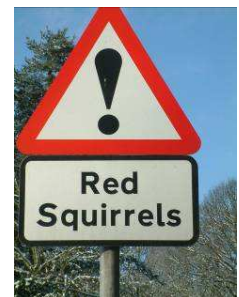
Alison Anderson, Sustain Dundee Project Administrator told us how a senior director from Dundee City Council was completely 'blown away' recently by how passionate and enthusiastic Brian Tasker was about his subject.

But there must be more to it than passion – that alone isn't enough for the general public who are inclined to view environmental enthusiasts as slightly odd. There's a lot to do with being able to judge your audience and to communicate in the right way, to press the right buttons for different groups of people. Although it is possible to learn how to do this, often it's down to the personality of the individual.

Whatever they're doing, it must be working. Last year, Brian Tasker told the *press* 'in Dundee, we're inundated with phone calls from people who have spotted red squirrels, but we find there are gaps in our knowledge in places like Angus and Perthshire'. Lots of interest is good news, but it hasn't stopped squirrel numbers going down in Dundee and compared to 5 years ago, the number of places you can spot squirrels is greatly reduced. More needs to be done about controlling greys, loss of habitat through suburban development and increasing traffic.



Some of us will still remember Tufty helping us to cross the road, it seems that now, we're helping him.



- Some tips from the Dundee rangers**
- Don't preach or even try to teach and definitely don't get too scientific. It turns people off
 - Make the subject relevant to everyone, show that it affects us all and people will start to take interest
 - Keep the presence of the project in the press – on average the Dundee Squirrel Project has a press release every 3 weeks
 - Develop information to help and inform people - various information leaflets support all aspects of the project and a recent direct marketing effort has promoted it to 2000 households in the buffer zone around red squirrel hotspots.
 - Make good use of activity in schools to raise the profile – an Education pack is currently reaching the final stages of development
 - Hold your own public events, be seen at as many others as possible and display information in public places – the city in particular has a coalface of an audience to address
 - Involve other organisations to help with elements of the project, spread the load and the word in one go.

Working together

People get involved with projects like 'Sustain Dundee Red Squirrels' for all sorts of reasons: *it seems like a fun thing to do; it gets me out walking regularly; we wanted to learn more; they asked us to help.*

Back at the beginning of the project, half of Dundee seemed to be out squirrel spotting. Local police, hospital staff and golfers all reported sightings. Even a local developer in a red-sensitive area made great efforts to take this into account.

At the moment, distinctive in their 'Red Squirrel Project' fleeces the Red Squirrel Action Group in Dundee are a band of around 20 regular volunteers who do the main monitoring along a number of transects in the red squirrel hot spots in the city. Sightings are added to the data the project sends to the Scottish Squirrel Survey and everyone knows the part they're playing is important locally and nationally. Sandra





Knight, a founding member of the Group grins and says that even after 4 years, seeing a squirrel close up is a real wow for her.

The Rangers are also making an effort to involve other organisations in new initiatives. The Project approached Jim Peters, course tutor for the metal fabrication course at Dundee College with a proposal that his class design a 'red only' weatherproof feeder as a class project. Used to long hours of pipe welding, the four students set about designing the feeder with gusto and much detailed discussion later, involving much to do with squirrels as well as metal, elements of all four prototypes were rolled into one and road tested.

Within half an hour of the prototype feeder being up in Rosie and Jimmie's Reid's garden, Ken Neil received a phone call to say it was already being used. Within two hours, he had a photo of the feeder and had written the press release 'Students' squirrel challenge'. Kudos for the college and more publicity for the project. With the prototype now well tested, the college is drawing up plans which will allow it to be manufactured on a bespoke basis and supplied to squirrel groups all over the country.

Shared passion and mutual benefit

As usual, the real enthusiasts, like Rosie and Jimmie Reid would follow their interest irrespective of whether there was a local project to get involved with or not. In this case, however, their knowledge has been a tremendous asset to the project and there has also been mutual benefit to sharing their pastime.

Rosie and Jimmie live in on the outskirts of Dundee in a property which backs on to Backmuir Wood - a red squirrel stronghold. Near the fence a range of feeders make it paradise for hungry squirrels and birds and a large french window gives a full view of the whole garden and wood behind. Deer visit regularly, and as we arrived a woodpecker was feeding.



Rosie has been unwell through multiple sclerosis for several years now and Jimmie has taken extended leave to help her cope with her illness. To raise money to allow the squirrel feeding programme to be kept up, they worked with Ken Neil to publish a calendar from Jimmie's gallery of beautiful wildlife photos. The Project helped raise sponsorship for publication and distribution of the calendar through local businesses and 890 copies sold like hotcakes. Many of Jimmie's photos are used in publicity materials to market the Project and you can view some of the best in the gallery linked to this story or on the Dundee Squirrel website.



Rosie's background as a Biochemistry graduate and teacher has also been of great support to the Rangers when they've been considering scientific research proposals and programmes in the area. She would love to be able to be back at work, teaching and giving children the opportunity to get out into the woods, understand and enjoy the nature around them. So we hope this story will go some way towards sharing her passion with adults and children alike.

Squirrels, water voles, swifts, butterflies - they all need us to take notice

The Countryside Rangers have the subject matter close to their hearts and they're good at telling us about it. We read the bits of paper, we hear what they tell us, but we don't always listen and less often act. For a very small personal outlay, supporting a project like the Scottish Squirrel Survey at local level will contribute to a larger national reward. You don't need to have lots of knowledge; Countryside Rangers can provide that together with plenty of support.



The Dundee squirrel guys are doing a great job of raising awareness of the issues and they're starting to see tangible results. In early March this year, they launched a new initiative working with the libraries throughout the city, which will link Red Squirrel promotional displays with library displays of books on wildlife for both adults and children. The recent marketing to two thousand households using a Freepost postcard produced an almost immediate 5% response which means over one hundred households have requested and received a full squirrel information pack. And the Rangers hope to start taking their new Education Pack out to many of the forty four primary schools in the city in the next few months. All the activities will be backed up by a series of talks and open events, some of which will be held at locations like Templeton Woods where many of Dundee's red squirrels hang out.

Self motivating and independent, the Dundee squirrel project was initiated by the Countryside Ranger Service and has been run by them since 2002. But many squirrel groups are run by volunteers with support from local experts. The various groups meet regularly and keep the thinking wide by exchanging information and ideas, so whether it's squirrels or butterflies, anyone could get a group going and find like-minded people to work with.

As Ken Neil points out 'the lesson that's important is that it does affect everyone'. Nature is relevant to us all.

For more information contact:

Dundee Countryside Rangers Ken Neil and Brian Tasker
Telephone 01382 431848
or visit the new website at www.dundeered squirrels.co.uk

Why should we be concerned?

Scotland has at least 75% of the UK's red squirrel population around 120,000 animals. Dundee is home to around 100. The introduction of the American grey squirrel about 100 years ago has put the survival of the reds in danger, spreading disease and stealing their food – eg. grey squirrels will eat unripe acorns, so much of the food is gone before it's ripe and ready for the reds to eat. This combined with loss of habitat, suburban development and ever increasing road traffic has put pressure on the population of reds.

There are ways we can and are helping.

- You can monitor sightings of squirrels either casually or regularly as part of a one of the 9 local squirrel groups around the country. If we know where they are, we can help look after them.
- Look out for squirrel signs – chewed pine cones, split open nuts and acorn shells
- In many places, ropes bridges have been put up over roads to provide safe crossings.
- Grey squirrels are being controlled in some areas.
- People are being encouraged to feed reds, if possible using feeders which exclude greys.
- People are being encouraged to plant a variety of trees and shrubs which will provide food for the reds
- Try to keep pets under control if you live in an area where there are red squirrels