

SQUIRREL CONTROL

Tackling the grey menace

by Diana MacMullen

The Sandringham Estate in Norfolk hosted a practical grey squirrel control day (12 May 2016) which was prepared and presented by David White, field manager east and East Midlands, of the Forestry Commission.

David has run several of these courses in the past; his wealth of knowledge and understanding shone through all that he shared with us, based on his experiences in a varied career from gamekeeper to wildlife ranger (managing grey squirrels to protect trees or for red squirrel conservation).

The event covered damage; different methods of grey squirrel control now Warfarin is not an option; trapping; planning a control programme (including optimising the timing, controlling at a landscape level and monitoring the success of the control programme); and looking at a wide variety of traps, discussing siting of traps.

Grey squirrels are prolific breeders, with two litters being the norm, averaging three per litter. Females are fertile at 8-11 months, males at four months. The most serious damage is generally between April and September and damage is frequent on the dominant trees particularly in the second year after a crop has been thinned when the sap flow in the phloem is at its strongest. My own take on squirrel damage on newly thinned crops is that disturbed/displaced squirrels are re-establishing territory. (Thinning little and often therefore is likely to suffer less squirrel damage.) David indicated that fresh damage seems to occur when the numbers rise above four squirrels/ha. There is some anecdotal evidence of squirrels copying others they see stripping bark. Research is also looking at calcium deficiency as a reason for stripping. Squirrels also strip stringy bark to line their dreys and strip dead bark foraging for fungi and insects.

Basal stripping is common on beech and sycamore where there is no understorey – the squirrels

are safe to strip without fear of predators.

Trees most likely to suffer damage include oak, beech, hornbeam, sycamore, sweet chestnut, Norway maple, Cricket Bat willow, Pine, larch and spruce. Ash, field maple and birch are less likely to be damaged; lime, aspen, alder, crab apple and cherry are least likely in most cases.

Young woodlands of many species adjacent to mature seed bearing trees may be particularly vulnerable to damage – a cautionary note for CCF and underplanted/mixed age woodlands.

We all know the devastating effects of squirrel damage on our trees. Squirrels also predate on bird nests and young, indeed the GWT estimates that squirrels may reduce breeding populations of game birds by 15%; and they estimate that 65% of grain fed to game birds is eaten by other mammals. Cobnut growers estimate they lose 20% of their crop to greys.

Control without warfarin

Fertility control is not yet a solution. At present it would need to be injected into each squirrel. Research is looking at an oral dose but specificity (to squirrels) and dosing issues are major problems to be resolved.



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Biological control (by Pine martens) is likely to play a part in grey squirrel control in some areas but like all methods of control is probably best used with a variety of other control methods to be fully successful. Further research is ongoing into the effects of pine martens on grey squirrel populations.

Drey poking and shooting can be useful in addition to other means, but recolonisation of dreys happens quickly in extensive woodland.

Traps. David showed us a wide range of traps – spring traps, cage traps from the UK and New Zealand, some complying with EU legislation (Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards – AIHTS). With at least four participants being gamekeepers the discussion was good on their relative merits and dis-merits. Out in Sandringham’s woodlands David had set out a number of traps – helped by the estate’s foresters Paul Griffin and Derek Paton – illustrating the craft of siting different types of trap.

Planning a programme

With the transition from eWGS to Countryside Stewardship being much on the minds of the FC and woodland owners and advisors, David gave us guidance on planning a control programme and highlighted one possible method for monitoring its success.

Additional Best Practice guidance is available from the FC (Practice note FCPN4 2007, will be updated in due course). The European Squirrel Initiative has a Trapping advice leaflet (available direct). BASC Provides guidance on trapping pest mammal species. Finally, formal certificated training on woodland pest control is available.

David’s final thoughts were that we should think of squirrel control as integral to forestry planning and management; control is crucial if your objectives are to grow timber (you’ll even grow more chip/firewood if squirrels are controlled); work professionally and within the Law; work with your neighbours; be open to new methods and guidance.

The mix of advisors, woodland owners, foresters and keepers on the course proved a valuable mix adding to informed discussion. If David plans to run a future course I strongly commend attendance, I doubt anyone would not learn several things to help in controlling this pest.

Diana MacMullen is a director of The Verderers



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