



# Mid Wales Red Squirrel Partnership

## Standard Operating Procedures for Grey Squirrel Control



South and West Wales  
De a Gorllewin Cymru

## Background

The grey squirrel was introduced into parks and country estates in Britain as an ornamental species in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The grey squirrel population expanded rapidly and by the 1960s had colonised much of Wales. As it did so the native red squirrel population declined. The grey squirrel out-competes the red squirrel for resources and has a competitive advantage over the red in broadleaved woodland. Conversely, smaller seeded conifers are less favoured by grey squirrels and so red squirrels have a slight competitive advantage where there are large areas of coniferous woodland. There are three significant remaining red squirrel populations in Wales: on Anglesey and Clocaenog in north Wales, and in mid Wales within the coniferous plantations of the Twyi Forest. In 2009 the Conservation Plan for Red Squirrels in Wales received Ministerial approval; this led to the endorsement of the Mid Wales Red Squirrel Conservation Area.

## Grey Squirrel Control

Where both species occur, the most effective means of conserving red squirrels at present is by reducing the number of grey squirrels. The Conservation Plan for Red Squirrels in Wales states that: *“Conservation of red squirrel populations depends upon maintaining sites free of grey squirrels”*. Without radical measures to control the grey squirrel population, the red squirrel in mid Wales is likely to become extinct. This guidance has been prepared by Mid Wales Red squirrel Partnership (MWRSP) and aims to clarify the legal aspects of trapping, dispatch methods, and the responsibilities that come with trapping squirrels.

## Legal Requirements

Grey squirrel control is a legal activity which does not need to be licensed. However, if trapping on land with an SSSI designation, it is a legal requirement that you ensure that consents from Natural Resources Wales are in place; please speak with your Red Squirrel Officer if you are unsure about the conservation status of your land. WTSWW has a policy on the killing of wild animals for conservation reasons, with which these procedures are compliant.

The table below outlines the various laws relevant to the grey squirrel. Basic provisions of the legislation are that:

- it is illegal to release a trapped grey squirrel into the wild and or to keep a grey squirrel in captivity;
- any grey squirrel caught must be humanely destroyed;
- drowning is an inhumane method of despatch and should not be carried out on behalf of the MWRSP;
- Legally, when trapping for grey squirrels, traps must be visited once every 24 hours, but, where there is a risk of catching red squirrels or other non-target species it is a legal requirement that traps are checked twice daily. With some exceptions, there is very little chance that you will catch a red squirrel in your traps in mid Wales. Anyone borrowing traps through the MWRSP Trap Loan Scheme should follow best practice and make every effort to check traps twice daily in order to minimise the risks to non-target species such as red squirrels, hedgehogs and birds, and to minimise stress to grey squirrels. However, with site-by-site agreement, checking traps once a day may be acceptable. Contact your Red Squirrel Officer if you are unsure.

This is not intended as a definitive guide to the legislation and you should refer to the original legislation if you need more details.

Legal instrument	Provision
<i>Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981</i> (as amended) Schedule 9	Illegal to release, or to allow to escape, to the wild any captive grey squirrel.
<i>Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996</i>	Illegal to subject them to wilful acts of cruelty or abuse.
<i>Destructive Imported Animals Act 1932</i>	An offence to keep a grey squirrel in captivity, except under licence.

## Health and Safety

Your health and safety is of paramount importance. The work required *may* involve some activities in remote and exposed locations and, if relevant, you should ensure that you have appropriate clothing/footwear and provisions for these circumstances. If you are working alone, you must ensure that you notify someone of your whereabouts at all times during the work. You must also ensure that this person is informed when you return from trapping. Where possible, mobile phones should be carried.

WTSWW employers insurance will cover volunteers working on the MWRSP project's behalf for personal injury sustained or third party damage caused during the course of the work. The following WTSWW health and safety documentation should be made available for all volunteers working on behalf of the Project:

- ACTIVITY RISK ASSESSMENT – GREY SQUIRREL CONTROL
- SITE RISK ASSESSMENT – TAILORED TO YOUR OWN SITE.

Copies of each site-specific risk assessment should be kept on file and retained by the Red Squirrel Officer. It is also required that volunteers complete the MWRSP Volunteer Registration Form and sign a grey squirrel control agreement before they commence trapping on behalf of the MWRTSP Trap Loan Scheme.

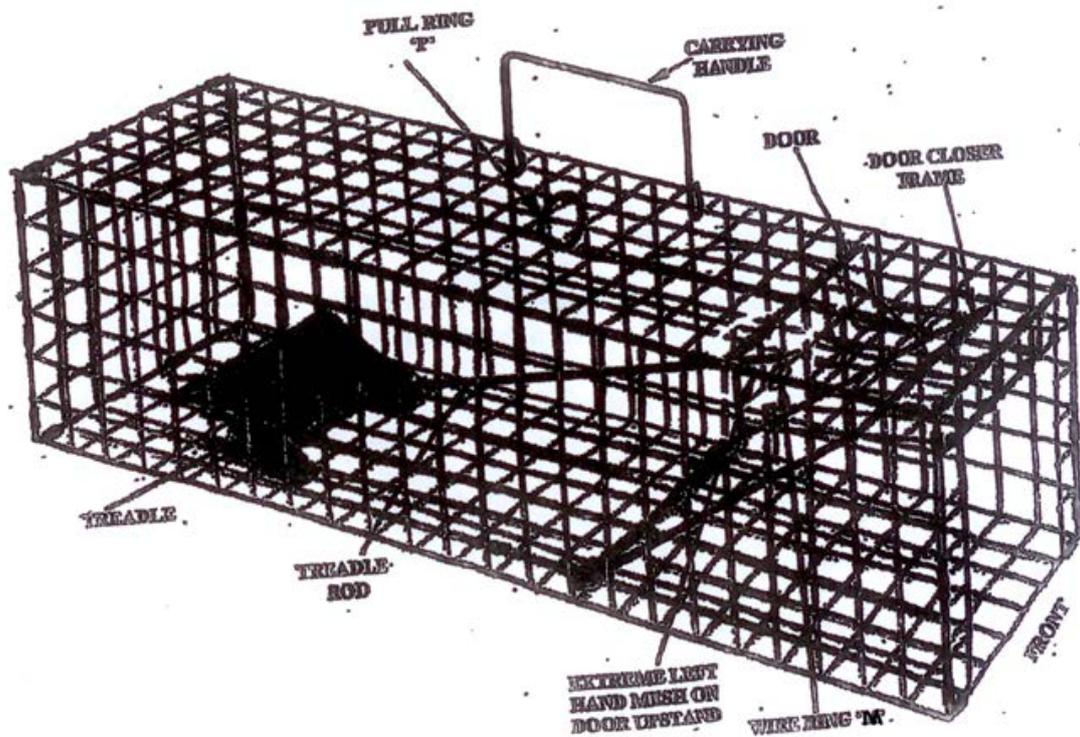
## Training

You will be given a thorough briefing on the work required, including live-trapping and despatch of grey squirrels before you conduct any work. You may also be expected to undertake additional training, supplied by the Project, where you need this to build on existing skills.

There are particular health and safety implications if you are shooting trapped animals. This method should only be used where you have explicit permission of the landowner, preferably in writing. Shooting must comply with all the relevant UK firearm regulations and you will be expected to conform to the BASC code of practice. You must make clear your intention to use this method to the Red Squirrel Officer in order that we ensure you are given the appropriate training and guidance if required.

## Method of Capture – Live Trapping

- a. Identify suitable locations for trapping based on sightings or signs of grey squirrels. This should be located in or near suitable habitat to increase the likelihood of trapping animals.
- b. Using your knowledge of the area, identify the risks to any non-target species and position the traps to minimise these. Prepare a secure, flat base for the trap, preferably at the base of a tree.
- c. Cover the trap with cardboard or plastic sheeting to provide shelter for the captive animal. Traps on the ground should be further covered by logs, branches and leaves; stones may be placed around the entrance to help disguise it. However, ensure that these do not interfere with the door closing.
- d. Traps should be pre-baited if you are trying to control grey squirrels where they are well established. This is unnecessary when trying to catch a single animal and, in this case, traps should be set and baited immediately. To pre-bait, secure the trap door open (using the treadle rod raised to its fullest extent and a twig) and bait with whole maize for a minimum of five days, and preferably one or two weeks. It is not possible to distinguish between food eaten by red or grey squirrels in areas with both species. However, only squirrels will remove the soft germ of the maize, discarding the outer kernel and this may give an indication that there are grey squirrels if red squirrels are known **not** to be present in the area.
- e. To set the trap, lift the trap roof with the pull ring "P". Push your hand into the trap and grab the treadle rod. Pass the treadle rod through the extreme left hand mesh of the door and then through the roof mesh at the position noted "M" and marked by a wire ring. **This ring is a mark only and not to be used to push the treadle rod through.** The sensitivity of the trap can be adjusted by the amount the treadle rod is pushed through the roof. Ensure that the treadle trips the door mechanism and the door falls free, the trap normally operates best when the treadle is raised as little as possible. Place the bait in the back of the trap, behind the treadle and a little around the entrance of the trap.



- f. Set traps should be baited with whole maize. Where there is a lot of natural food available, you may prefer to use peanuts as an added attraction for grey squirrels. Legally, when trapping for grey squirrels, traps must be visited once every 24 hours, but, where there is a risk of catching red squirrels or other non-target species it is a legal requirement that traps are checked twice daily (such as late morning and dusk). **Any red squirrel caught must be released immediately and reported to the Red Squirrel Officer.** You must lock traps open or shut when you are not able to visit them regularly (e.g. illness or holidays). Do not attempt to trap in severe weather as squirrel activity is likely to be low and there may be a risk of the weather conditions preventing regular monitoring of the trap.
- g. Non-target animals should be released immediately. You must review the trapping if you regularly catch more non-target species than grey squirrels. Under these circumstances, a licence may be required to cover trapping of protected species. Measures which may be taken to minimise trapping of red squirrels in areas of co-existence include using only maize bait, setting covered traps on the ground where possible and moving traps to a different location which offers the best source of grey squirrel food (such as broadleaved woodland).
- h. Trapped grey squirrels must be handled humanely in accordance with the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996. Grey squirrels cannot be released under the Grey Squirrels (Prohibition of Importation and Keeping) Order 1937 and must be destroyed humanely.

### Approaching the Trapped Animal

- a. Sprung traps can often be identified from a distance as the door will be closed. However, as the location or cover of the trap may prevent this, you should always approach traps directly and calmly to avoid undue stress to any captive animal.
- b. You should try to confirm the species present in the trap without touching the trap or with minimal disturbance to avoid distress to the captive animal. Non-target animals must be released immediately. Open trap door, keeping fingers well away from the trapped animal, using the trapping comb to contain the animal whilst lifting the door. When exit is clear stand behind the trap until the animal has left the area.

### Dispatch Method

Anyone undertaking grey squirrel control must consider whether or not they are prepared to carry out the humane dispatch of any animals they catch. Your local Co-ordinator or the Red Squirrel Officer can supply traps on loan and

can also, in some circumstances, co-ordinate dispatch by one of the volunteer Community Controllers, who will have been trained in humane dispatch method. The method that the MWRSP recommends for humanely dispatching grey squirrels is by cranial concussion; the animal is secured in a hessian sack and despatched with a single blow to the head with an appropriate implement such as a fishing priest, by a trained individual.

**Spring trapping (kill trapping), drey poking, poisoning, drowning and gassing of grey squirrels is not condoned by MWRSP and may not be undertaken on the Project's behalf.**

You will be required to keep a record of the number of days that the traps are set and of the amount of time that you have spent trapping. If you are dispatching the animals yourself, we will also require a record of all animals caught; the Project will supply standard reporting forms. Records are used as a tool to judge the success of the Project and make changes to our strategy if need be. Volunteer trapping time is used as part-funding (in-kind) and enables the project to draw down funding for trapping equipment and other project costs.

To ensure that grey squirrel control is undertaken legally and humanely it is important that you are aware of how to kill grey squirrels humanely. The following presents the minimum Standard Operating Procedures for the dispatch method recommended by the project. It is important that you are fully experienced and/or trained in grey squirrel dispatch before undertaking any control work on behalf of the Project. This should be discussed at the outset with your Local Co-ordinator. Anyone undertaking grey squirrel control on behalf of the MWRSP will be expected to meet the requirements of this training before undertaking any control; further information can be obtained from the Red Squirrel Officer.

In most cases, grey squirrels will be captured in relatively isolated locations. However, where this is not the case, e.g. urban gardens, you may prefer to move the animal to a less public place before despatching it. This is perfectly acceptable as long as you leave the animal in the cage to transport.

**Cranial Concussion** (*Guidance on this method is also available in Forestry Commission Practice Note 4.*)

**Equipment:**

- A heavy hardwood stick or blunt fishing priest capable of delivering a blow of sufficient force to cause a depressed skull fracture;
- Medium weight hessian sack<sup>1</sup>;
- Thick gloves (optional)
- Trapping comb (optional)

**Method:**

- a. Place a hessian sack tightly over the entrance to the trap taking care not to leave any gaps. Roll the length of the sack up to create a tunnel for the animal to move down once released from the trap. Release the door to allow the animal to move from the trap into the sack. The animal can be encouraged to move into the sack by removing the cardboard or plastic cover, by using a trapping comb and/or by blowing gently on the animal's tail. You can use thick gloves to help minimise the risk of being scratched or bitten.
- b. Once the squirrel has moved into the sack, use your foot to seal the sack entrance to prevent the animal from escaping, taking care not to step on the animal itself. Roll the sack up behind it to prevent it turning around and manoeuvre the animal into the corner of the sack. Ensure that the head is secure in one corner, not covered by the tail and free of excess sacking.
- c. When the animal is secured, locate the back of the head and, ensuring it is against a hard surface, using the heavy stick or fishing priest, deliver a rapid blow of sufficient force to fracture the skull.

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<sup>1</sup> The hessian sack provides strength to avoid being bitten whilst providing a darkened environment to minimise stress to the animal involved. Conical restraints should only be used where these mask the animal's eyes to prevent increased stress.

## Confirmation of Death

It is the responsibility of the operator to ensure that the method is delivered quickly, effectively and humanely. Death must be confirmed for each animal in all circumstances. Signs of death include:

- Loss of rhythmic breathing
- Loss of heart rate
- Onset of rigor mortis

Loss of breathing and heart rate may be difficult to detect if shallow or weak respectively. If there is any doubt about death, a second method must be used to kill the animal.

## Disposing of Carcasses

As carrion can play an important part in forest ecosystems it may be acceptable to leave carcasses, distributed in suitable locations in woodland; if on a public site, place out of view. Alternatively, and in garden situations, carcasses may be buried.

## Disinfecting the Trap

***It is only necessary to disinfect traps if you are trapping in areas where there are red squirrels present.*** In these cases, using a disinfectant is essential in preventing the spread of disease between grey and red squirrels. If you are unsure as to whether you should disinfect traps or not, please contact your Red Squirrel Officer.

Disinfect the trap after it has been occupied. Spray with a solution of disinfectant such as Trigen or Virkon S and leave to dry - the trap can be left out in the rain to rinse away the odour of the disinfectant, which can sometimes discourage animals from entering the trap. Always follow the manufacturers' safety instructions when using disinfectant.

## References

Forestry Commission (2007) *Controlling Grey Squirrel Damage to Woodlands*. FCPN4, Surrey.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (2009) Standard Operating Procedures for grey squirrel control.