Position Statement

Grey squirrel management

The Trust's view:

- The non-native grey squirrel is firmly established in the UK.
- There is clear evidence that expansion of grey squirrel populations has negatively affected populations of native red squirrel and continues to do so.
- Selective bark stripping and seed predation may affect the tree species composition, but not the overall survival, of native woodland.
- Bark stripping by grey squirrels can affect the timber value of trees with economic impacts for landowners.

The Trust will:

- Support control of grey squirrel populations within red squirrel areas, neighbouring control zones, and in support of red squirrel reintroduction projects where control in these areas is co-ordinated and appropriate to allow the successful protection and/or expansion of red squirrel populations ;
- Co-operate in grey squirrel control programmes outside these areas where they are happening across multiple ownerships, at landscape scale, and are appropriately managed to avoid perturbation effects;
- Practise and promote woodland management approaches that will reduce the potential impact of grey squirrel damage, as part of a wider approach to promote resilience in woodland;
- Continue to explore and review the evidence on the role of grey squirrels in woodland ecosystems, particularly effects on other wildlife, and on effective control and management of damage by grey squirrels and where appropriate facilitate, commission or support such work.

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Background

Grey squirrels were introduced into the UK in 1876. They are an established part of the UK's wildlife and a popular sight with the public in parks, gardens and woods, but they are also the subject of concern among landowners and conservationists, leading to calls for control and management of populations.

Declines and extinction of populations of native red squirrel in the UK has been matched by expansion of the range of grey squirrels. This is thought to be due to competition for food and space but primarily due to grey squirrels carrying a parapox virus, which kills red squirrels. Grey squirrels carry an antibody to the virus. Evidence for other wildlife impacts is less clear. The commonly held view that grey squirrel nest predation is leading to declines in bird species is not strongly supported by evidence, and while competition for food and space might affect dormice population levels there is no conclusive evidence of this.

Selective bark stripping, and damage and consumption of seed, especially considered with the impacts of deer browsing, may affect natural processes such as regeneration within woodland, leading to changes in long term tree species and age class composition. There is a need for further research into all of these possible impacts. However, grey squirrels are also prey for other species such as native goshawks or pine marten, and may contribute to an increase in deadwood.

The impact of bark stripping is more serious for timber production. Ring barking by squirrels may cause death of trees. Research shows fewer than 5 per cent of damaged trees die, but even if death does not occur, damage can result in loss of timber yield and trees of poor form, as well as fungal infection and staining of timber, all of which has economic impacts for landowners. In beech, sycamore and oak woods in Britain, grey squirrel damage has been estimated to reduce the value of tree crops by 25 per cent, with impacts greatest in single or limited species single-aged plantations. This may deter landowners from planting woodland if timber is one of their objectives.

Management of grey squirrels within a single site risks a perturbation effect, with young grey squirrels moving in to replace those lost and can lead to increases in the level of damage at the site level. Therefore to be effective, control needs to happen across a large enough area to minimise these effect. The co-ordinated approach, with multiple owners' engagement and involvement, used within many of the red squirrel protection areas is an example of how grey squirrel control can be undertaken effectively at a landscape scale.

The Woodland Trust's primary objectives in managing its woods are around wildlife conservation and public access. In terms of our objective to protect native woods, trees and their wildlife, the greatest impact of grey squirrels, based on current evidence, is that on red squirrel populations. The Woodland Trust therefore will participate in co-ordinated programmes to control grey squirrel populations on its sites in red squirrel zones, neighbouring control zones, and in support of suitable red squirrel re-introduction areas.

We acknowledge the diverse objectives of other woodland owners, including timber production. The Trust supports the development of a vibrant, diverse and robust forestry sector in the UK. We will therefore carry out control of grey squirrels in non-red squirrel areas as part of wider, coordinated initiatives across multiple ownerships, where these are at a scale likely to avoid perturbation effects, and we are confident that they will be effective.

We will also look for other ways to minimise grey squirrel impacts, through appropriate forestry management regimes that promote diverse species mixes and mixed-age stands, as part of a wider approach to promote resilience in woodland. We recognise there are gaps in evidence, particularly around the impacts of grey squirrels on native woods and wildlife, and the effective control of grey squirrels and management of grey squirrel damage. We will continue to monitor and review the evidence around the impacts of grey squirrels and their control and will where appropriate facilitate, commission or support further research in these areas.