

Problems with Squirrels?

Grey squirrels were introduced to Britain in the late 1800s, and their adaptability has allowed them to successfully populate much of the country. They are now a common wildlife species in urban areas and mixed woodland.

Diet

Most of a squirrel's time is spent foraging for and storing food. Their diet varies according to the season and consists primarily of tree seeds, but they also eat berries, fungus, nuts, plant bulbs and shoots, etc. and food provided by residents. Surplus food is buried, especially in autumn, as provision for possible lean times ahead.

Breeding

Squirrels build nests of twigs and leaves, which can measure up to 30cm in diameter. However, they may also choose to nest in people's houses, which can cause potentially serious problems (more on this later).

There are generally two breeding seasons, one in late winter/early spring and the other in the summer/autumn. Three or four kittens are born in each litter. They begin to forage with their mother after 4-5 weeks, and leave the nest after 10-12 weeks. An adult can live 5-6 years, although mortality is very high during the first year.

Due to the long breeding season, it is possible to find young in the nest at any time except from October to January. Any work to remove squirrels from a house should take this into account.

Red vs. Grey Squirrels

Despite common belief, the grey squirrel has not been the cause of the decline of the red. The red is less adaptable than the grey, and in Britain is living on the edge of its preferred habitat. Deforestation and habitat loss caused them to disappear from Ireland as early as the 15th century, and from Scotland by the 18th, long before the grey was introduced. In addition, in the late 19th and early 20th century they were considered pests and were killed in their thousands. By the 1920s their population had been decimated.

Red squirrels are now protected, and in some areas, coexist with grey squirrels.

So what's the problem?

Many people derive great pleasure from urban wildlife and actively encourage them. However, not everyone shares that view, and sometimes squirrels can pose problems, especially if they take up residence in your house.

Squirrels in the Loft?

When squirrels enter a loft space, they can cause structural damage by tearing up loft insulation for bedding, chewing timbers, pipework and stored items, and posing a fire hazard by stripping insulation from electrical wiring. They may also be noisy, and if they drown in uncovered water storage tanks, may contaminate the water supply. For these reasons, it is important to keep squirrels out of lofts.

The best cure is prevention. A hole need only be as big as a squirrel's head to allow access. If they have been seen entering the property, their access points will be known, but otherwise a piece of newspaper stuffed securely into a suspected access hole can be easily removed by a squirrel and will show that a hole is in use.

The RSPCA advise the use of strong wire netting with a mesh size no larger than 25mm to block any access holes, plus repair to any slipped slates, rotten soffits or missing bricks etc. to prevent access.

If the squirrels have already gained entry, *it is essential to ensure there are no squirrels remaining in the loft before access is blocked.* Not only is it cruel to trap them (and illegal to cause suffering to a captive animal), they may do additional damage in their attempt to escape or in a mother's attempt to rescue her young. The decomposition of any squirrels that die may also cause smell and insect infestation. Squirrels can attack when frightened or to defend their young, so take care and make noise to frighten any squirrel out of the loft before you enter.

If young are present, they should be left until they are old enough to leave the nest, and repair work carried out when the family is out foraging.

Problems in the Garden

Problems in the garden are more annoying than dangerous. Many squirrel proof feeders are sold to prevent them from raiding the bird feeder, and some bird seed supplements contain pepper additives that are distasteful to squirrels, and harmless to both. Other products based upon the smell deterrence principle are also available.

Bulbs can be protected with wire mesh or an inverted wire basket firmly staked to the ground. The plants can grow up through the mesh but can't be unearthed. (This method works well if you have cats digging up your garden too.)

Pest Control

Lethal control of squirrels is permitted but should only be carried out by qualified professional pest control officers. The use of poisons is strictly regulated for use by professionals only and *should never be undertaken by members of the public.*

The Council does not provide any pest control services for dealing with squirrels, but we can refer you to a humane deterrence service, or the Council's pest control contractor, who will charge for this service. Alternatively, you can arrange for such service directly with another pest control company. If you wish to contact the Council's contractor, please call 020-8891-7800.

Practical advice can be obtained from the Fox Project by contacting their squirrel adviceline on 0906-272-4477 (calls charged at 25p/min). They may also be able to provide practical assistance more cheaply than the services of a pest control company.

If you have any comments regarding this leaflet, or if you require more information, please contact Jane Edmondson, Senior Neighbour Nuisance Officer, on 020-8891-7737.

If you require a copy of this leaflet in Braille, large print, on audio tape, or in a community language, please contact the Public Information Officer on 020 8891 7677.