



Grey squirrel, photograph Geoff Hamilton



Red squirrel, photograph Niall Benvie

GREY INVASION

Travel back in time just 100 years and take a leisurely morning stroll through one of Ireland's forests. Keep an eye out for a flash of movement amongst the branches – you could be lucky enough to spot a red squirrel peering at you, mostly hidden by the trunk of a tree. Today, in many areas of the country however, the bushy tail you might see will belong instead to a grey squirrel, a relative newcomer to our shores. A recent survey has found that our native red squirrels are being steadily replaced by greys and are now very rare in several counties. What can be done to protect our indigenous squirrels from further incursion by the grey and their possible disappearance?

Most readers will be familiar with both the red and grey squirrel, but some may be unaware that the grey was actually introduced to Ireland as recently as 1911. Several animals, intended as ornamental additions to a wedding reception in Co Longford, escaped into the surrounding woodland and multiplied to such

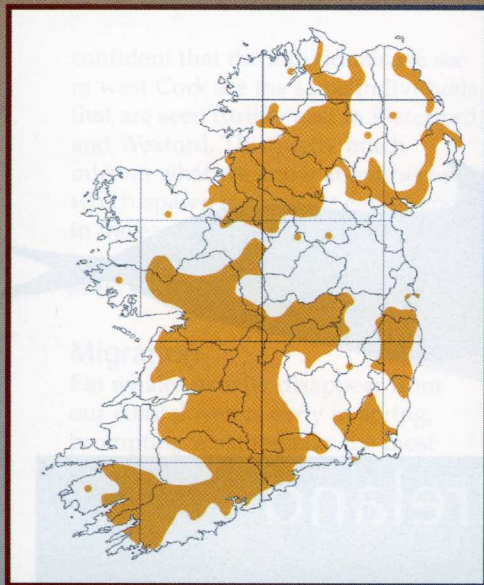
an extent that the entire modern-day population of grey squirrels is descended from these few original animals.

Where red and grey squirrels overlap, particularly in broadleaf and mixed woodlands, the greys use up the majority of the autumn seed crop before reds find them palatable. When this happens, numbers of red squirrels fall away and they are quickly replaced by the invading greys.

The Irish Squirrel Survey 2007 set out to assess the distributions of the two animals by collecting data from organisations involved in wildlife and forestry, together with information from the general public. Distribution maps based on the survey show that the red squirrel can still be found in the majority of counties and remains common in the western half of Ireland. Though it is also still found in many areas of the east and north, in many cases its habitat is now shared with the grey squirrel. Unfortunately, it is now probably extinct in Meath and Westmeath, and has become

particularly rare in Kilkenny, Carlow and Louth. Grey squirrels meanwhile are now frequent across the east, and are now present in 26 counties (the exceptions being Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry and Cork). Most significant is its recent spread into the counties of Antrim, Wicklow and Wexford, which were predominantly devoid of greys only 10 years ago. For the first time, grey squirrels have also been confirmed west of the River Shannon.

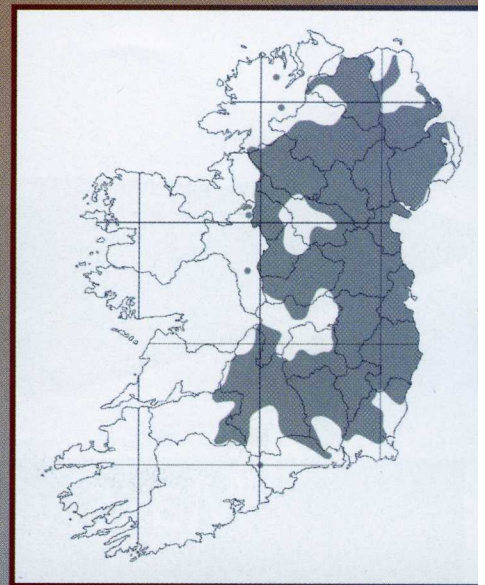
So what does this mean for the future? Red squirrels that already share their habitat are under immediate threat, while other populations just beyond the current grey squirrel distribution (such as Cork, Limerick, Kerry and northeast Antrim) may also be considered at risk. It is likely that the grey squirrel will continue to spread in many areas of the country in the coming years. It is possible that they could extend their range west of the Shannon, though the type of habitat in this region is not ideally suited to grey



Distribution of red squirrels in 2007

squirrel dispersal. Active conservation of red squirrels may be pursued in a number of ways including; selective management of coniferous forests which support good populations of red squirrels, targeted grey squirrel control at the frontiers of their distribution to minimise further spread, supplementary feeding of red squirrel populations and translocations of reds into normally inaccessible woodlands.

All of these options are currently being assessed as part of a range of projects, and hopefully an integrated plan for the protection of the Irish red squirrel will be put into place in the near future. so that in another 100 years, our great-great-grandchildren will still be able to go red squirrel-spotting in the many forests of Ireland!



Distribution of grey squirrels in 2007



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The Irish Squirrel Survey 2007 has been published as a report by COFORD. Copies are available for €8.00 - email info@coford.ie, phone 01-2130725 or visit www.coford.ie to order it on-line