**Gatehouse Squirrel Group**

**Feeder Census Scheme**

Seeing red squirrels when out in our local woods is not easy: they are naturally sparse in oak woodland and the dense foliage of conifers obscures our view of them year-round. Providing food for them via bird feeders in gardens is the way most people get to see their reds regularly. We can use this to provide an indication of how our local population varies through time: all we need to do is collect information on our garden visitors in a consistent way and on a regular basis. It is also another a way of detecting greys that are moving in or even breeding in our area, with a view to their efficient control.

**COUNTING REDS**

The easiest and most memorable statistic to record is the maximum number of reds you have seen at the same time. This will be less than the total number of reds in your area, but is probably a good indication of their local status. Quite often it is possible to recognise individuals through differences in their coat colours and patterns, allowing you to make a different estimate of the number you have visiting. Unfortunately, some individuals look identical, so this counting method may also produce an underestimate of the actual number visiting your patch. Reds do change in their appearance when they moult and grow a new coat (twice a year), so over a period of months you may be mistaken in thinking that you have lost one and attracted another! Counting squirrels is much more difficult than counting sheep, but that does not mean we should not try. Both these measures should enable us to judge whether the population around Gatehouse is increasing, stable or decreasing, which is what we really want to know.

So, I intend to contact everyone willing to join this scheme, to collect the following two numbers at the end of each month from now on: **maximum number of reds seen at once on any one occasion, and minimum number of different reds recognisable during the month**. At the start, it will also be helpful to have your location (e.g. address, six-figure map reference), so that I can map the results to show you what we are finding.

**GREYS & SQUIRRELPOX DISEASE**

Feeding birds and reds at feeders is fine, just as long as there are no greys about. Their visits to feeders are thought to provide an easy way for the Squirrelpox Virus to spread, particularly as it is carried on the skin and in the saliva. Remember that any reds that catch it will not survive more than a few days, whilst greys are completely immune, enabling just one infected individual to cause mayhem in its locality. Whilst less than 10% of greys in Scotland currently seem to carry the virus, there are unpredictable local outbreaks in reds, causing them to disappear very suddenly.

So, we need to act responsibly if a grey turns up at a feeder we are supplying. Please contact me immediately, so that we can promptly try to remove it by trapping or shooting, at or near the feeder. Whatever happens, all feeders should be disinfected using Vircon-S, which is specific for viruses (most household disinfectants only kill bacteria). This chemical is safe, relatively cheap and available online (e.g. [www.hyperdrug.co.uk](http://www.hyperdrug.co.uk)) in tablet form, so that you can make up a small volume of solution to spray (it ‘goes off’ after a week). I have a supply should you need some urgently.

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*(Revised 5 February 2017)*