

SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING OF RED SQUIRRELS

Why provide supplementary feeding for red squirrels?

Starvation, competition from grey squirrels, disease, road casualties and habitat loss have all contributed to making the red squirrel a vulnerable species. If you are feeding red squirrels in your garden, this may help to provide them with a source of food and nutrients, particularly in the summer when wild food is hard to come by. In addition, watching red squirrels feed is an entertaining, satisfying and often amusing sight.

Why do red squirrels come to my garden?

Squirrels may come to your garden for a number of reasons: to look for materials such as moss for nest lining or to drink from your garden pond – but the biggest attraction is food.

What should I feed them?

Squirrels will quite happily pillage the nuts and seeds from your garden. It is best to feed a variety of different foods, similar to those that the squirrel might encounter in the wild, with a few added extras in small amounts.

- The most suitable foods for red squirrels are hazelnuts in their shells, wheat, unsalted peanuts and sunflower seeds. Beech nuts, sweet chestnuts and pine nuts are also excellent if you can afford them.
- **Red squirrels may suffer from calcium deficiency if eating a diet rich in peanuts or sunflower seed so ensure that these nuts only make up a proportion, and not the bulk, of the food offered to red squirrels.**
- Provide an alternative calcium source such as a cuttlefish, bone or antler placed near to the feeder. This is especially valuable during summer for juvenile and female squirrels.
- Thin slices of apples and carrots from time to time can also reduce the chances of calcium deficiency occurring, and are an important part of the food you provide.
- **Old and decayed brazil nuts can cause poisoning and death so best to avoid these altogether.**

Things to watch out for

If a grey squirrel visits your feeder please remove it immediately and contact your local squirrel group or Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (scottishsquirrels.org.uk). The deadly squirrelpox virus which is carried by greys is an ongoing threat to red squirrels in your area.

Bird and squirrel feeders should be kept clean to avoid transmission of diseases. Remove soiled or stale food and scrub feeder weekly with detergent. Spray with a pet-safe or bird-safe anti-viral disinfectant such as Virkon S before refilling with food. Grey squirrels may be visiting your feeders unnoticed.

- Avoid sweet, dried foods such as raisins and sultanas, as these can cause calcium deficiency.
- **Cats account for a high number of fatalities in gardens visited by squirrels.** Make sure that food isn't scattered on the ground but is placed as high as possible – a good feeder location is against a wall or tree so that the squirrel doesn't have to cross open ground, and can escape easily.
- Provide a source of water if it is not naturally available.

In the wild, red squirrels feed on shoots and flowers in spring, and nuts, seeds from cones and fruits in autumn and winter. The critical period to feed them is therefore during the summer months before fruits, conifer seed and nuts are ripe, when their natural food is in short supply. In autumn when plenty of natural food is available, the squirrels may stop coming to your garden, but they will probably return in the winter. Continued feeding throughout the winter will also provide an additional boost to the squirrels in your area.

How often should I feed the squirrels?

Sometimes red squirrels can become dependent on supplementary food. Try to avoid feeding them in such amounts that they don't need to look elsewhere! It is best to feed small amounts every 3 or 4 days. This way, you can provide enough to help keep the squirrels alive until autumn, but you will not encourage them into bad habits.

What should I do if grey squirrels come to my garden?

- If grey squirrels start appearing in your garden for the first time, please contact your local squirrel group or your local Red Squirrel Conservation Officer. You should not feed grey squirrels, so you may need to stop all feeding.
- If you have wild birds which rely on your food supply and can't stop feeding them, try to avoid laying feed down in the same place every day, and **clean feeders regularly** to minimise the risk of spreading disease.

Suppliers

Most suitable foods are available from online suppliers, garden centres, farm suppliers, supermarkets and health food shops. Pet food shops may also supply mixtures containing some or all of the recommended foods, sold for pets such as chipmunks. **Always check the quality of the food to ensure its freshness.**

Anti-bacterial disinfectants for feeders are available from garden shops or RSPB. Anti-viral disinfectants such as Virkon S are available from local farm shops.

If you know of anyone feeding red squirrels, please pass on this leaflet or ask them to contact their local squirrel group for more information.

Solway Forests Red Squirrel Network



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(This local group covers Mabie Forest, Beeswing, Dalbeattie Forest, Palnackie, Kippford, Rockcliffe, Colvend Coast, New Abbey)