



A Journey of Red Squirrel Survival Becky Clews-Roberts – Red Squirrel Ranger, Red Squirrels Trust Wales

If anyone asks where they can see red squirrels in north Wales, they are advised to head North West to the Isle of Anglesey. The Island has been grey squirrel-free since 2012 and now has a population of around 800 reds up from an all-time low of just 40.

However, few people know of the population in north east Wales in [Clocaenog Forest](#) which was at one time considered to be the last stronghold for red squirrels in Wales.



Forest managers Natural Resources Wales (NRW), have commissioned studies of the red squirrels but in recent years numbers have taken a sharp decline. An opportunity arose via Red Squirrels United for action to be taken to halt further decline and secure a future for the population.

Time for action!

Becky, the Red Squirrel Ranger for Red Squirrels Trust Wales (RSTW) and the hugely dedicated team of volunteers determined where in the 5,500 forest the reds were hanging out by using 50+ trail cameras. Once this had been established, we assisted NRW in a [pilot reinforcement](#) drawing upon lessons learned from the work carried out on Anglesey.

Reinforcement techniques aim to stop potential genetic bottlenecking and by using a soft-release approach, whereby animals are kept in enclosures for up to three weeks, we were able to keep a health check on them. We also took the opportunity to place radio tracking collars on the red squirrels which, once released, allowed volunteer trackers to record which sections of the forest the reds seemed to prefer whilst also keeping a check on their health and wellbeing. The information gathered will be used by NRW to form future forest management plans that take red squirrel ecology into consideration.

How did we do it?

Hand-reared red squirrels were sourced from collections across the UK with a mix of males and females – kept apart in the enclosures. Volunteers visited the enclosures daily, including Christmas Day! to top up food, water and check overall health. Droppings were collected for disease testing, carried out by The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA).



Throughout the Red Squirrels United project, RSTW rangers have been keen to offer training to project volunteers. This will ensure conservation work can be continued beyond the life of the project. Volunteers have been able to get stuck in at the deep end of mammal conservation by learning about reinforcements and how to carry out radio tracking.



We continue to carry out radio tracking which is building up a picture of how the red squirrels are adapting to their new surroundings.

During camera checks in May 2018, project volunteer Julian was overjoyed to watch our first video evidence of a young red squirrel! This confirmation of breeding deemed the pilot reinforcement a success.

We realise numbers are still low however and based upon the success of the pilot reinforcement, we are now

entering phase two of the reinforcement. As well as more captive-bred red squirrels, we are translocating animals from a forest on Anglesey due to be felled because wind-thrown trees have made it unsafe. A six-month student placement with RSTW will enable daily radio tracking to take place which will, again, enable regular health checks as well as gather invaluable data on forest use and dispersal rates.

Volunteers have recently completed tasks to build a further two enclosures making four in total, ready to hold up to eight red squirrels! We hope that a further increase in the population will be better placed to withstand the various predation threats that we know exist in the forest.

The Clocaenog Red Squirrels Trust - a newly formed red squirrel community group comprising RSU volunteers are ready to continue the work to ensure a thriving red squirrel population in Clocaenog Forest into the future.

