



The dog blog; using sniffer dogs to detect squirrel pox

Rachel Cripps, Red Squirrel Officer at Lancashire Wildlife Trust

Two of my passions in life are red squirrels and my dog, Max. I have been working in red squirrel conservation for six years and it is my dream job. I couldn't believe it when the opportunity arose to have Max working alongside me doing what I love!

Most people have heard of detection dogs being used by the police and military to detect drugs and explosives. But their skills can be used far more broadly, from medicine to conservation. Conservation dogs can be used to detect live animals, carcasses, scats, diseases and even traces of invasive plants. Their drive, determination and almost endless energy makes dogs ideal for the kinds of scenarios we find ourselves surveying in. They can search areas far more quickly and effectively and as they rely on smell instead of sight, obstacles, such as overgrown vegetation, are not such an issue.

I was joined by Holly Peek from [Red Squirrels Trust Wales](#), and Mike Green from [Northumberland Wildlife Trust](#). Each of us had experienced a squirrelpox outbreak in our areas and had been frustrated at how difficult it was to find any dead red squirrels. Volunteers had spent many hours searching for carcasses, but with little success. During a squirrelpox outbreak, any carcasses remaining in the environment can continue to be a source of infection. There are also other diseases that display similar symptoms to squirrelpox, and without testing you never know for sure what you are dealing with. Disease outbreaks may not even be detected in more remote areas or in low density red squirrel populations, unless carcasses are found.

At the Red Squirrels United Knowledge Fair in March 2018, the three of us got chatting and realised we all had the same idea; could dogs do this better than us? Mike had already started some training with his dog, Rowan who had effectively found dead red squirrels during a squirrelpox outbreak in Cumbria. Holly was keen to see if her dog, Darwin had what it took to be a detection dog. I had recently got my dog Max, an ex-drug detection dog. A date was set for a workshop and on 29 June we headed to the [Lancashire Wildlife Trusts Freshfield Dune Heath reserve](#).

We were exceptionally lucky to have the opportunity to work with [Kryus Canine Limited](#), who put on a really fun and informative workshop for the team, which included other Red Squirrels United staff and volunteers. Frank, Sian and Tash from Kryus talked us through the process of how to train a detection dog and everyone had the chance to practice each stage, either with their own dog or a trained Kryus dog. We started with a basic memory retrieve, before moving on to more difficult searches. They then demonstrated how to train dogs onto a specific scent; in our case squirrels! The final stage was how to train the dog to indicate passively that he has found the scent. When we are searching for dead red squirrels we



don't want the dog to pick up any carcasses due to the risk of contamination both to the dog and the squirrel.

We also had a chance to practice quartering; a technique enabling you and your dog to effectively and thoroughly search an area. This was a little harder to get the hang of and requires a lot of practice, but everyone had a go and had fun. We finished the day with Max and Billy doing a demonstration in the woods using a red squirrel that had been unfortunately run over in the area. They both did a fantastic job and found the squirrel!

The workshop was just a taster of what is involved in training a conservation detection dog and this obviously cannot be achieved in one day. Thankfully, I had a head start with Max and I am grateful to the team at Kryus for putting in extra time with us. The process has been so much fun but also a very steep learning curve. I now know how crucial it is to find a dog that not only has a good nose, but also has the drive to continue searching and not give up. In the middle of a disease outbreak you need a dog you can rely on to do the job. I also realised how important the role of the handler is. Max was amazing and picked everything up so easily. But we need to be a team and my job is to ensure he is working at his best and searching areas fully and thoroughly.

So, what does the future hold now? I am looking forward to getting in more practice with Max and refining our skills (mainly mine!), but also hopefully realising the potential of this new survey technique, whether that is here in Merseyside or other areas in the country. I hope our red squirrel populations remain healthy, but we are now not only better equipped to detect and identify a disease outbreak, but also have another resource to manage it. Every little bit helps in the conservation of one of our most endangered mammals.

I would like to say a massive thank you to Kryus Canine Limited for giving up their time to run this workshop and for sharing their knowledge, as well as for the extra time they put in with me and Max. Thank you also to Lancashire Wildlife Trust for hosting and filming the day.

Stay tuned on the Red Squirrels United [YouTube](#) channel for the video of the day coming soon!