



Change tree-felling laws to help save threatened red squirrels!

MPs debate future of Squirrel Nutkin today

Today, Wednesday 3 July, MPs will debate how to prevent the extinction of red squirrels in the UK. Red Squirrels United is calling on government to change outdated tree felling legislation and increase funding to save the native red squirrel which faces extinction in the UK without urgent action.

Tree felling laws are failing to protect rare wildlife

Red squirrels have become extinct across large parts of the UK and today it is estimated that less than 140,000 remain across the country. More than three quarters are found in Scotland with smaller populations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Not only is their future survival threatened by squirrel pox virus, a disease that is fatal to them, red squirrels can be further endangered by poorly timed tree felling. Outdated laws allow trees to be cut down during their breeding season and this means that red squirrel babies – known as kittens – can lose their homes or die when the trees that are home to their nests (dreys) are cut down.



Less than 140,000 red squirrels remain across the UK

Currently, in England and Wales, under the 1967 Forestry Act local authorities cannot refuse tree felling licenses in order to conserve or enhance vulnerable flora and fauna. In contrast, Scotland can refuse licences to protect wildlife populations where necessary. Red Squirrels United wants the law to be changed so that licences can be refused or granted with 'enforceable wildlife protection conditions' added to safeguard vulnerable flora and fauna where appropriate. This could include the need for thorough pre-felling checks and preventing felling within 1km of breeding red squirrels. In Wales, the Welsh Government is committed to revising the outdated 1967 Forestry Act, but in England there is no current plan for change.

Nikki Robinson of Red Squirrels United says:

“We have received several reports of forest felling taking place in areas where numbers of red squirrels are present and possibly breeding during spring and summer; this is unacceptable. This species is at serious risk of extinction in the UK, and we should be doing everything we can to safeguard its future. We are calling for seasonal restrictions to tree felling licences to protect all rare species where needed. There is also no consideration for the cumulative impacts of issuing multiple tree felling licenses or the impact this could have on vulnerable wildlife populations in an area.”

Stephen Trotter, Chair of Red Squirrels United adds:



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Their nests are protected but the trees they live in are not

“We fully recognise the economic and operational needs of the forestry industry and Red Squirrels United works closely and successfully with many woodland owners. We are not against the felling of trees but wish to see more sensitive working practices that ensure vulnerable species are protected at key times of the year, particularly as such a small proportion of woodlands in England and Wales contain red squirrels.”

More red squirrel funding needed

Successful funded partnerships such as Red Squirrels United provide essential training, resources, sharing of best practise and community engagement that smaller groups cannot achieve on their own. Unfortunately, there is no foreseeable long-term funding available for this work that would help ensure a future for red squirrels to continue. This central coordination needs adequate resourcing for the actions of conservation and community groups to have maximum benefit. These long-term sustainable sources of funding must be put in place in order to safeguard and secure the future of our red squirrels across the UK.

Nikki Robinson continues:

“We look forward to today's debate and hope that MPs will seek the changes needed to ensure that our red squirrels do not become a distant memory and join the long list of extinct species that we could have saved.”