

## 12.6 Red Squirrel feeders

Red squirrels were once widespread over much of Ireland but numbers have declined greatly over the past fifty years. Reasons for the decline include loss of habitat and disease. However, the most important factor has been competition with the introduced American grey squirrel. Since first recorded in Northern Ireland in 1945, grey squirrels have become widespread.

Both red and grey squirrels compete for the same food supply within broad-leaved woodland. Grey squirrels are at an advantage where food is limited, due to their ability to consume unripe food such as hazelnuts in October. As the red squirrel can only digest ripened nuts, it is more likely to suffer from food shortages over the winter months.

### Conditions and standards

- Red squirrel only feeders are eligible for grant aid.
- Supplementary feeders will only be approved in areas where both red and grey squirrels are present and competing for food.
- Feeders must be cleaned, washed and disinfected every two to four weeks. Feeders must be thoroughly dried before refilling.
- Only recommended squirrel foods should be used.
- Feeders must be kept filled between early April and late August.
- Check the feeder regularly to ensure the nuts, bolts and magnet are in working order. These parts may need tightening and/or oiled.
- Grant aid is available for metal hoppers that utilise the weight difference between adult red and grey squirrels.

## **Further advice**

### **Positioning feeders**

1. Feeders should be situated in an area of woodland that is easily accessible, sheltered and free from disturbance. The feeders should be positioned about 2 metres from the ground on a large tree. The canopy of the tree should connect with the canopy of other trees.
2. Feeders should be held in position by the use of screws, straps, copper nails or wooden pegs. (Ordinary nails should not be used as these may damage the tree.)
3. The squirrel has to cross a tilting platform in a front tunnel of the hopper before reaching the food at the back. The tilting floor will hold the weight of the adult red squirrel but not an adult grey. It is important to check the tilting mechanism to ensure that it is correctly set at between 350-400 grams. As it may take some time for the squirrels to use the feeder, some food should be scattered around and on top of the feeder initially to help squirrels find it.
4. The critical time for feeding red squirrels is in the late spring and summer from April to August, when natural food becomes scarce. If the autumn/winter seed crop is poor then feeding may need to be started earlier.
5. Feeders should be moved to another suitable location if the present site becomes contaminated.

### **Choice of food**

6. When choosing foods for supplementary feeding it is important to include a wide variety of foods to ensure a balanced diet, which should include a source of calcium. Foods recommended for supplementary feeding include peanuts, sunflower seeds, hazelnuts, pine nuts, walnuts, almonds, maize, cooked carrots and apples. Vision e-plan grant aid does not cover the cost of the feed.

### **Feeder maintenance**

7. As feeders are a potential source of disease it is important to add fresh food regularly and remove any stale food. It is also important to regularly (every two to four weeks) clean the feeder by thoroughly washing with a disinfectant solution taking care to remove dried organic matter from all surfaces. Rinse and dry the feeder thoroughly before refilling. If the tree trunks and branches in the area immediately beside the feeder are

contaminated it is advisable to move feeders periodically to different trees. Wear protective rubber or plastic gloves and wash your hands thoroughly after handling the feeder.

8. Check the feeder regularly to ensure that it is in working order. Nuts, bolts, and the magnet may need tightening/oiled. It is also important to check that the floor tips at the correct weight. Check to make sure that lodged food does not stop the trap door from working.
9. There is concern that using supplementary feeders can facilitate the transmission of parapox virus between squirrels. There is currently no evidence to suggest that the virus has been transmitted to the red squirrel population in Northern Ireland. To reduce the risk of this disease regular maintenance and cleaning of feeders is very important.

### **Source of feeders**

10. Red squirrel feeders, which are suitable where greys and reds co-exist, are available from:

Telephone: 01509 620217

Fax: 01509 620217

Mobile: 07931355190

Email: [alpethermo@aol.com](mailto:alpethermo@aol.com)

Website: [www.thermoproducts.co.uk](http://www.thermoproducts.co.uk)

### **Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)**

**Note:** Consent must be obtained from the Environment & Heritage Service (EHS), DOE, before any works are carried out within or along an ASSI boundary. The EHS contact telephone number for further information is 028 9054 6595.

Management plans are provided for participants in the **Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Management Schemes**

