

A trail of two squirrels

This trail starts where the path enters the forest opposite the car park near the Pillars of Hercules

Welcome to the Forest of Falkland. These woods are home to red and grey squirrels, as well as many other kinds of animals including roe deer, woodpeckers and lots of mini-beasts.

As you'll discover on this trail, red and grey squirrels differ in lots of ways. But are they friends or foes? Follow the squirrel markers to find out! You might not see any squirrels today, but you will learn a lot about them.

1. Prime property for squirrels!

Squirrels eat tree seeds and make their nests (dreys) in trees, so these woods are highly desirable habitat.

The evergreen trees around you are Norway spruce and Douglas fir, planted for timber - they grow fast, tall and straight. Like most conifers (cone-bearing trees) they keep their tough needles all year round. The cones contain small seeds which both red and grey squirrels enjoy eating.

Squirrels make their nests (dreys) from twigs in the fork of a branch (made cosy inside with dry leaves, grass, moss and feathers). Greys' dreys are about the size of a football; reds make them slightly smaller - see if you can spot one.

2. If it's really red, it's not a grey!

You might see squirrels at any time of year if you walk very quietly through the woods. Look for movement in the branches. Listen for scrabbling claws on bark and dropping cones. Squirrels make sharp chattering calls when disturbed.



Grey squirrel

Red squirrel

Photos © Scottish Natural Heritage

Red squirrels are smaller than greys, about two-thirds the size. Their fur is usually bright reddish brown, but can be dull brown when they are moulting (spring and autumn). They have pointed ear tufts (in winter) and bushy tails (both may be tipped with black). They are shy of people and spend more time in trees than on the ground.

Grey squirrels are bigger and heavier - on average double the weight of reds. They may have a reddish tinge on their backs but not the rich russet of a red squirrel. Their belly fur is white. They have bushy tails but no ear tufts. They spend more time foraging on the ground than reds, and are less wary of people.

3. See the signs

Even if you don't see squirrels, signs that they live in these woods are all around you. On the ground and tree stumps, look for cones that have been nibbled apart by squirrels looking for the tasty seeds inside.



Photo © Sam Docherty

Squirrels are either right or left handed, just like us; they only have four digits ('fingers') on each hand yet have no difficulty handling fiddly cones and seeds. They sometimes use flat topped tree stumps as picnic tables - see if you can find one. Squirrels like a very varied diet. As well as nuts and seeds, they eat fruit, mushrooms, eggs, young birds, frogs and lizards.

They bury a store (cache) of nuts and seeds for the winter. They remember where they've put most of them, but always miss a few - doing the trees a big favour because these buried seeds are safe from other things that might eat them, and in the perfect conditions to grow into seedlings!

4. We're being invaded!



Photo © Sam Docherty

Rhododendron was brought here from the Himalayas and other parts of Europe because it has beautiful flowers in spring. It loves being here and nothing eats it, so it spreads rapidly in our woods. But the lovely woodland wild flowers that grow here naturally, like snowdrops, primroses and bluebells, can't cope with the dense shade under Rhododendron. It also prevents tree seedlings from growing so it's a problem for the squirrels too.

We have a problem with this big evergreen plant called Rhododendron - it's taking over parts of the forest. Volunteers are working hard to remove it, but it's a big job!

5. Save our red squirrels!

Grey squirrels are invaders too! Red squirrels have been here since soon after the last ice age ended (about 10,000 years ago). Greys were brought to the UK from North America in 1892.

It might be fine if red and grey squirrels simply lived happily alongside each other, but greys are spreading while reds are disappearing - there are now 20 grey squirrels for every red in the UK. Three-quarters of Britain's red squirrels live in Scotland - around 120,000 of them.

Because they are such an important part of the natural world, reds are protected by law - it is illegal to hurt, kill or catch red squirrels, or to disturb or damage the trees they shelter or nest in. It is also illegal to introduce grey squirrels anywhere in the UK.

Greys eat more, are very adaptable and bolder, which may leave reds going hungry where there is not enough food to go round. But the most serious threat is a nasty disease called squirrel pox. Greys carry the virus without getting ill, whereas it's deadly to reds and can wipe out whole populations very quickly. So far the disease has only been found in the far south west of Scotland, but grey squirrels are very mobile and there's a real danger they will spread the disease. So we need to reduce numbers of grey squirrels to protect the reds.

6. What's this woodland good for?

You are in the Forest of Falkland. These woodlands are home to many different kinds of wild plants and animals as well as squirrels. This is a lovely place to walk and enjoy as you are doing now. But it's also a working wood producing timber for building, firewood, making furniture and other useful and beautiful wooden things.

Trees are important carbon stores that lock up some of the gases that cause climate change. These woods are being managed in a sustainable way, to get the most benefit from all these things the trees provide. This means that instead of cutting down all the trees at once when they are fully grown (clear-felling), every few years a small number of trees are removed and new ones are planted, so that there is continuous woodland cover which benefits all of us – people and wildlife.

Now follow the path round to the right (don't cross the bridge!)

7. Making the most of moss

Covering the ground here is a thick carpet of soft moss. Look closely and you can see different kinds: two feather mosses and a star moss - just three of the 12,000 different kinds of moss in the world!

Photos © Sam Docherty



Star moss



Feather moss

Moss is an important plant for forming soil on the woodland floor. The spongy covering prevents soil erosion and holds water. It's also a good place for seeds from other plants to land and grow. And just like the trees, it holds carbon, helping to slow down climate change. It provides a home for small creatures like spiders, insects and worms as well.

8. All ferns are not bracken!

At most times of year you can see ferns growing in these woods, or lying on the ground turning into compost and making new soil. See if you can spot two different kinds here.



Bracken

Male fern

Photos © Scottish Natural Heritage

Male fern likes shady places best. The fronds come from the ground like giant feathers, unlike bracken, which has branched stems. Bracken also likes woodland but grows happily in the open too. Ferns are an ancient kind of plant. They don't produce flowers or seeds, but spread by minute spores blown by the wind. Look at the underneath of the fronds for the rust-coloured dots of powdery spores.



Photo © Scottish Natural Heritage

9. A walk on the wild side?

Now you're at the end of this trail and know a lot more about the two squirrels that live here, and other creatures that share their world.

You have discovered that to try and keep these woods as wild and natural as possible, we have to manage them carefully. This means removing invaders like grey squirrels and Rhododendron, and only taking out a few timber trees at a time so it stays as a woodland long-term. Some of these trees will be left to get really old – they'll live for hundreds of years if we look after them. Trees get ever more beautiful as they age, and offer food and shelter to many other plants and animals. Imagine how many squirrel families one old tree might house over its long lifetime!

Follow the path up to the lane then turn right to return to the start

Learn more about squirrels on these websites:

www.fiferedsquirrels.co.uk

www.saveoursquirrels.org.uk

www.red-squirrels.org.uk

www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/redsquirrel



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