

### Keeping the Isle of Wight red

Citizen science is the catchy name for the important contribution from the general public.

Monitoring squirrels on the Isle of Wight is one of the most important aspects of red squirrel work. We only use non-invasive methods so there is no distress to the squirrels.

A lot of good research has been achieved from squirrels killed on the road, found dead in gardens and in woodland. So thank you to all who contributed by picking up the bodies.

In effect we also monitor for grey squirrels, although identification can be difficult given reds can have grey coats. All reports of greys are scrutinised and some may trigger a search using camera traps.

Given the trouble publicity caused in 2002—and since then - we would never disclose if there has been a grey incursion. Any grey getting on to the Island, by whatever means, will be found and trapped. If greys establish over here that is the end of the Isle of Wight's nationally important red squirrel population.

Grey squirrels not only outcompete red squirrels, but pass on the squirrelpox virus which is a horrible death for the reds but doesn't affect the greys. Therefore, this work is the most important job of all so we must be vigilant and keep up the monitoring—with your help.



*A typical red squirrel*



*A grey squirrel. Notice the tail and ears.....*

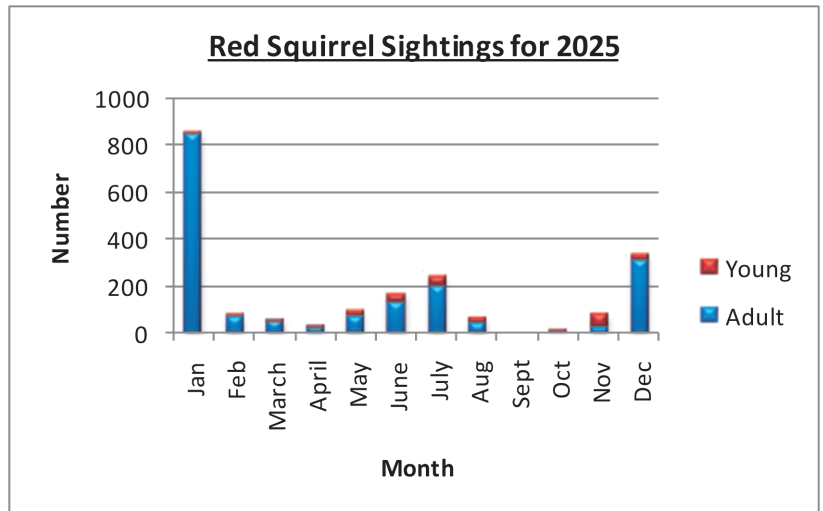


*A red squirrel with a grey coat  
There are variations and they rarely have a white tail  
as this one did.*

## Monitoring results for 2025

The evidence that it was a good mast year shows clearly in the data provided by Peter Dugher as, after July, the squirrels virtually disappeared from the garden for several months.

The month hazelnuts are ready, or at least the squirrels start opening the nuts, has changed since I started red squirrel work in 1991. At that time you would start looking for split shells in September but over the years this has changed to July, presumably due to global warming.

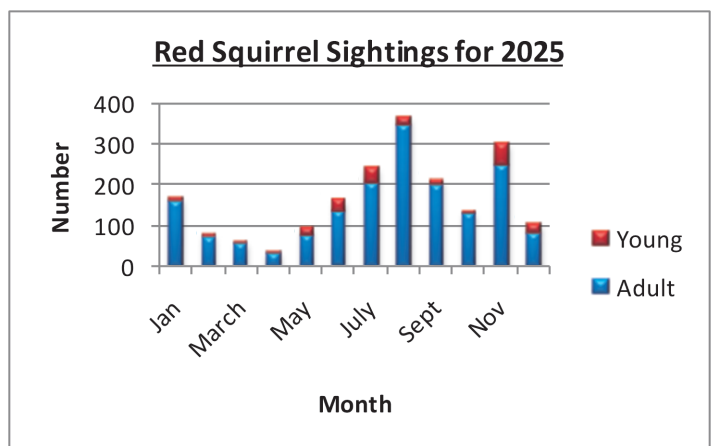


Data from Peter Dugher, Apse Heath

A total of 1332 red squirrel reports on the Isle of Wight came in from the general public during 2025. This doesn't include woodland monitoring or Peter Dugher's careful monitoring in his garden.

Garden squirrels are a good indicator of fluctuations in numbers and it appears there was a slight drop in 2025. The more outlying areas lost their squirrels, although dispersing young may be back in these

areas this year. Any sightings in unusual places always welcome!



General data from the public 2026



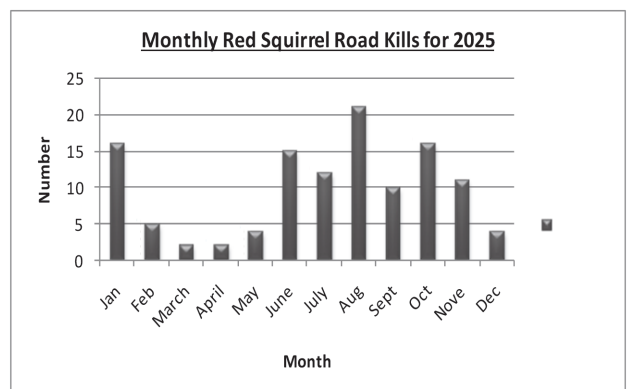
Red squirrel enjoying hornbeam seeds

A number of reports came in during May asking why garden squirrels were fewer, which is unusual for that month. I did notice in my garden that the oak apple crop was abundant and the squirrels were making the most of them, so perhaps that is the answer.

## Mortality

Reported road kills peaked in January, probably because males were looking for females as they start to come into season in January. The same pattern occurred in 2026. The other peaks, notably August, probably relate to young squirrels dispersing.

I am giving post mortems examinations a rest unless there is a query on an animal that died shortly after coming into care. One case was typically toxoplasmosis which affects the lungs. It is a fatal, parasitic disease often contracted from cat faeces, which contaminate the food squirrels pick up from the ground.



Total number of road kills was 118

## Projects with Bournemouth University

I have been working with Bournemouth University for some years, mainly looking at genetics. Red squirrel enthusiasts on the Isle of Wight have helped collect genetic material by cutting the ears from dead squirrels and having hairtubes in their garden to collect hair samples from live squirrels .

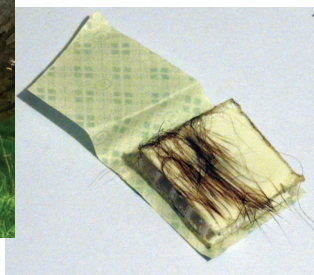
There is a lot more to be discovered about red squirrels living on islands —without any harm to them—so there could be another citizen science project in the future that requires your help. For example, we would like to collect hair or ears from roadkills for DNA testing to see if our red squirrels are moving across the Island or staying near to where they are born. This is done every 10 years.

The last tests showed the population was split with the east being slightly different to the west. It will be



Hairtube survey

interesting to see if the corridors put in to link woodland together is helping dispersal.



## All Island red squirrel survey

This survey should be carried out every 5-6 years and whereas I have done it previously, other pressures meant it is late. A big thank you goes to Becky Watts for completing the survey; the first time since 2016.

Becky says ‘Evidence of red squirrel presence, predominantly in the form of discarded split hazelnut shells, was recorded in almost all Island woodlands surveyed. In the majority of the few woodlands where evidence was not discovered, or woodland was inaccessible, red squirrels were reportedly regularly seen by residents in the locality.’



Becky with a nut opened by a squirrel

## Brownsea Island

I visited Brownsea Island in March to talk about habitat with the rangers. It was a lovely day and the Island was quiet as it wasn't open to the public. We talked about habitat, red squirrels (of course) and what can be done to keep Island populations safe as they are unlikely to survive if greys are not kept away.



The National Trust and the Dorset Wildlife Trust rangers manage the Island and are keen on the red squirrels, so now have a copy of the '30 years of red squirrel work on the Isle of Wight' book.

Both rangers are planning a trip to the Isle of Wight soon to see how different our Island is from theirs. For a start, we do not have deer nibbling our undergrowth and we certainly do not have as many conifers as Brownsea!



## UK Squirrel Accord Anniversary Conference at Greenwich

It is important for the Isle of Wight to be part of the bigger picture of UK red squirrel work. There are Zoom meetings and conferences which I attend whenever possible. We are lucky we do not have greys but who knows if, heaven forbid, this may change. Plus there is always a lot to learn from each others experiences.

Groups from around the UK came to the Greenwich meeting and some took a book about our Isle of Wight red squirrel work away with them. The books are free to libraries or organisations where a number of people can benefit from the information.



## Trophy winner Helen Danby

Helen Danby has been a stalwart at shows for more years than I can count! It took a lot of persuading to get her to accept the volunteer trophy but she gave in and accepted this year. Helen will be at a number of shows this year so come along and meet her.

Helen owns a beautiful wood in West Wight and is an avid red squirrel supporter. She does have red squirrels in her garden too, lucky Helen!



## Shows and calendars

Wight Squirrel Project will be at a number of shows over the summer and we look forward to seeing you and hearing about your 'garden' squirrels and other concerns. We may not have much for sale but we are generous when it comes to giving out information leaflets, free bookmarks and fridge magnets.

The IOW Red Squirrel Trust have taken over all the calendars this year, so please support them. If I have time and can find the right product, Wight Squirrel Project will offer a diary filled with pictures and facts.

## Charity status

Wight Squirrel Project was founded in 1993, so will be celebrating 35 years of red squirrel work in 2028. The IOW Red Squirrel Trust has the woodland and its remit is education, so Wight Squirrel Project has been covering the science work. That is, working with other groups, labs and universities.

Also, we cover monitoring and care/rehabilitation of red squirrels. A huge thank you goes to Jacquie for the hands on work. If you find a sick or injured squirrel please take it to a vet if you can. The bill will be paid for by Wight Squirrel Project.

I've pondered for years about a name change and taking the charity to another level but the income has stayed below the Charity Commission level so far. Perhaps it is time to change as our work is so vital to our red squirrel population. Still thinking....

## Den with kittens in

Three kittens were left homeless when a tree was cut down with their nest in. The nest was in a tree hollow, which is called a den. All trees must be checked for red squirrel dreys or dens before felling, although it's hard to spot a nest inside the trunk.

The mother usually comes back for the kittens if they are left nearby but only if nobody is about. Jacquie took them in and they are doing well.



As you can see from the pictures it was a close shave!

Don't forget to make note of the new postal address which started in February 2025:

**Wight Squirrel Project, c/o The Museum of Ryde, Victoria Arcade, Union Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight, PO33 3LU**

The museum is well worth a visit and you can pick up our information sheets or a book while you are there.