

# Trees for L<sup>y</sup>fe

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## The Reds Return:

A report to the Nineveh Charitable Trust  
July 2020

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**Red Squirrel Project Manager**



## Progress on objectives

Due to our Project Manager being on Maternity Leave, we began the project later than originally planned in June 2019. We are now over half-way through the two-year project period and have made excellent progress against our planned objectives, as follows.

1. Create f new populations of red squirrels by translocating 80 squirrels to unoccupied territory in the North and West Highlands (40 per annum)

We are almost half-way through this objective. In October and November 2019 20 red squirrels were translocated to Spinningdale, in the north Highlands, and in February and March 2020 a further 17 squirrels were translocated to Ardtornish Estate in Morvern, on the west coast of Scotland. Due to the Coronavirus out-break we were unable to complete this translocation but the 17 that are there will be more than enough to get the population off to a good start and we are aiming to add another three in the autumn.

The squirrels were trapped from woodlands and residential gardens across Inverness-shire, Moray and Strathspey, which are areas that are free from Squirrel pox. Traps were placed alongside feeders which were pre-baited for up to a month. To ensure that there was no negative long-term impact on donor populations we only removed a maximum of two squirrels per 200 ha, as agreed with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) as part of our licence.

The squirrels were given a health inspection in the field to check that they were fit for translocation. This included weighing them and checking for external parasites as well as any signs of disease or injury. Hair samples were collected which will be sent to Edinburgh University for genetic analysis.

The sex ratio at Spinningdale was 57:43 males to females and we will ensure a similar ratio at Ardtornish as a higher proportion of females is preferable to get the breeding population off to a good start. All squirrels were healthy other than one that had an infected eye and appeared to be blind; this was not translocated and was re-released at its trap site.

Once passed fit for translocation the squirrels were transferred into specially-built nest boxes lined with hay and provisioned with peanuts and a slice of apple, which they remained in for the journey to the release site. At the release site the boxes were secured to trees and the exit lightly stuffed with moss. This enables the squirrels to exit the boxes at first light the next morning, when there are no people around.



## The Reds Return: Red squirrel translocations to safe havens in the Scottish Highlands



A red squirrel in a trap.



A squirrel being transferred from its health inspection cone into a nest box.

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The squirrels were provided with supplementary food for up to six months whilst they became accustomed to their new habitat. This was carried out by volunteers in the local area who had attended workshops with our Squirrel project staff and given training in how to look for squirrel sign so that they could monitor new populations.



A red squirrel visiting a supplementary feeder after exiting its release box at Spinningdale.

We are pleased to report that out of the 38 squirrels captured we had no losses during translocation. Squirrels stress easily so this is something that we are particularly proud of. Sadly, one squirrel that was released at Spinningdale was found dead a few days later and a post-mortem found that it had probably been hit by a car. This is unfortunately something that is common throughout red squirrel range. There have been no further deaths recorded since release and we expect to see breeding at both sites this spring and summer. The early success of these first two translocations has been a fantastic start to the project.

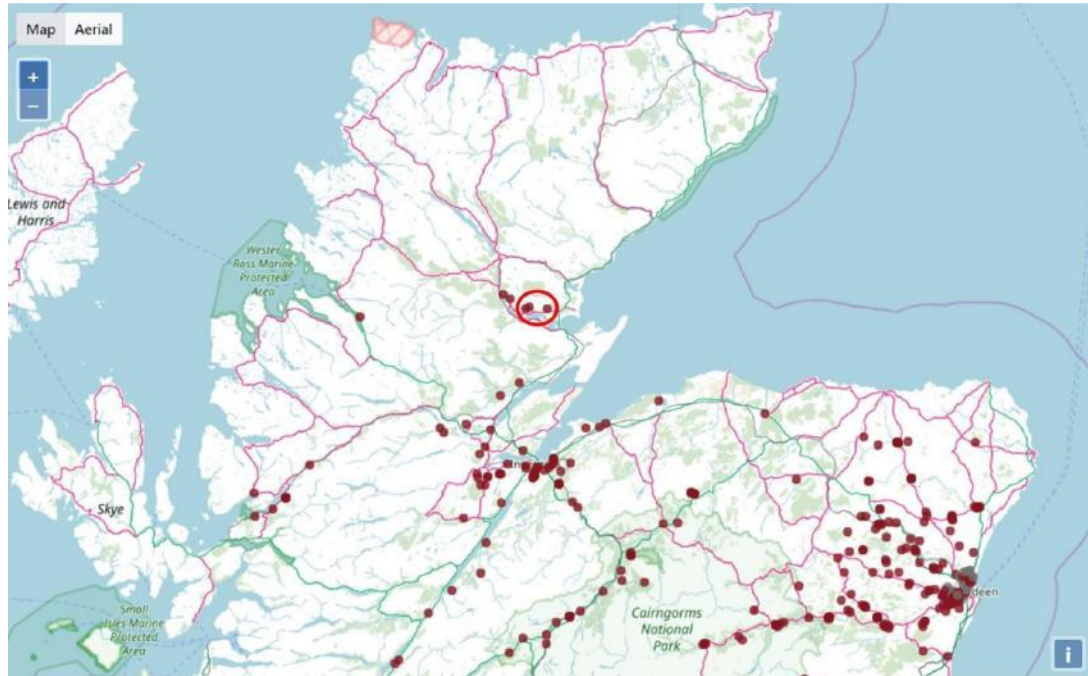
2. Carry out 2 annual surveys at each release site to determine population expansion and breeding success of translocated squirrels.

Annual surveys are carried out in April-May and will begin one year after the creation of the new populations, in 2021. These will comprise feeding sign surveys across the available woodland area and will enable us to map population expansion from the release sites. In addition, we are collating data throughout the year from sightings records and the Scottish Squirrels sightings database shows that there have already



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been a number of sightings of squirrels around Spinningdale this year (highlighted in red). Over time, we expect colonisation to continue to the east and north, where there is an abundance of excellent red squirrel habitat.



Data from [scottishsquirrels.org.uk](http://scottishsquirrels.org.uk)

We have also personally received a number of sightings reports and one local resident is seeing at least two different squirrels visiting feeders in her garden every day. This picture, taken from a remote camera that she has installed, shows that the squirrel has swollen nipples and is likely to be lactating, meaning that she has young. If this is the case, we would expect to see young squirrels venture out of the drey for the first time in early summer.



A squirrel visiting a feeder in a local resident's garden; it appears to be a lactating female.

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We know that the squirrels have been making good use of the supplementary feeders that we installed to help them settle into their new habitat and now that they will have had an opportunity to forage in the area, with an abundance of natural foods available, we will start to remove these.

We are delighted that the Spinningdale release has been successful so far. It has only been a few months since the Ardtornish release but we fully expect to see the same results there; there have already been frequent sightings and there is regular use of the feeders.

3. Engage a team of up to 120 squirrel reporters/rangers from the local communities where translocations are taking place.

Our red squirrel reporters and rangers are being recruited through talks and training sessions with local communities at the translocation sites. We held a talk with residents at Spinningdale in August 2019 which was attended by 27 people. This is an impressive turn out for a remote Highland community and demonstrates the level of interest in our red squirrel reintroductions. As part of the talk, participants were shown how to identify red squirrel feeding sign and were asked to log any sightings on the Scottish sightings database and to report feeding sign to Trees for Life. People were also given the opportunity to become directly involved in the practical side of the project by becoming a 'ranger'. 10 people were recruited; they helped to release the squirrels and are responsible for carrying out the supplementary feeding for 6 months after release.

In January 2020 we held a talk in Lochaline, the community that is local to Ardtornish Estate in Morvern. 28 people attended; another excellent turn out. People were asked to become reporters in the same way as at Spinningdale and a number of people signed up to help with supplementary feeding, although this has not been able to take place due to the Coronavirus. We plan to re-engage with the local community once we are able to again later in the year.



Spinningdale Red squirrel volunteers.



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### 4. Deliver educational experiences in 10 schools across 3 communities.

Engaging with young people is one of the key goals of our project. So far we have worked with 3 schools across 3 Highland communities: Foyers and Invergarry primaries (December 2019) and Dornoch Academy (March 2020). Invergarry is within existing red squirrel range and Foyers is one of the locations where we trap squirrels from for translocation. As most of the other schools that we plan to work with will be around our release sites, Foyers and Invergarry provided excellent opportunities to engage more widely with Highland communities, and to teach children that are fortunate enough to have red squirrels locally about our work to relocate squirrels to areas that don't have them.

At Invergarry we conducted a workshop with the whole school (35 pupils), teaching them about the project and how to identify squirrel sign. Foyers is a much smaller school, as are many in the Highlands, and all nine students took part in the workshop, followed by a walk in the woods next to the school to search for feeding sign. The children were very enthusiastic and all returned to the classroom with their pockets stuffed full of eaten cones!

Dornoch Academy is a secondary school near to last autumn's release site at Spinningdale. We gave a talk to two classes of 20 pupils and are hoping to be able to take them out to the woods to learn about squirrel sign later in the year.

Additionally, in November an opportunity arose to work with a school further afield, in Glasgow. We ran a workshop about the project with 30 children from P4 and P7 at Sunnyside School, as well as teaching them about Trees for Life's wider work, and planting some trees with them. It was wonderful to be able to include some city-based children in the project in addition to those in remote communities.



A post from Sunnyside's Twitter account after our visit.



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5. Take part in three outdoor public events and enthuse people with red squirrel displays, stories and information.

In August 2019 we took part in Belladrum Tartan Heart Music Festival. This is a key event in the Highland calendar and was an excellent opportunity to promote the red squirrel project, as well as the wider rewilding work of Trees for Life. We had an open-sided marquee with a number of activities including creating clay squirrels, fun facts about red squirrel games, Pin the Tail on the squirrel, displays about the project and a Virtual Reality film enabling people to experience wrap-around rewilding. More than 250 people visited our stand and enjoyed taking part in the various activities.

We have also taken part in a number of smaller events. In July 2019 we held a Family Day at our Dundreggan Conservation Estate. We ran similar activities to those at Belladrum, as well as outdoor performances by actors from Eden Court and a woodland orchestra. It was designed to help us engage with the small community around the estate and was attended by around 30 local people.

The final three events were all attended by 9-10 people: a stall at an event at Inverness Botanic Gardens, a separate workshop at Inverness Botanic Gardens Botany Club and a session at Cheshire House in Inverness, which is a home for young adults with physical disabilities. We want to engage a diverse range of audiences with the project and these smaller events enable us to do that, and to include groups that might not be present at large public events.

We had planned to hold stalls at the Highland Games over the summer but these were cancelled due to the Coronavirus outbreak. We hope to be able to attend public events when they can once again be held safely for all.



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6. Undertake 6 walks at translocation sites to engage at least 180 local people with red squirrels.

We have carried out 3 walks so far: at Spinningdale after the autumn release and at Inverewe and Balmacara, release sites from 2017. 32 people attended the Spinningdale walk and learned how to identify squirrel sign including dreys and feeding remains, with the aim of enlisting their help to monitor squirrel spread throughout the release site woodlands and into the wider habitat. Data collected will include type of sign (drey, species of feeding remains, droppings, tracks), date and location. The data will be sent to Trees for Life to be used for monitoring purposes and any sightings will be logged on the Scottish Squirrels sightings database ([scottishsquirrels.org.uk](http://scottishsquirrels.org.uk)).

Four people attended the walk at Inverewe Gardens, although we were unfortunate in that it was raining and so attendance was lower than we were expecting. However, it provided a useful opportunity to re-engage people with the project several years on from the release. The Balmacara walk was with the RSPB children's club from Skye and included 12 participants. It was a particularly interesting location to carry out the walk as it is a woodland that squirrels have spread to since release in Plockton, at least 5km away. The children learned how to look for squirrel sign and will be able to use this knowledge to help monitor the squirrel population as it extends further towards the Isle of Skye.

We had additional walks scheduled over the summer but these will have to be postponed until it is once again safe to resume our public project activities.



Children from Inverfarigaig Primary searching for cones eaten by red squirrels. We feel the project is making excellent progress in meeting key objectives and so far the following milestones reached:

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- 37 red squirrels have been translocated to 2 sites in the northwest Highlands
- 10 red squirrel rangers have taken part in the project with a further 53 reporters recruited.
- 48 people have attended guided walks to learn how to search for squirrel sign to assist with monitoring;
- 114 pupils and a further 40 new citizen scientists have been engaged through school visits and workshops for local community groups
- A further 200+ people have been engaged in the project through outdoor events.



Trees for Life would like to thank the trustees of the Nineveh Charitable Trust for your generous donation which has helped us to continue with this valuable Red squirrel translocation and protection project.

Please get in touch if you would like any additional information about Red squirrel translocations, or any of our other projects.

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