



BRIEFING: Grey squirrel rescue and release licence revocation

Campaign aim: To have the decision by Natural England to end these licences reversed

Introduction

Grey squirrels have faced a new risk this year. From December, a new law on 'invasive species' will make it illegal to rescue and release 'non-native' animals such as grey squirrels and Muntjac deer.

In December 2018 rescue centres were contacted by Natural England stating that their licences to rescue and release grey squirrels would be revoked in March 2019. This has since been pushed back to October 2019, and then to December 2019.

The effects of this change will be devastating to grey squirrels and many volunteers and vets who work with rescued wildlife.

Grey squirrels are scapegoated and blamed for a wide range of issues across the UK, from the reduction of the red squirrel to damaging scarcely credible amounts of timber. Sadly, this can have cruel and lethal consequences for them.

Grey squirrels are the only diurnal wild mammal that has adapted to live with us in our cities; they are loved by many and seen by many as a kind of free-living pet. The killing of these animals at the point when they need human help, and the criminalization of those who try to help them, would be widely seen as flying in the face of public morality.

How did this come about?

Triggered by Brexit, the EU legislation on invasive species was translated into British law. However, the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 does not represent a full and balanced transposition of EU Regulation 1143/2014 **(1)** into British Law, but rather bends the text to suit an extreme and unpopular eco-political agenda.

This legislation concerns the treatment of animals who are not technically native to a country, but are already well established on its territory, and in particular, wildlife rescue activity in relation to these animals.

Interpretation of EU regulations

Article 19 (1) of EU Regulation 1143/2014 states: "Those management measures shall be proportionate to the impact on the environment and appropriate to the specific circumstances of the Member States, be based on an analysis of costs and benefits and also include, as far as is feasible, the restoration measures referred to in Article 20. They shall be prioritised based on the risk evaluation and their cost effectiveness."

The European Commission further elaborated on this point in a separate document **(2)**, citing the situation with grey squirrels in the UK as a specific example and giving the following caution: "Article 19(1) specifies that those measures shall be proportionate to the impact on the environment and appropriate to the specific circumstances of the Member State and be based on an analysis of costs and benefits. The risk management decisions in relation to IAS that are widely spread thus lie with the Member States. There is neither an obligation for Germany to eradicate the raccoon from its territory, nor is there an obligation for the UK to eradicate the grey squirrel from its territory."

This clarification has not been taken into account when interpreting this legislation in British law, leaving these vulnerable and persecuted animals without protections granted to other wildlife.

The environmental impact of grey squirrels

One common reason for culling grey squirrels is the supposed ecological and environmental damage they are deemed responsible for. However, the evidence for this is not always as clear as some would believe.

Grey squirrels do not reduce the bird population **(3)** and the tree damage in commercial forestry is statistically acceptable **(4)**.

Red squirrels are not an endangered species according to the IUCN Red List, and their conservation status is "least concern" **(5)**. Their decline in the UK is down to multiple factors, including human persecution, industrialisation, climate change, and deforestation. Sadly, grey squirrels are often blamed as the sole reason for their decline, resulting in culls as a misguided attempt to help red squirrels. In areas where the habitat is exactly right for red squirrels, they manage to coexist with the greys **(6)**. Having descended from limited genetic stock, red squirrels succumb to many diseases, the pox that grey squirrels carry is only one of them, and not a major factor, statistically, in red squirrel mortality **(7)**.

We would suggest that the actual ecological impact of these species needs to be re-examined.

What can be done?

Animal Aid would ultimately advocate for rescue centres to be able to help squirrels and other non-native animals in the same way as any other wild animal. We do not think that wildlife rescue centres should have to obtain licences in order to be able to help these animals.

In the meantime though, and as an urgent priority, we would recommend a return to the old licensing system. This will mean that rescue centres can remain licensed to help grey squirrels and other non-native animals, and be allowed to continue to do their essential work unhindered.

Ultimately, whatever people believe about their impact, the number of orphaned and injured grey squirrels released back into the wild after being rescued is not statistically significant. It is therefore cruel, inhumane and senseless to make rescuing these animals against the law.

Further reading and useful links:

The True History of Grey Squirrels, John Bryant - <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/historygreysquirrels.pdf>

The New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation, Fred Pierce

Urban Squirrels - <https://www.urbansquirrels.co.uk/>

The Mouse Stranglers – John Bryant

References:

1 Article 19 (1) of EU Regulation 1143/2014 - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R1143&rid=6>

2 - Adoption of the first list of invasive alien species of Union concern, Questions & Answers, Brussels, 13 July 2016

3- http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8448000/8448807.stm

4 - Forestry Commission, 'Controlling grey squirrel damage to woodlands, Practice Note', August 2007

5- <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/20025/115155900>

6- Bryce et al., 'Can niche use in red and grey squirrels offer clues for their apparent coexistence?', *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 2002.

7- Simpson et al., 'Causes of mortality and pathological lesions observed post-mortem in red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*) in Great Britain', *BMC Veterinary Research*, 2013.

