

THE GREY MENACE

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STEVE BLOOMFIELD reports on a new pilot scheme using volunteers with air rifles to control grey squirrels in the National Forest.

I doubt that I am alone in stating that there has been a dramatic increase in grey squirrel numbers recently. Certainly 2015 seems to have been a bumper year for breeding and just about every landowner, manager or keeper that I have spoken to has confirmed this impression. Now, anyone who manages our woodland understands the damage that squirrels can do to growing timber. A DEFRA commissioned study (2010) estimated that grey squirrels cost the British economy £14m per annum but there are deeper issues for the native red squirrel and conservation in general.

As a gamekeeper, grey squirrel control was always a priority from the estate



forestry perspective but it always amazes me the number of people who don't realise that grey squirrels also take eggs and fledglings and are a serious menace

to breeding song birds.

The National Forest in the Midlands covers some 200 square miles stretching from Leicester in the east to beyond Burton on Trent in the west. Within this area, BASC and the National Forest Company have been working together on a pilot scheme to establish the effectiveness of establishing control groups to reduce grey squirrel numbers.

Charles Robinson from the National Forest Company said; "Grey squirrel control is of paramount importance to protect young woodlands in the forest; however, we also know that it is a time-consuming and costly operation to undertake.

"We were looking for ways to reduce this burden while still affording maximum protection to vulnerable trees and this project could provide the answer. We have used the pilot to gather data on the effectiveness of this control method, so that we may compare this against more conventional trapping methods. With BASC, we will collate this data to understand if this is a robust, effective and humane method to control grey squirrels within woodland."

We need a safe, humane and effective control tool

Knowing how grey squirrels target game feeders we have installed bait stations and have recruited a small group of experienced volunteers equipped with suitable air rifles. For the land owner or manager this approach has advantages over relying totally on cage or spring traps. It eliminates the responsibility of having to check traps which can be time-consuming for busy or part-time land managers. It is safe and humane – bait stations are positioned so that range and back-stops can be guaranteed and directed away

“ It was alarming to see how much damage grey squirrels cause ”

from public footpaths. Shooters on the pilot scheme underwent an awareness day designed at covering all aspects of responsible shooting and will take an accuracy assessment and receive a certificate. The other important element is that, as BASC members, they will all be covered by quality insurance.

David Burchell, a National Forest scheme landowner, forestry consultant and pilot scheme host, said; "We planted 60,000 hardwood trees in 2001/2002 to increase sporting potential while creating a long-term commercial timber asset and it was alarming to see how much damage was caused by grey squirrels. We have always controlled grey squirrels as part of our shoot management plan and therefore decided it was a good idea to record the numbers killed through different methods; the results have proved very interesting."



A grey squirrel bait station



Evidence of damage caused to trees by grey squirrels

Landowners need to take responsibility and face facts

Without a landscape-scale solution to the problem of grey squirrel population and distribution we will fail to protect valuable timber resources. Equally importantly we will never get to a situation where our native red squirrel successfully re-establishes and is able to re-populate more widely.

Without doubt, many landowners take this responsibility seriously and have a robust programme of control, but what about the areas of forestry and landowner's in-between these where little or no control takes place? All that happens is that a sanctuary is created where grey squirrels can breed and then re-populate the surrounding areas, frustrating the hard work and expense already undertaken. This is where the control groups come into operation allowing landowners to contact BASC through the scheme, and register an interest in receiving help with their control. BASC members, who live locally and have undergone the required training and assessment, will be introduced to the landowner. There will be club rules in place and an agreement between the landowner and control group members will ensure accountability and scrutiny. The idea is to provide a free control solution to those who don't have the time or resources on their land and to link these areas together with those who are engaged in control. This will establish a landscape-scale control area allowing a rapid reduction in population (and possible eradication in red squirrel zones) and then maintain sufficiently low densities.

The BASC/National Forest grey squirrel control scheme, if successful, could lead the way to a sustainable, inexpensive and humane long-term solution to the problem of overpopulation, damage to growing timber and conservation of our native species. Similar projects are being trialled in the south west of England and a number of red squirrel groups have expressed an interest in hearing the results.

Anyone wishing to know more about the scheme should contact the BASC Central England centre.



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Airgun tactics for grey squirrels

Air rifle hunters can play an important role in the control of grey squirrels – **MAT MANNING** offers some advice on how to target these invasive rodents.



A PCP air rifle with scope and moderator is the ideal tool for controlling squirrels

KIT SELECTION

Virtually any full-powered airgun will have the knockdown power to humanely dispatch grey squirrels. Stick to head shots and you should achieve clean kills whether using .177, .20 or .22 calibre.

But rather than becoming too distracted with power, airgun shooters need to concentrate on accuracy, as a squirrel's head is a fairly small target. Whether you shoot a spring-powered or pre-charged air rifle, it's vital to find a pellet that performs well with your gun. Quality roundhead ammo from the likes of Air Arms, JSB, Daystate, H&N and RWS usually come out tops in the accuracy stakes – and when you find a brand that suits your airgun, my advice is to stick with it.

Telescopic sights are regarded as standard equipment by most airgunners,



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and will certainly help to extract optimum accuracy from your rifle. There's no need to splash out on jumbo optics with a massive zoom range; 3-9x40 and 4-12x44 are popular configurations that offer enough magnification for longer shots along with the option to wind down for improved light transmission when shooting at dawn and dusk.

It's also worth investing in a silencer; the muted blast from a moderated air rifle is remarkably quiet, and far less likely to spook any remaining squirrels after you've shot one or two.

FOOD SOURCES

Squirrels are always on the lookout for easy feeding opportunities, and pheasant feeders are one of their favourites. These hoppers are a real draw during the colder months when natural food is scarce – set up an ambush and you should get plenty of action.

You can always create your own bait station by building a feeder. This is also a great way to lure squirrels out from cover during the spring and summer, when dense foliage makes it difficult to spot them in the treetops. Load it with peanuts, and squirrels will find it hard to resist.

In the autumn, squirrels love to feast on nature's harvest – acorns, beech mast, sweet chestnuts and hazelnuts are among their favourites. Stalk among stands of trees that are heavy with these fruits and you can expect to encounter plenty of prey.



Make your own peanut hopper and you'll soon have greedy grey queuing up



A trio of grey squirrels brought to book with the air rifle

HUNTING TACTICS

Although squirrels tend to be active throughout the day, there's usually a distinct flurry of activity at dawn and dusk – prime times to be out with your airgun. And ignore the myth about squirrels hibernating during the winter – I've shot them in sub-zero conditions with snow on the ground.

If you're targeting a feeder, it's best to ambush incoming squirrels. Building a hide can help but a combination of natural cover and camouflage clothing is usually enough to hide you from squirrels when they're distracted by food. Try a roving approach during autumn days; it'll enable you to cover more ground, and you can always settle down and wait if you happen across an area where the squirrels are particularly active.