

- Q. What threat does the Non-native grey squirrel pose to our native red squirrel?
- A. The grey squirrel originated from North America. It was believed to have been first introduced into Ireland as wedding present to one of the daughters of Castle Forbes House in Longford in 1911. From there they were believed to have been intentionally released into the countryside and have subsequently spread across Ireland into Northern Ireland both naturally and by intentional further introductions. Only large water bodies such as the Shannon River have hindered their spread.

Red squirrels are native to Northern Ireland and are believed to have been present here since before the last ice age, but had become extinct a number of times.

Historically the removal of native woodlands has undoubtedly helped to cause their decline, through the removal of suitable habitat and food source. In an effort to re-establish red squirrel populations in Northern Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were re-introduced from Britain.

The red squirrel is however once again under threat, but this time it is from its larger North American relative the grey squirrel.

- Q. So why is the grey squirrel a threat to its smaller relative the red squirrel?
- A. Firstly the grey squirrel competes with the smaller red squirrel for habitat space and food. The grey squirrel is capable of eating unripe food sources earlier in the season, such as acorns, whilst the red squirrel needs the food source to be fully ripened. By the time the smaller red squirrels are ready to eat the grey squirrels have cleaned up most the food supply leaving very little for the reds.

The second reason is that the grey squirrels can, in some cases, carry a virus known as the 'Parapox virus' or 'Squirrel Pox' to which they are immune. The grey squirrel can pass this highly contagious virus on to the red squirrels, who are not so fortunate and do not have natural immunity. An infected red squirrel will develop severe very sore lesions (open wounds), which will eventually lead to their death in a very short period of time. It has been one of the most significant factors in the decline of red squirrel populations in the UK.