

Press Release

Culling reduces squirrel pox infection

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Research ⁽¹⁾ lead by Newcastle University and funded by the European Squirrel Initiative has demonstrated that the culling of grey squirrel populations on a landscape scale dramatically lowers the prevalence of the squirrel pox virus (SQPV) infection rates amongst surviving animals.

The research investigated trends in grey squirrel capture rates within woodlands on the 720km² island of Anglesey during a thirteen year period of control 1998-2010.

Grey squirrels are a reservoir for squirrel pox transmissions to red squirrels and scientists examined the results of blood testing carried out during the cull period.

The highest proportion of greys with SQPV antibodies (75%) was observed in 2002, coinciding with the year of the highest total catches of grey squirrels. The proportion of grey squirrels with antibodies decreased continually from 2003 to 2010 when only 4% of sampled animals were positive.

This was a 28% decrease per annum in the risk of a trapped individual grey squirrel testing as positive for SQPV antibodies. In contrast, tests on mainland populations in 2010 showed that 67% of 70 adult grey squirrels examined were positive for antibodies to SQPV.

"This demonstrates that culling not only reduces the competitive threat posed by grey squirrels, but crucially, progressively reduces the risk of inter-specific SQPV rates", said George Farr Chairman of the European Squirrel Initiative.

"This finding has major implications for the planning of strategic grey squirrel control for red squirrel conservation as it may be possible to develop trapping protocols which target pox reduction or extinction," he added.

The report summary is now available to download from the reports section of the ESI website www.europeansquirrelinitiative.org

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Notes to editors

1) *Schuchert, Shuttleworth, McInnes, Everest & Rushton (2012). Landscape scale impacts of culling upon a European grey squirrel population: can trapping reduce population size and decrease the threat of squirrel pox – a preliminary report.”*

2) The European Squirrel Initiative was founded June 2002 by a group of concerned conservationists and foresters. The organisation seeks the restoration of the native Red Squirrel and the protection of the natural environment by removing the impact of the alien Grey Squirrel in Europe.

Its role is to:

- Persuade conservation bodies and governments of the absolute necessity of ridding Europe of the Grey Squirrel.
- Continue to commission research into the impact of the Grey Squirrel on local ecosystems.

Issued on behalf of the European Squirrel Initiative by Kendalls.

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