

SAVE OUR REDS CIC

A Conservation Action Framework for Britain's Red Squirrels

Britain does not lack red squirrel policy. It lacks enforcement, accountability and joined-up habitat protection.

FOR DEFRA · PARLIAMENTARIANS · CONSERVATION BODIES · PLANNING PROFESSIONALS · JOURNALISTS



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Endangered

Red squirrel status on the Great Britain Red List for Terrestrial Mammals

15,000

How low Natural England's modelling puts the population in England

2051

Projected loss from mainland England on current management

110,000+

Signatures on the Save Our Reds petition

The science is settled. The evidence is in. **What is missing is delivery.**

1 Executive summary

Britain's red squirrel crisis is not only a crisis of habitat and disease. It is a crisis of delivery. The evidence is settled, the legal instruments largely exist, and public support is overwhelming. What is missing is a plan with a date on it, a body responsible for it, and enforcement behind it.

Sciurus vulgaris has been present in Britain for roughly ten thousand years. Once numbering around **3.5 million**, reds are now confined to pockets of northern England, Scotland and a handful of islands. Somewhere between **120,000 and 290,000** remain across Britain, around three-quarters of them in Scotland. In England, Natural England's own modelling puts the population as low as **15,000**, within a modelled range of 15,000 to 29,500. Grey squirrels number around **2.7 million**. Where squirrelpox takes hold, reds can decline 17 to 25 times faster than through competition alone.

In April 2026 Natural England published its England Red Squirrel Recovery Strategy (NECR669), developed by the Zoological Society of London over six years and sixty-plus stakeholders. Save Our Reds welcomes it. Its evidence base is thorough and its central finding is unambiguous: under current management, red squirrels face extinction across mainland England within around twenty-five years.

But NECR669 is a decision-support document, not a delivery plan. It names no body to act, sets no date for choosing between the strategies it assesses, says little about habitat protection or the enforcement of existing law, and leaves the squirrelpox vaccine and grey squirrel fertility control as possible future tools rather than funded programmes. Three months earlier, government had published a Grey Squirrel Policy Statement committing DEFRA and the Forestry Commission to act over five years. Neither document attaches a timetable to a named owner.

This framework does three things. It sets out where existing policy falls short. It documents the gap between the protection red squirrels have on paper and the protection they receive in practice. And it converts both into a **Five-Point Emergency Action Plan**: five measures that are practical, cost-aware, implementable within existing policy frameworks, and requiring no new primary legislation.

WHAT WE ARE ASKING GOVERNMENT TO DO

Respond to NECR669 with a published implementation timetable, a named delivery body and a funded action plan within twelve months of publication, that is by **April 2027**. Treat recovery as Britain-wide rather than England-only. And adopt the five actions set out in Section 4, each with a measurable outcome against which delivery can be judged.

The species

Endangered on the Great Britain Red List, and Endangered in England and Wales specifically. Native for around ten thousand years. In much of England, all but gone.

The evidence

Natural England modelled eighteen management strategies against six objectives. Doing nothing means mainland extinction inside twenty-five years. Large-scale grey suppression offers the greatest recovery potential.

The gap

No timetable. No named delivery body. No habitat protection framework. No funded research pathway. Six years to reach a first step, in a twenty-five year window.

Conservation without delivery becomes managed decline.

2 The evidence base, and where it stops

The England Red Squirrel Recovery Strategy (NECR669) was published by Natural England on 14 April 2026, developed by the Zoological Society of London with support from the UK Squirrel Accord. It used structured decision-making with more than sixty stakeholders, evaluating eighteen management strategies against six objectives: red squirrel recovery, cost, public acceptability, animal welfare, non-target bycatch and socioeconomic benefit.

It is a serious piece of work and Save Our Reds welcomes it. Our argument is not with the science. It is with what happens next.

WHAT THE STRATEGY ESTABLISHES

- Red squirrels are Endangered, and their range in England has contracted by up to 95 per cent.
- Under a do-nothing scenario there is a high probability of extinction across mainland England within around twenty-five years.
- Regional strategies combining targeted grey squirrel management with red squirrel translocations show the most promise in the near term.
- England-wide grey squirrel suppression offers the greatest recovery potential, and would also reduce the estimated £37 million a year in woodland damage caused by grey squirrel bark stripping.
- Stakeholders favoured approaches focused on northern England, where the surviving strongholds are.

SEVEN GAPS BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND DELIVERY

No implementation timetable	The strategy identifies a next step, selecting a management approach, but attaches no date to it. There are no milestones in a twenty-five year extinction window.
No named delivery body	No organisation is made responsible for acting on the findings. Without an owner, the strategy becomes a reference document rather than a catalyst for action.
No habitat protection framework	The strategy concentrates on grey squirrel management and says little about protecting the woodland reds depend on, or enforcing the law that already exists. That is half the crisis left unaddressed.
No funded research pathway	The squirrelpox vaccine and grey squirrel fertility control appear as possible future tools rather than programmes with money, milestones and deployment dates behind them.
Public acceptability treated as a constraint	Recorded opposition to lethal control, 55.7 per cent, is embedded as a decision objective. That means opposition to lethal control can materially constrain the scale of intervention considered acceptable, rather than being treated as a challenge to be addressed through public information and engagement.
Six years to reach a first step	Development ran from 2020 to 2026. The species declined throughout. That is delay a population of this size cannot absorb.
England-only framing	Red squirrel populations and grey squirrel pressure cross borders. An England-only response risks gaps, duplication and inconsistent enforcement across Britain.

3 The enforcement gap: law versus reality

On paper, the red squirrel looks well protected. In practice it falls between the cracks of instruments that are either advisory, unmonitored, or aimed at something else. Responsibility is spread thinly across agencies and nobody is accountable for the outcome.

WHAT EXISTS

- **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981**, Schedules 5 and 6. It is an offence to kill or injure a red squirrel, or to damage or destroy a drey.
- **NERC Act 2006, Section 41**. Listed as a Species of Principal Importance, placing a duty on public authorities to have regard to its conservation.
- **Forestry Commission Operations Note 65**. Recommends pre-felling surveys, seasonal restrictions, retention of drey trees and canopy connectivity.
- **UK Forestry Standard**. Sets biodiversity design standards for publicly funded woodland.
- **Countryside Stewardship WS3 grants** for squirrel management.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Large-scale felling continues in known red squirrel woodland. It is illegal to harm a red squirrel, but not to fell the trees it lives in.
- Operations Note 65 is advisory. Compliance is voluntary and not centrally monitored.
- The UK Forestry Standard is inconsistently implemented and rarely audited.
- WS3 uptake is limited and the scheme is poorly promoted.
- No agency publishes enforcement outcomes for red squirrel habitat, so failure is invisible.

THE MISSING INSTRUMENT: SCHEDULE 2

Red squirrels are not listed on Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. Schedule 2 is what delivers strict protection of breeding sites and resting places, a species-licensing regime, and integration into planning decisions. It already covers all bat species, hazel dormouse, otter, great crested newt, and, since October 2022, the Eurasian beaver.

The beaver was reintroduced to England in 2015 and listed seven years later. A species native to Britain for around ten thousand years has weaker legal protection than one reintroduced eleven years ago. The red squirrel is also rarer in England than the otter, estimated in the tens of thousands, and the hazel dormouse, estimated in the low hundreds of thousands. Both are Schedule 2 species.

The route is short and uses powers ministers already hold: amend the retained Annex IV(a) to include *Sciurus vulgaris* under Regulation 144(2), then add the species to Schedule 2 under Regulation 143. The Beavers (England) Order 2022 is the working precedent. The full legal argument is set out in Save Our Reds Briefing Paper No. 1.

4 Our Five-Point Emergency Action Plan

These actions are practical, cost-aware, and implementable within existing policy frameworks. They do not require new primary legislation. They require political will and institutional accountability.

MEANWHILE, THE SCIENCE IS MOVING

The Animal and Plant Health Agency, funded by the UK Squirrel Accord and working with the Roslin Institute, MV Diagnostics and Sporomex, has achieved infertility in rats by free-feeding an oral immunocontraceptive: a world first for wildlife fertility control. Species-specific feeders are in development, including a weight-triggered design set at 450g that admits more than 90 per cent of adult greys while excluding red squirrels. The Red Squirrel Recovery Network, led by Northumberland Wildlife Trust with £4.86 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, will trial bait delivery at landscape scale across southern Scotland, Northumberland, Cumbria and Lancashire. A protective vaccine against squirrelpox is in development too, but it is still waiting on funding and a clear regulatory route into the field.

One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Legally protect reds and their woodland habitats	Enforce existing law with named accountability	Deliver and audit biodiversity commitments	Fund the vaccine and fertility control research	Deploy rangers now, not next year

1 Legally protect red squirrels and their woodland habitats

Add red squirrels to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, as beavers were in 2022. Establish enhanced protection for all known red squirrel habitats. No large-scale felling without mandatory wildlife impact assessment, independent oversight and enforceable penalties.

MEASURABLE OUTCOME

Schedule 2 listing laid before Parliament within twelve months, and no habitat clearance in known red squirrel habitat without a completed and published impact assessment.

2 Enforce existing wildlife law with named accountability

Red squirrels are already protected in law, but that protection is too often ignored. Government must properly enforce existing legislation across all red squirrel areas, with clear responsibility placed on Forestry England, land managers and relevant authorities, and meaningful consequences where breaches occur.

MEASURABLE OUTCOME

An annual enforcement report, published, naming the responsible officers and recording every incident, investigation and outcome in red squirrel areas.

3 Deliver and audit biodiversity commitments

Publicly funded woodland schemes already incorporate biodiversity design standards. These commitments must now be properly implemented while safeguarding red squirrel habitat and canopy connectivity, with transparent monitoring and public reporting across all publicly funded woodland schemes.

MEASURABLE OUTCOME

An annual published audit of habitat retention across every publicly funded woodland scheme in red squirrel range.

4 Fund and accelerate squirrelpox vaccine and grey squirrel fertility control research

Scientists have made real progress in both areas, but further investment is needed to move from laboratory promise to practical results in our woodlands. Fertility control has reached a world first and now needs funding to reach market. A protective vaccine against squirrelpox is in development, building on feasibility work completed at the Moredun Research Institute two decades ago, but it still lacks both sustained funding and a clear regulatory route into the field: £250,000 announced by the UK Squirrel Accord in 2017 never became a programme. With squirrelpox confirmed north of Scotland's central belt in April 2024, closing that gap is the most urgent item in the national response.

MEASURABLE OUTCOME

Published timetables and deployment milestones for both programmes, with transparent progress reporting and a named funding route.

5 Deploy rangers on the ground now, not next year

Dedicated, trained wildlife rangers must be deployed immediately across red squirrel strongholds in Great Britain to monitor populations, support volunteers and respond rapidly to threats. Protection on paper means nothing without presence on the ground. Anglesey shows why: reds recovered there from roughly 300 animals to seven or eight hundred once greys were cleared, and greys have since crossed back from the mainland, stowing away on vehicles. Years of work can be undone in a season without people watching the ground.

MEASURABLE OUTCOME

Named ranger deployment across all identified strongholds within twelve months, with published monitoring returns.

5 What we are asking for, and by when

Within twelve months of NECR669

By April 2027, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should respond to the strategy's findings with a published implementation timetable, a named delivery body and a funded action plan. As at September 2026, seven months of that window remain.

Britain-wide, not England-only

Recovery should be coordinated across Britain, with parallel instruments in Scotland, under the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994, and in Wales. Habitat, enforcement, disease, research and ranger deployment should be handled as one integrated strategy, not five separate ones.

Britain does not lack red squirrel policy. It lacks enforcement, accountability and joined-up habitat protection.

6 The public mandate

Ministers are sometimes told that stronger wildlife protection lacks public support. On red squirrels, the opposite is true, and it is not close.

More than **110,000** people have signed the Save Our Reds petition. Between November 2025 and January 2026 the campaign surveyed **1,590** supporters and members of the public. **99 per cent** wanted government to strengthen enforcement and habitat protection. **97 per cent** supported mandatory wildlife impact assessment before woodland felling. More than a thousand people wrote substantive answers to a single open question: what do red squirrels mean to you personally?

A note on method. This was a self-selecting survey distributed through Change.org, social media and campaign networks, not a representative national poll, and we do not present it as one. It was also conducted before the Red List classification was formally updated, so the original wording referred to Near Threatened rather than Endangered. What it measures is the strength and consistency of feeling among people who care enough to answer, and on that it is unambiguous.

WHAT PEOPLE WROTE

Four themes ran through the written responses.

Memory and childhood

Respondents repeatedly described seeing reds as children and not since. The most common single sentiment was a wish for grandchildren to see what they saw.

Native identity

Reds were described as belonging here in a way greys do not, and as part of what the British countryside is, rather than simply something in it.

Precedent

Many wrote that if a species this well known and this well loved can be lost, the outlook for less charismatic wildlife is bleak.

Responsibility

A recurring question, asked in various forms: if this species is already protected, who is supposed to be doing something, and why has it not happened?

"Can we really be so selfish as a species to let the red squirrel disappear?"

PETITION SIGNATORY

"I've never seen a red squirrel, and I'm 73. That's just sad."

PETITION SIGNATORY



7 Why this matters nationally

Biodiversity

Red squirrels are a native woodland indicator species. Their decline signals wider degradation in the woodland systems they depend on. The UK has committed to halting biodiversity decline under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Losing a species this visible, this protected and this closely watched would be a poor test case.

Woodland resilience

Grey squirrels strip bark from young trees, killing them or opening the way for pests and disease, at an estimated cost of £37 million a year in England and Wales. Protecting reds and managing greys are closely connected objectives, delivering benefits for woodland resilience and timber as well as wildlife.

Cultural identity

The red squirrel is among the most recognised and most cherished native animals in Britain, in children's books, in tourism, in the identity of whole regions. Its loss would be a cultural failure as much as an ecological one.

Public trust

This is the part that reaches beyond squirrels. If a well-known, legally protected, publicly supported species is allowed to disappear through institutional neglect, it becomes considerably harder to ask the public to believe any other conservation commitment.

Watch a species disappear

Our interactive decline map traces the retreat of the red squirrel and the advance of the grey across Britain from 1876 to the present day. Drag the slider and a hundred and fifty years of loss plays out in seconds. It is free for schools, newsrooms and parliamentary offices to use.

saveourreds.netlify.app



8 Our call to government

1 To the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Respond to the findings of NECR669 with a published implementation timetable, a named delivery body and a funded action plan by April 2027, and adopt the Five-Point Emergency Action Plan set out in this framework. Lay the secondary legislation needed to add *Sciurus vulgaris* to Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

2 To parliamentarians

Sign the Save Our Reds Parliamentary Pledge, calling for action on legal protection, enforcement, habitat and research, at pledge.saveourreds.uk/pledge, and ask the department when it will name a delivery body and publish a timetable.

3 To Forestry England, land managers and planning authorities

Treat Operations Note 65 as a floor rather than an option. Commission pre-felling surveys in known red squirrel woodland, retain drey trees and canopy connectivity, and publish what you find. Much of the habitat damage described in this framework is done lawfully, by people who were not required to look first.

None of this requires new primary legislation. It requires a decision, an owner and a date.

The science is settled. The evidence is in. What is missing is delivery.

9 About, network and references

ABOUT SAVE OUR REDS

Save Our Reds is a Community Interest Company founded by journalist and campaigner Marie Carter-Robb, working across media, policy and public engagement to close the gap between conservation evidence and conservation delivery. The campaign runs a national petition, a public awareness survey, an interactive decline map, a parliamentary pledge and a series of policy briefing papers.

Campaign ambassador: **Terry Abraham**, the multi-award-winning Cumbria-based filmmaker behind the BBC's *Cumbria's Red Squirrels*.

Developed with expert advice and contributions from **Dr Craig Shuttleworth**, a leading red squirrel conservationist, and **Dr Peter Lurz**, a leading expert on red squirrel habitat and ecology.

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THE NETWORK

This framework draws on the practical experience of groups working in the strongholds:

- Penrith & District Red Squirrel Group
- South Lakes Red Squirrel Group
- Northumberland Red Squirrels
- County Durham Red Squirrel Group
- Anglesey Red Squirrel Project
- Canny Hill Woodland Project

Alongside independent conservationists, ecologists, landowners, foresters, researchers and wildlife advocates across Britain, all working towards the same end: that future generations know red squirrels as living heritage, not as memory.