

PEST CONTROL ADVICE SHEET

SQUIRRELS



INTRODUCTION

There are two different types of squirrel found in Britain: the red squirrel and the grey squirrel. The number of red squirrels has declined rapidly since the 1940s and it is now almost entirely absent from the south. However, the number of grey squirrels has risen dramatically over the same period due to their ability to adapt to a wide variety of surroundings.

The remainder of this leaflet deals with the problems caused by grey squirrels.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

Most people can identify a squirrel by its distinctive bushy tail. The head and body measure between 25cms-26.5cms (9"-10"). They have short front legs and much more powerful hind limbs which enable them to leap to and from heights in excess of 6 metres (20ft).

Squirrels have good eyesight and are particularly sensitive to movement. Smell is also important as the squirrel uses this sense to find caches of food which it has buried. The presence of touch-sensitive whiskers around the nose and elsewhere prevent the squirrel from bumping into objects, which is particularly important when jumping over large distances.

The squirrel is a member of the rodent family and common to other rodents has teeth that grow continuously throughout its life. This enables the teeth to be maintained in good, sharp condition which is vital for feeding.

WHAT DO THEY EAT?

Squirrels will feed on virtually any food that becomes available, be it the nuts on a bird table or the sweet sap beneath the bark of trees. What they eat is largely dependent upon their habitat. Their natural food is tree seed including acorns and beech nuts.

In deciduous woodlands tree seeds are only produced during the autumn. In order for the squirrel to survive the winter months, it buries these tree seeds below the surface of the soil in a "cache". When food becomes scarce, the squirrel uses its sense of smell to locate these stores of food.

Unfortunately squirrels have developed a taste for the sweet sap beneath bark and frequently strip bark from trees to obtain it.

Squirrels gain most of their water from their food, but they will drink from hollows in trees, garden ponds and bird baths.

WHAT DAMAGE DO THEY DO?

In commercial woodland the damage caused by squirrels is costly. The removal of bark around the trunk of a tree prevents the transportation of nutrients to the branches above and hence the tree dies. In the garden squirrels can cause similar damage to your own trees. Furthermore they can dig numerous holes in the lawn in which to put food caches. Squirrels will also dig up newly planted bulbs.

Perhaps the most worrying damage is caused by those squirrels which choose to make their homes in loft spaces. They may build huge nests which can involve the use of large quantities of loft insulation. Squirrels are also far from light-footed and can sound as if a herd of elephants has taken up residence!

The major worry of squirrels in a roof space, apart from the noise factor, is their tendency to gnaw electrical cabling which can cause a fire to break out. Squirrels produce nests between January and March and later in the year from June to August.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT SQUIRRELS IN A LOFT

The thought of killing squirrels is unacceptable to most people and in the majority of cases is unnecessary. With a little gentle persuasion squirrels can normally be encouraged to vacate a loft.

The following is a possible course of action:

- 1 Locate where the squirrels are entering.
- 2 Whilst the squirrels are out of the nest (normally in the morning) block off the access point. It is often advisable to make a noise inside the loft to drive any "stragglers" out.
- 3 If you still hear noises, then unblock the hole again as soon as possible as a youngster may be trapped inside. The mother squirrel will call to the infant and move it to a nest elsewhere.
- 4 Block up the holes again.

REMEMBER: in order for squirrels to enter the loft they must be able to get onto the roof. Sometimes squirrels can leap from a low roof onto the main roof. In these instances there is little you can do except to make sure the roof area is as sound as possible.

NOTE: the destruction of grey squirrels is permitted by law. Red squirrels, however, are protected by law and it is an offence to kill or injure one.