

## **Grey Squirrel – and other aliens**

***Bill Howell***

The greys have come in for some forthright criticism from summer on. I first had it drawn to my attention in a letter to the Daily Telegraph in July: a Mr Edward Brun saw them as responsible for the degeneration of our deciduous woodlands over more than 40 years, with the beech suffering especially from the squirrels' bark stripping. He felt that the Forestry Commission has given in, believing that little can be done to stop them. They are spreading at an alarming rate over Northern Italy and will soon be threatening the great beech woods of France, Germany and Switzerland.

It is time, he declared, for the British public to be made aware that the grey is not a cute, cuddly animal, but a destructive, invasive species. We must find a solution before it is too late.

In our E.D.P. on November 5th, Malcolm Mellor from Wymondham, under a headline of "Don't feed tree rats", drew attention to the sale of squirrel food "specially formulated" and "rich in fibre and protein" at around £8 per bag. The decline in red squirrel numbers, he says, is mainly due to habitat loss and because the "introduced and more aggressive grey competes for territory and drives the reds away".

"Has the world gone crazy?" he asks. "Are we a really soft touch when it comes to little furry animals?" It is a destructive, introduced pest, "in reality nothing more than a tree rat". There are certainly few red squirrels round here for us to feed with this expensive product!

The very next day the "Sunday Express" printed a story about the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs investigating how to administer some form of contraceptive to prevent the numbers of greys increasing any more. Experts have claimed that if action is not taken soon the reds will be wiped out within 20 years: it is estimated that at the moment there are only 30,000 reds in England, compared to 2 million greys. The reds have protected habitats in certain areas, but even there, greys are being found.

Percy Trett and Rex Hancy joined in the fray after the EDP published a letter from "Cyril Grey-Squirrel" of Fritton appealing for sympathetic treatment: he certainly got no sympathy from them! And I don't recall Phyllis having a soft spot for greys; she too called them tree-rats: she would invite her friends round to shoot them, as they were a menace to young birds and trees.

We all know that the grey is an introduced, alien species, but it is not the only one. We recall the coypu and the time it took to eliminate it. Will the mink have to go the same way? There are lots of people who think that the grey will have to be shot and trapped out of existence. What of the New Zealand flatworm, preying on our own earthworms? Or the ruddy duck, the Italian crested newt, the red-eared terrapin? To say nothing of the muntjac and Chinese water deer.

And the flora too: Japanese knotweed growing abundantly in the wild and shading out native plants; Himalayan balsam, very attractive to look at, but it spreads so quickly; giant hogweed: we see that at Wheatfen, huge plants, and so unpleasant if you have a brush with it – who brought that in? The orange balsam, not so many years ago confined to a small area, is now spreading all round the reserve.

We can add the harlequin ladybird, found last year in Yarmouth cemetery, apparently threatening our native ladybirds, found this year in more places and far greater numbers. Yarmouth naturalist Bill Fairless discovered it last year and this year has destroyed thousands of them; it is a great pest in the USA, where again it was an alien, imported species.

Rabbits in Australia, possums in New Zealand, you can go on and on. Have a look on the internet and see what is happening. Will we never learn?