

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Literacy Lab #24: "Brits rally... squirrels"

Living Environment: Comet 2011-2012

## "Brits rally to save red squirrels from invasive grays"

**Directions:** Take a few minutes to read the article below either online (or on the back of this page.) Write responses to the statements or questions below. Cut/copy/paste is not allowed – use your own words and thoughts, based in research if needed.

Read more: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2012/04/10/gIQAQaCF9S\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2012/04/10/gIQAQaCF9S_story.html)

**Fact-finding:** List three facts that you learned in this article.

1.

2.

3.

**Vocabulary:** List and define three unfamiliar words in the space below.

**Implications:** What are your feelings about this "discovery"? Why is this type of discovery important/unimportant? Fully explain your answers.

## “Brits rally to save red squirrels from invasive grays”

By John Kelly

Janet Wickens insists that she doesn't hate all Americans. “Just the squirrels,” the Englishwoman told me recently. And just the gray squirrels.

Janet is director of the Red Squirrel Survival Trust ([www.rsst.org.uk](http://www.rsst.org.uk)), a British nonprofit group that, as its name makes clear, is locked in an apocalyptic struggle to save the tiny, tufted-eared mammal that Beatrix Potter made famous. Potter's Squirrel Nutkin was a red squirrel. But if Squirrel Nutkin were around today, he'd probably be dead or disfigured — not the sort of thing you'd want to put in a children's book.



The problem is our very own gray squirrel. In 1876, an English aristocrat decided that his country house was lacking a certain something. What it was lacking were gray squirrels gamboling about the ha-ha. And so he imported some gray squirrels from America. Other landowners followed suit. The furry immigrants did what squirrels do best: They started having baby squirrels. By 1930, English naturalists realized there was a problem.

Gray squirrels are twice as large as reds — 600 grams to 250 grams or so — and have been able to outcompete the native species for habitat and food. They can also carry a virus called squirrel pox, which causes weeping pustules on an infected animal's face, feet and genitals.

Gray squirrels are immune to the virus, but it is nearly 100 percent fatal in red squirrels, which die within two weeks of being infected.

“Squirrel pox, visually, is a pretty horrible thing to see,” Janet said. “Once it gets into a red squirrel population, that red will pass it on to another red.”

Two squirrel pox outbreaks near Liverpool — one in 2006, another in 2008 — pretty much annihilated the native reds there. The same is true with much of the rest of the country. Maps of the red squirrel's range over time tell the sad story: Red patches shrink under the gray onslaught. As recently as 1940, 95 percent of the United Kingdom had some red squirrel presence. By 2002, only 15 percent did.

Naturalists estimate that there are only about 120,000 red squirrels in Great Britain, compared with 3 million grays. Most of the remaining reds — about 75 percent — are in Scotland. There are also red redoubts on the Isle of Wight, off southern England, and on Anglesey, an island in Wales.

And so, with the same pluck and resolve that saw them through the Blitz, the British are fighting back. A massive project is underway in the north of England, costing about 3 million pounds and involving 1,500 volunteers who report squirrel sightings and trap the invasive grays. In parallel, workers are creating a 15-mile-wide gray-free buffer zone in southern Scotland. The hope is that over time, grays can be pushed farther and farther south. Eventually reds may be reintroduced to regions in southern England that haven't seen the crimson critters in generations.

In other words, this is not a good time to be a gray squirrel in Great Britain. “We have a lot of project workers doing nothing but trapping and ridding,” Janet said.

Ridding? “They basically kill them,” she explained. In fact, gray squirrels are considered vermin in the United Kingdom. It is against the law to release them into the wild once they’ve been trapped.

“If you remove those grays from the area, the reds will return,” Janet said. “It’s definitely a battle that can be won.”

And it’s a battle worth fighting, she said. On the side of the red squirrels: Prince Charles, the trust’s patron, who in a statement on the group’s Web site wrote: “I am in-cred-ibly fortunate to see red squirrels often when I am in Scotland and I cannot bear the thought that one day they might disappear forever, driven out by the relentless Northern march of the greys.”

Many people in Britain have never seen a red squirrel, or if they have, it was at a wildlife center, where the squirrels are displayed in much the same way that bald eagles once were here, before that species made a comeback.

Janet has been fortunate enough to observe them in their natural, if threatened, habitat. “They are enchanting to look at,” she said. “Tiny, very fast, quite comical.”

But unless she and others can do something about gray squirrels — the furry snakehead of the U.K. animal world — the reds don’t stand a chance.

Read more: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2012/04/10/glQAQaCF9S\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2012/04/10/glQAQaCF9S_story.html)