

Identifying Red Squirrel Feeding Sign

What are squirrels feeding on through the year? Cones all year round when present

Spring - catkins, tree buds, shoots, flowers e.g. blackthorn | **Summer** – Insects, oak flowers | **Autumn** – mast e.g. field maple, oak, ash, hornbeam, beech, hazel, bark stripped to get at sap, rosehips, fungi | **Winter** – cached food, fungi, tree bark



Hazel Squirrels will nibble a small notch at the pointed end of a hazelnut, then use it to split the shell clean in half to get at the nut inside. They will check the weight before doing this, so they can tell if the nut is good or not.



Not to be confused with Hazelnuts eaten by smaller rodents will have holes nibbled in them and will not be split clean open as their mouths are too small to do this. This one has been eaten by a wood mouse.



Scots Pine Squirrels will hold a cone between their two front feet, and using their teeth, half bite and half tear off the scales, turning the cone with their feet as they go. They will discard the scales and eat the small seeds beneath them. You may find a pile of stripped scales, and the core of the cone with the top few scales still attached. Edges will look fairly ragged, and the bottom of the cone may be missing.

Spruce (L) and Douglas fir (R) These non-natives are both stripped in the same way as Scots pine. Douglas fir cone scales often have forked strips running up the middle. Norway spruce is another food squirrels will take, and is similar to Sitka spruce. Sitka needles are much spikier to the touch and blue-grey on the underside. Sitka cone scales have a crinkly appearance, and Norway spruce cones are usually much larger.



Beech (L) and Oak (R) Beech nut cases may naturally open but if you find the four sides broken apart or particularly if you find the case split in two, this is probably the work of a squirrel. You may also find seed husks ripped into pieces. Acorn cups are broken apart then the tough casing bitten away from the germ inside, leaving jagged pieces.



Larch Not a native species but a favourite of squirrels. They will strip these like any other cones. The trees are recognisable from the small round nobbles or “pegs” along their branches, and because the tree is deciduous – unusually for a conifer, the needles turn red-brown and fall off in winter.



Other Sign



Drey A drey is a hollow nest around 25-34cm across and with two layers – an outer husk of branches and a central core of warmer, more insulating material. Dreys are usually built 6-8m above the ground, in a fork in a branch, often nestled against a tree trunk. Breeding dreys will be further from the trunk, on smaller branches which are harder for pine martens to reach. You will find them easier to spot in deciduous trees in winter, otherwise they are well camouflaged. Some bird nests, or fungal infections of trees called witch's brooms, may look like dreys from a distance.

Most bird nests are flat, so try to get a view of the suspected drey from face on, or sideways, where you can look out for the roughly spherical shape. Another key identifying feature is the presence of leaves and needles in the drey. Squirrels will gnaw live branches with leaves and needles still attached for use in a drey, whereas birds will use fallen twigs which have usually lost their leaves.

Tracks Squirrels have 4 toes on their front feet and 5 on their hind feet. Their gait will change with their speed, but they usually hop, so you'll see their tracks in clusters with their longer hind footprints in front of their smaller front ones. Tracks nearly always start and end at a tree.



Lookalikes ...

Some cones, like the pine to the right (1), look like they have been nibbled but in fact are just old and starting to rot away.

Other small rodents will nibble scales off, leading to neater, visibly nibbled (rather than ripped) edges around the cone (2). Some will look very similar to squirrel sign, but location may give you a clue about the identity of the nibbler. **Mice and voles** will drag food under shelter such as tree roots to stay safe from predators whilst eating. Squirrels will eat out in the open, even using tree stumps as perches to do so. **Crossbills** will firmly wedge a cone somewhere and use their unique beaks to split the scales apart. You may find cones with scales split neatly down the middle (3). **Woodpeckers** also wedge cones in trees but will hammer away at them, leading to them looking crushed and falling to pieces, but still relatively fresh (4).



Reporting squirrel sightings:

Please help red squirrel conservation by recording any sightings of red and grey squirrels at www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk