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HELVE⁺IA

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

Red Squirrel – Eichhörnchen

The Eurasian red squirrel is an arboreal, omnivorous rodent. In Great Britain and Ireland, numbers have decreased drastically in recent years, in part because of the introduction of the eastern grey squirrel from North America.

The red squirrel has a typical head-and-body length of 19 to 23cm, a tail length of 15 to 20cm and a mass of 250-340g. It is thought that the long tail helps the squirrel to balance and steer when jumping from tree to tree and running along branches and may keep the animal warm during sleep.

The coat of the red squirrel varies in colour, much like hair colour in some human populations. The underside of the squirrel is always white/cream. The red squirrel sheds its coat twice a year, switching from a thinner summer coat to a thicker, darker winter coat.

The red squirrel has sharp, curved claws to enable it to climb and descend broad tree trunks, thin branches and even house walls. Its strong hind legs enable it to leap gaps between trees. The red squirrel can swim.

Red squirrels that survive their first winter have a life expectancy of 3 years. Individuals may reach 7 years of age, and 10 in captivity. Survival is positively related to availability of autumn-winter tree seeds; on average, 75-85% of juveniles die during

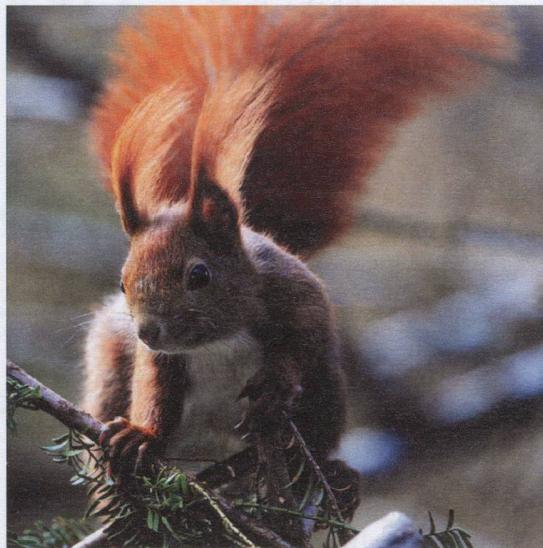
their first winter, and mortality is approximately 50% for the following winters.

The red squirrel is found in woodlands. The squirrel makes a drey (nest) out of twigs in a branch-fork, forming a domed structure about 25 to 30 cm in diameter. This is lined with moss, leaves, grass and bark. Tree hollows and woodpecker holes are also used. The red squirrel is a solitary animal and is shy and reluctant to share food with others. However, outside the breeding season and particularly in winter, several red squirrels may share a drey to keep warm.

The red squirrel eats mostly the seeds of trees, neatly stripping conifer cones to get at the seeds within. Fungi, nuts (especially hazelnuts but also beech- and chestnuts), berries, young shoots, and bird eggs are occasionally eaten. Often the bark of trees is removed to allow access to sap. Between 60% and 80% of its active period may be spent foraging and

feeding. Excess food is put into caches, either buried or in nooks or holes in trees, and eaten when food is scarce. Although the red squirrel remembers where it created caches at a better-than-chance level, its spatial memory is substantially less accurate and durable than that of the grey squirrel, and many caches are never found again. No territories are maintained, and the feeding areas of individuals overlap considerably.

from the internet



The Eurasian red squirrel – Eichhörnchen