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The Red Squirrel

The red squirrel measures about eight inches and has a tail of nearly the same length. Its shade is reddish brown, with creamy white under-parts.

It prefers to live among conifers, firs or pines, collecting fir cones or pine cones for its food, stripping off the scales to get at the tiny seeds at the heart of the cone.

In spring, when food is scarce, red squirrels will eat the shoots and buds of fir trees. They also tear off the bark of other trees, such as birches, in order to drink the sap, thus sometimes causing the tree to die, if the sap cannot rise to the upper part of it.

Besides conifer seeds, they also eat all kinds of nuts, acorns and most kinds of seeds and berries. The squirrel also occasionally robs the nest of the woodland birds of their eggs and their young.

Contrary to the popular belief that squirrels hibernate through winter they do not hibernate.

For their winter home they build round nests, known as dreys, in the tree tops. Usually the drey is built in a fork of the tree, where the branches join the trunk; it is made out of twigs, lined with dry grass, dead leaves and moss. Often several squirrels occupy the same drey.

In autumn the squirrels make food stores, usually in holes in the ground at the foot of trees. They do not remember where they put their food, but as the same squirrels normally stay in the same patch of woodland right around the year, there is a good chance of their finding at least some of the buried nuts.

Squirrels like building nests. In spring they build some more, smaller than the winter ones, to raise their young in. Like rabbits, mother squirrels pluck fur from their under-parts to line the nest.

Breeding begins early in the year, the young being born between late January and April. The young are born blind and naked.

There are usually three or four of them, but sometimes as many as six and sometimes only one or two. They grow quickly, open their eyes when they are five days old and are well covered with fur by the time they are three weeks old.

There used to be red squirrels in most parts of Britain, but now they are very rare in the south and midlands, though more common in the north-west, in East Anglia and in parts of Wales.

The *grey squirrel*, which was originally brought to this country from America, has spread over most of England, Wales and Scotland. It is larger and heavier than the red squirrel.

Squirrels can become very tame in parks and gardens and frequently eat food out of one's hand.

Red squirrels in southern Europe are much darker in colour than the British ones.



Illustration by H. J. Thomson