

**R**OSS and Demelza seem blissfully unaware that so much is riding on them. Ross, as cheeky as his naughty literary cohort Squirrel Nutkin, hangs nonchalantly upside down, waiting for hazelnuts to drop onto the wire roof of their pen, as Demelza retreats coyly to a corner to titivate her already glossy chestnut coat.

Their arrival on the Trelowarren estate in September represents not only a major milestone for the Cornwall Red Squirrel Project, but a catalyst for a more overarching rewilding project on the Lizard peninsular. It's taken nine years to get to this tentative stage and demonstrates that turnarounds in conservation tend to be both a long game and expensive. 'Nature has evolved over millennia; we're trying to do this in a relatively short period,' points out estate owner Sir Ferrers Vyvyan.

'I felt quite emotional,' admits Ian Hampton, a trapper who's spent three years preparing the way for this one breeding pair of *Sciurus vulgaris*, which came via the National Studbook. Four-year-old Ross has the confidence of having already been in the public eye, in the Paradise Park Wildlife Sanctuary at Hayle; Demelza, more nervous at only six months old—she would gallop maniacally up and down the same branch, a typical manifestation of squirrel stress—came all the way from Norfolk to ensure genetic diversity.

**‘Grey squirrels will swim the Helford rather than risk getting mud on their feet’**

The last time a wild red squirrel was spotted in Cornwall was in 1984; most of Britain's 140,000 are in Scotland. Its nemesis, the grey squirrel that was innocently introduced to England in 1876 as an ornamental addition to the landscape, had managed to infiltrate the far western county by about 1950. As its natural habitat was the North American landmass, and freezing winters kept numbers down naturally, its impact on woodland and other species had gone largely unnoticed, but it can travel 10 miles a day, so its takeover of a small island was inevitable.

In 2009, the Red Squirrel Survival Trust (RSST), which aims to revive the species by keeping them apart from greys, was formed as a national charity with The Prince of Wales as patron. He visited Michael Galsworthy on the Trewithen estate near Truro, where there is now another breeding pen, and a conversation began with two more Cornish landowners, >

**Shy and swift, red squirrels can flourish in our woodlands if unchallenged by greys**

# Softly, softly, catchee squirrel

The red-squirrel revival is gathering pace all over the UK. Kate Green visits the Trelowarren estate in Cornwall, where an important milestone has been reached







### Why can't they live together?

Grey squirrels, categorised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as one of the 100 worst invasive species, easily out-compete reds for food. They weigh about twice as much and naturally spend three-quarters of their day foraging on the woodland floor—their visibility was one of the original attractions—whereas the red spends most of its time up a tree.

In autumn, the grey can increase its body weight by 20%; the red struggles to increase by 10%. When an animal can't gain weight, it fails to breed—there are suspicions that grey squirrels impact on other species, such as dormice, in this respect. Other wildlife charities have researched the greys' predatory impact, especially on fledgling numbers, but publication of findings has been hampered by lack of funding.

The major factor in the red's decline is squirrel pox, which greys carry and spread, but don't suffer from. Ian uses the analogy of a human flu sufferer: 'If someone came into a packed room with flu, the germs would quickly transmit to everyone, but if there were only two people in the room, they wouldn't.'

The red squirrel has one advantage, however: it can run away more quickly from the pine marten, a predator, which is why a project reintroducing pine martens to Wales is under way.

Grey squirrels can be culled under a 2015 EU regulation on the management of such species and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. There's also immuno-contraceptive technology, which is used in pork production, but getting it licensed and practical for administration in the wild could take decades.

### The Prince of Wales, patron of the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, welcomes a red to Birkhall on the Balmoral estate in 2008. The creatures are even allowed indoors

Sir Ferrers and Charles Williams of Caerhays, who is chairman of the Cornwall Red Squirrel Project; the idea took root that a reintroduction in the relatively confined area of the Lizard could work and the group began fundraising for a project co-ordinator.

County ecologist Natasha Collings got the project up and running as a charity in 2011; she's still closely involved, but made way so that precious funding could be directed to paying three rangers to eradicate grey squirrels from the Helford Estuary and beyond.

One operates in the buffer zone east of the Helford because, astonishingly, grey squirrels will swim across rather than risk getting mud on their feet when the tide's out. They will also zoom through a pinch point ➤





**It all depends on you: Ross the red squirrel seems quite at home in the woods at Trelowarren, with his partner Demelza**

such as a valley. ‘They have definite highways,’ explains Ian, whose previous job at Tehidy Park, near Camborne, chiefly involved mitigating grey-squirrel damage.

The idea is to breed reds within pens at first, the ultimate aim being a wild population of 200–300, but both Ian and Natasha stress this is a long-term project that ‘needs to be broken down into baby steps’; it took 18 years to clear Anglesey of grey squirrels before the RSST’s successful reintroduction of reds there. ‘We’ve always been realistic—it’s real-life science and we don’t have 10 Ians,’ says Natasha. ‘In many ways, our real problems will start when the reds are released.’

‘Our dream is that, once we’ve established a population here, we’ll link up with another area, but we need to know that the community would like to do it,’ points out Sir Ferrers. ‘There are people in villages who won’t sign up to the project, even in a rural area such as this. Reactions have changed from people saying “Oh, greys are lovely”, but, for instance, the National Trust can’t upset its members, although it’s been generous enough to let us trap on its land once it saw it was being done professionally.’

Ian Hampton/CRSP

He hopes to encourage local community pride through the idea that an iconic British species is being saved; a webcam will enable them to follow Ross and Demelza’s antics. ‘The unofficial results [of culling] are extraordinary—Trelowarren is awash with songbirds. It’s making a significant difference to our planted forestry; we’re fighting so many tree diseases now that anything that takes the pressure off is a good thing,’ Sir Ferrers notes.

‘If we think back to a natural world—before farming with chemicals, before greys arrived—it was all symbiotic. We’re now rediscovering those links. What I fear, however, is that it’s a complex ecology that we don’t yet understand. And is there some inappropriate nostalgia? People look at the landscape and say how lovely and natural it looks, but it’s not natural and we have to manage it.’

Sir Ferrers has, as have many other landowners, he reports, been digesting Isabella Tree’s book *Wilding (Books, May 2)* and visiting programmes in Holland, at Alladale in Scotland and in the Carpathian mountains. He’s ‘having conversations’ about a 740-acre area on the Lizard peninsular, but says it needs to be represented ‘not as a vanity project, but as part of a wider discussion’.

## ‘It’s not about Tufty loving. It’s the bigger question of manage or don’t manage’

‘My personal belief is that there will be little appetite for unmanaged rewilding [in Britain],’ explains Sir Ferrers. ‘I think we will look at the parts of the country we don’t farm—as long as we can agree what sustainable farming is. Since the Second World War, we have indulged in a dangerous oversimplification of our ecology.’

The Cornwall Red Squirrel Project, which Sir Ferrers calculates will cost about £70,000 per year to keep going—‘in terms of wildlife projects, that’s pretty modest’—may be restricted to one small area of the British Isles, but it’s clearly opened up a wider debate.

‘It’s only the tip of a relevant and current discussion about what type of support the Government will give landscape post-Brexit,’ he suggests. ‘Red squirrels have a place in the continuum of land-sparing—that’s wilding and rewilding, plus biodiversity—and land-sharing, which is about the sustainable intensification of agriculture.’

‘It’s not about Tufty loving. It’s the bigger question: manage or don’t manage? What we can’t do is do nothing. We set out full of fear of failure, but now we’re relatively hopeful and, on the way, have learned new skills.’ Visit [www.cornwallredsqurrels.co.uk](http://www.cornwallredsqurrels.co.uk)

## Think like a squirrel

‘I’m over the moon,’ says Ian, as our walk through the silent, sylvan banks of the Helford, surely the most delightful workplace in England, reveals an encouraging scarcity of grey squirrels—not one in sight, in fact. ‘I’m never more happy than when I don’t kill anything. These boxes have been here for a fortnight and are virtually untouched.’

This, and the fact that there are hardly any toothmarks on fallen acorns, means the system is—hurrah!—working. The feeding stations (*below*) have been designed by one of Ian’s colleagues so that, unlike with others, the squirrel enters from the top down. ‘A squirrel always looks for food downhill—you have to think like a squirrel,’ explains Ian, who can tell by the way the bait has been nibbled whether a squirrel or a mouse has had a taste.

As the animal ventures further down for food, it’s caught either by the neck or the chest and killed instantly. The carcase remains inside the box, so it can’t be removed by a predator before it’s examined and recorded for age, sex, weight, length and so on.



**The Prince says:** ‘They come into the house at Birkhall and we get them chasing each other round and round inside.’

*If I sit there quietly, they will do so around me. Sometimes, when I leave my jackets on a chair with nuts in the pockets, I see them with their tails sticking out, as they hunt for nuts—they are incredibly special creatures.’*