



BATHSCAPE SQUIRRELS

Dan Merrett

Grey Squirrels are such a common feature in Bath, and indeed across the country, that it is easy to forget that they are a recent introduction. A walk through Victoria Park will often involve squirrels scuttling across the path and up the closest tree, and many residents and tourists stop to feed them. But the story of their establishment is an interesting example of our often curious relationship with nature.


Originally from North America, Grey Squirrels were deliberately introduced to the UK at a number of sites from the late 19th Century onwards. One of the most enthusiastic liberators was the 11th Duke of Bedford who released imported Grey Squirrels from his home at Woburn Abbey and gifted more to estates around the UK. From the start of the 20th Century until the late 1920s there were dozens of introductions and it wasn't until 1938 that it was declared illegal to import Grey Squirrels to Britain or to keep them in captivity.

In the Bathscape area the spread of Grey Squirrels can be charted through their appearance in various Bath Chronicle articles of the time, which also reflect the public's differing attitude to the Red and Grey Squirrel. In the 1920s Grey Squirrels had yet to appear in the area and instead it was the Red Squirrel that made the occasional headline. 'Plum stealer detected in Walcot Garden' ran the headline of an article in August 1924, with the strap line 'Squirrel the Culprit'. Despite its criminal activity the report took a sympathetic view of the offender describing it as a 'pretty little bright-eyed squirrel'.

Red Squirrels at this time had already seen a sizeable fall in number, with disease thought to have taken hold across national populations in the 1900s and early 1910s, though as late as 1909 the Bristol Natural History Society lists the Red Squirrel as being 'plentiful wherever woods and plantations are found'. By the 1930s their presence in Bath was noteworthy, with a short piece in the Chronicle in July 1937 reporting "a beautiful red squirrel was seen at play in Pulteney Road, Bath during the weekend. It did not take much notice of passers-by, or even vehicular traffic".



Squirrel in the botanical gardens




Meanwhile Grey Squirrels were advancing into south-west England, aided by introductions that were recorded in Warwickshire, Oxfordshire and Devon during the 1920s. In 1934 they were noted as having reached Blaise Castle Woods by Bristol Natural History Society. In 1935 the Bath Chronicle asked its readership whether Grey Squirrels had 'yet invaded the precincts of Bath'. A Mr Bromet of Denewood Grange, Batheaston responded promptly to confirm that he had seen three in his garden and they were still at large, voicing his fear that "unless they soon receive the 'happy dispatch', the young birds in the nests of our bird sanctuary are in serious danger". This was soon followed by a sighting the following month in the vicinity of the Penn Lea estate in the west of the city, where on a Tuesday afternoon one Mr Cook spotted a Grey Squirrel leaping from tree to tree. The story ran under the headline 'Grey Squirrel Menace' and referred to the species as an 'American tree rat'.


This hardening of attitudes toward the Grey Squirrel as compared to the red reflected the national mood. In 1931 an 'anti-Grey Squirrel campaign' was launched by The Field magazine, reacting to reported damage to orchard, garden and farm crops as well as to trees. In a letter sent to the Chronicle in 1941 a reader proposed that the anti-Grey Squirrel campaign be renewed to prevent squirrels breeding in Rainbow Woods at Combe Down. He had been watching the Grey Squirrels there and reported that they "lacked the carefree spontaneity of the red squirrel. Their movements, almost weasel-like, seemed crafty, cunning. Only when sitting bush over the back did they offer any pleasure".

In 1943 even Bath's police force got involved. The Chronicle reported a 6am chase through the streets of Bath between a Grey Squirrel and 'two burly policemen' who overtook their quarry outside the Chronicle's headquarters and promptly dispatched it. The article noted however that not everyone disdained the Grey Squirrel, quoting one 'enthusiastic lady reader' who described the appearance in a local factory of "these lovely creatures". The paper goes on to warn that in dealing with the Grey Squirrel 'it is necessary sternly to repress the "lovely creature" complex'. The Grey Squirrel it says "is evicting and supplanting our own charming English red squirrel, which companionable little creature though he is in captivity, has also – it is idle to deny – some wicked little traits of his own".

In 1945 the Chronicle reported that Grey Squirrels were multiplying rapidly in and around the city. Sightings were described on the same day from gardens in Midford Road in Combe Down and Rosslyn Road in Newbridge where a Mrs Shellard detailed 'it was very lively and jumped quickly from tree to tree', adding that the birds were much disturbed.

Nationally by the late 1940s free cartridges were being issued to squirrel-shooting clubs, and in the early 1950s a bounty of 1 shilling was being paid for each Grey Squirrel killed. Over £100,000 was paid out nationally by 1958, but the fight against the advancing Grey Squirrel was long lost.





Today in Bath and the surrounding area Grey Squirrels are as firmly established as any species of mammal and unless it is a rare case of albinism, or an individual chooses to bite an over-friendly resident, they feature little in the press. For several years beginning in the year 2000 the president of Bristol Natural History Society, the late Richard Bland, counted Grey Squirrel numbers each week on his regular hour long walk across the Clifton Downs, and his records suggest a healthy and stable population.

After a dramatic change in fortunes for Red and Grey Squirrels during the 20th Century, the Grey Squirrel emerged the undisputed victor. Their numbers across England are thought to be around 2million, compared to only 30,000 Red Squirrels, which are now generally restricted to islands like Brownsea and the Isle of Wight. As for ourselves, we still seem undecided whether to love them or loathe them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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