

Red squirrels will have a least one litter of young - called kittens - a year, normally between February and April. They are born in dreys – a spherical nest close to the trunk of the tree or in a prominent fork. The drey is made out of twigs and lined with leaves, moss and bark.

There are normally three kittens in a litter and these will stay in the nest for about seven weeks before beginning to explore the woodland around them.

In years when there is a good food supply, there will often be a second litter later in the year.

During times when food is abundant, red squirrels will often hoard food and, during the autumn, it is often possible to see the squirrels scurrying away from the feeders with seeds that will be buried somewhere close by. They don't actually hibernate but will become inactive during cold spells in the winter.

This stop is the end of the audio trail. We hope that you have enjoyed it and have managed to see a red squirrel here in the heart of the Widdale red squirrel reserve.

If you would like to find out more about red squirrels in the Dales please visit our website www.yorkshiredales.org.uk

To learn more about the work that is being done to conserve red squirrels in northern England please visit the Save our Squirrels project website www.saveoursquirrels.org.uk

Spend as long as you like viewing the red squirrels although please take care not to disturb them. When you are ready, follow the same trail back to Hawes and a well-earned rest!

Snaizeholme Red Squirrel Trail Audio trail



This leaflet is a transcript of an audio file for MP3 players, which can be downloaded from our website www.yorkshiredales.org.uk

It describes what you will see as you walk along and helps you learn more about red squirrels and their habitats. The leaflet should be used in conjunction with the map and route instructions, on both of which the stopping points below are marked.

Welcome to the Snaizeholme red squirrels audio trail. En route to the squirrel viewing site at the end of the trail you will pass several features of interest where we've recorded sound bites of information for you to listen to. Use the map and written instructions to guide you out along the trail and then back to Hawes.

Turn the audio off as you go through the village of Hawes and turn it back on by St Margaret's Church – stopping point one.

1 Hawes

If you ask a child to draw a picture of a squirrel, the chances are that they will draw one that is grey. A hundred and fifty years ago it would have been quite a different story; the only squirrels in the country then were red. Grey squirrels were introduced from North America in the late 1800s as an ornamental addition to the gardens of a number of stately homes. Grey squirrels were perfectly adapted to survive in the English woodlands and quickly spread across many areas of the country.

The church on your left, St Margaret's Church, has large front doors made out of sturdy oak, which were felled in Victorian times, long before grey squirrels had ever scampered through a Dales woodland.

Turn the audio trail back on after passing through the next field.

2 Gayle Mill

As you approach the village of Gayle, you will notice the recently restored Gayle Mill, which operated as a saw mill from the late 1870s. The mill would have used local timber originally, but even at that time native broadleaf woodland would have been declining towards the levels seen today in the Dales, and the oak used for the church doors in Hawes, for instance, would have been a limited and valuable commodity.

Use the map and follow the squirrel waymarkers until you reach stopping point 3 as you climb the hill on West Cam Road. Turn the audio trail back on there and listen to the Upper Wensleydale Area Ranger from the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, Matt Neale, talk about the landscape around you.

3 West Cam Road viewpoint

At first glance, this view shows a well-wooded landscape. However, it actually consists of a sparse amount of woodland mixed in with individual trees and copses.

It's far removed from the scene that would have faced you in medieval times. Then, the trees and wildlife in this part of Upper Wensleydale were carefully protected as they were a hunting forest for the Lords of Middleham and Richmond. As an area of interrupted woodland and large natural clearings, this would have provided a suitable habitat for red squirrels, with an abundance and good variety of food.

From the fifteenth century, however, it became more profitable to turn the land over to farming and lead smelting, so the process of clearing wood began in earnest.

By the nineteenth century when grey squirrels were introduced, they out-competed the red squirrels for a limited food supply and

this, along with the reduction in woodland, put further pressure on the native red squirrel population.

The next stopping point is just after you leave the track and strike out across open moorland.

4 Lower Widdale and Cotterdale viewpoint

The woodland cover in the Yorkshire Dales National Park reached a low point in the mid-twentieth century, but has been slowly increasing ever since. The low point is reflected in the fell side on the opposite flank of lower Widdale; all that you can see here are small isolated groups of trees. The decimation of the woodland from many years of felling effectively kept both the introduced grey and the native red squirrels out of Widdale and Snaizeholme as there was a very limited food supply.

Ironically, the key to the current population of red squirrels in the Widdale and Snaizeholme valleys has been the replanting of conifers in large plantations. As these trees have reached cone-bearing age, they have become a habitat that reds can expand into as they cope better on a diet of pine seeds than the greys, who prefer large seeds like acorns.

In recent years the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority has helped increase the woodland cover in the National Park by 826ha (or the equivalent of about 2,000 football pitches). We aim to continue this increase by around 180 football pitches each year for the foreseeable future.

The next stopping point is just beyond the next stile.

5 Open Access land

As you make your way towards the woodland part way down this slope, you may be aware that the trees are very different to the ones you saw scattered in Upper Wensleydale. These woods are not remnants of the ancient broadleaved woodland that once dominated the area, but are commercial plantations.

Back in the 1960s and 70s, fast-growing softwoods such as spruce were planted in many upland areas as an investment crop to be felled years later.

Red squirrels are much better adapted to surviving in conifer woodlands than grey squirrels, which is why many of the remaining red squirrel populations in the country can be found in woodlands similar to these.

The Snaizeholme and Widdale plantations have been designated as a red squirrel reserve where native red squirrel populations have the best chance of long-term survival. It is one of 16 reserves in Northern England set up by the Red Alert North England Conservation Partnership.

As you walk through the woodland in a few moments, you should imagine yourself stepping back in time. The hidden valley beyond is almost untouched by the hustle and bustle of modern life. Take a few moments to readjust and appreciate the silence and tranquillity around you.

The next stopping point is just as you emerge from the woodland.

6 Snaizeholme valley side landuse

As you leave the plantation you may begin to see and hear more birds as the densely packed conifer woodland with little undergrowth is not a particularly good habitat for them.

Look downhill over the wall. Here, see if you can spot a bank and low wall that snakes down the edge of the field and has very large stones embedded within it. This is probably evidence of medieval woodland clearance as these boulders are a sure sign of a boundary that is hundreds of years old.

As you look down the boundary wall towards the valley bottom, you will notice it gradually gets covered by vegetation which, at some point in time, may have formed a hedge.

Little is left of it now, except individual trees such as the huge oak you can see at the bottom of the field; trees like this would be typical at the edge of such an early enclosure cut out of woodland. Farmers would have retained trees like this oak when they cut down the original woodland or planted them from collected acorns as they would have provided timber and also food for their pigs.

The barns in the landscape are evidence that, by the eighteenth century, growing and storing hay to feed cattle had become important in the valley. The farmers used these buildings to store the hay and over-winter their cattle. By this time, natural woodland would have only remained in inaccessible areas such as the gills you will see as you continue walking towards the valley head. These locations would always have been too difficult to clear for agricultural purposes.

As you move further along this path down towards Snaizeholme beck, you will cross areas that remain relatively boggy and are also not too productive for agriculture. You will catch glimpses of the barren valley head and remnants of old woodland. It doesn't take too much imagination to see the landscape as it might have been 9,000 years ago after the Dales emerged from the clutches of the last Ice Age, and when plants and animals like the first red squirrels were recolonising the barren tundra.

Continue now until you find the bridge over the beck. The next stopping point on the trail is in the pasture beyond.

7 Valley bottom - pasture just after river

The alder trees that still exist along the river banks make it very easy for you to imagine how an agile mammal such as a red squirrel might travel up and down this valley. Low branches almost span across the river, making it easy for a squirrel to leap from one bank to the other.

The trail crosses the pasture to a stile into the woods.

If you haven't already spotted a red squirrel you may start to see evidence of them soon, as they often leave pine cones, stripped bare of their seeds, lying on the woodland floor. If you are quiet, you may begin to see both squirrels and other woodland wildlife.

Turn the audio trail back on once you are in the woods and listen to Ian Court, National Park Authority Wildlife Conservation Officer, who will talk about the management of this site.

8 Snaizeholme estate

You are now entering the heart of the Widdale red squirrel reserve woodland. This area has been specifically managed with nature conservation in mind for many years.

Planted around 40 years ago, this wood is a mix of Sitka spruce and larch that provides an ideal food source for red squirrels. This woodland has been managed by landowner Hugh Kemp so that there will be mature trees producing cones that are a suitable food supply that squirrels can eat for many years to come.

At the same time, large seeded broadleaved species such as oak and hazel are generally removed as these are particularly attractive to grey squirrels. Another aspect of the management here is to ensure that the greys do not come into these key woodland reserve areas

Grey squirrels are the main threat to the surviving populations of red squirrels, particularly as they carry the Squirrelpox virus. The virus does not affect greys but proves fatal to reds, killing them within 15 days of infection. It is very contagious and, in areas where there are still lots of reds, the virus could spread rapidly through the population.

In order to protect red squirrel populations in areas such as Widdale it is therefore vital that any grey squirrels are controlled so that there is no risk of them bringing in the virus.

The last stop for the audio trail is at the red squirrel viewing point set up in the next area of woodland. Here we will explain more about red squirrels.

9 Squirrel feeding area

You are now standing at the Snaizeholme red squirrel viewpoint. Hopefully, with a bit of patience and if you wait quietly, you will see red squirrels in this area.

In densely planted conifer woodland, watching wildlife can be very difficult, so we have put a feeder in a recently felled area to attract the squirrels to a spot where it is easy to see them.

Keep a careful watch on the high branches of trees in the clearing for approaching squirrels but also watch out for them scampering along the ground.

You will probably see some of the common woodland birds such as coal tit and chaffinch from the viewpoint and you may be lucky enough to see some scarcer species such as crossbill and siskin as well.

Remember that the red squirrel is the only native species of squirrel in this country. Before the introduction of grey squirrels, they could be found in a wide range of woodland types, both broadleaved and coniferous.

They have a varied diet predominantly made up of seeds but, at certain times of the year when these are in short supply, they will also take fungi, fruits, berries, shoots, buds and even birds eggs.

Nowadays, red squirrels are virtually restricted to conifer woodlands like these in Snaizeholme where there is no competition from grey squirrels. This is because the larger grey squirrels cannot survive solely on conifer seeds and need larger seeds such as acorns and hazelnuts.