



SAVE OUR REDS

A Conservation Action Framework for Britain's Red Squirrels

By Save Our Reds CIC

Policy Briefing | May 2026

***"The evidence is there. It is very clear.
Now is the time to act, not tomorrow -
because tomorrow will never come
for the reds in Britain."***

- Marie Carter-Robb, founder, Save Our Reds CIC

ENDANGERED

Britain's Red List for
Terrestrial Mammals

140,000-160,000

Estimated UK Population

25 YEARS

Estimated timeframe to
mainland extinction (NECR669)

80,000+

Petition Signatures

References: Natural England Recovery Strategy (NECR669), April 2026; Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981;

Save Our Reds National Survey (n=1,590); RSNE 2024 Survey Data

Save Our Reds CIC | saveourreds.uk | change.org/save-our-reds

Interactive decline map & app: saveourreds.netlify.app

Save Our Reds Day: 15 May 2026 | Aligned with Endangered Species Day

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Britain's native red squirrel is classified as **Endangered** on Britain's Red List for Terrestrial Mammals. In April 2026, Natural England published its Red Squirrel Recovery Strategy (NECR669), a landmark 140-page evidence base produced by the Zoological Society of London over six years of stakeholder consultation and population modelling. Its conclusion is unambiguous: under a 'do nothing' scenario, **red squirrels face extinction across mainland England within 25 years** - by approximately 2051 under current conditions. Without coordinated, Britain-wide action, this loss will accelerate beyond England's borders.

The Save Our Reds campaign exists because the red squirrel crisis is not solely about habitat loss. It is about the broader failure to deliver a coordinated Britain-wide recovery framework that addresses every interconnected thread of the crisis: habitat destruction, weak enforcement, grey squirrel expansion, squirrelpox, vaccine and fertility control solutions, biodiversity protection, and long-term woodland resilience.

Natural England's strategy represents a significant scientific contribution. It confirms the scale of the crisis, evaluates 18 management scenarios, and provides the most comprehensive population modelling yet undertaken for England's reds. However, it is a decision-support framework, not a delivery plan. It contains no implementation timetable, no named delivery body, no funded pathway for vaccine or fertility control development, and no habitat protection framework. Its stated 'next step' is a decision on which strategy to pursue, without specifying when that decision will be made or by whom.

This document builds on that evidence base to propose what comes next: a practical, measurable Conservation Action Framework that can be implemented within existing policy structures. It identifies the critical gap between legal protections on paper and enforcement on the ground, and sets out the Save Our Reds Five-Point Emergency Action Plan.

The evidence is there. It is very clear. Now is the time to act, not tomorrow - because tomorrow will never come for the reds in Britain.

- Marie Carter-Robb, founder, Save Our Reds CIC

The UK red squirrel population has fallen from an estimated 3.5 million to approximately 140,000-160,000. England's red squirrel population remains uncertain: NECR669 modelled a starting population range of approximately 15,000 to 29,500, while earlier Natural England estimates placed England's population at around 38,900. Grey squirrels, introduced from North America in 1876, number around 2.7 million. They outcompete reds and carry the squirrelpox virus: APHA has previously stated that red squirrel decline may be 17-25 times greater where squirrelpox is present in grey squirrel populations than through competition alone. The Save Our Reds interactive map and app (saveourreds.netlify.app) allows users to drag a timeline slider from 1876 to the present day and watch red squirrel range collapse across Britain in real time. The Save Our Reds petition has gathered over 80,000 signatures.

2. THE EVIDENCE BASE: NATURAL ENGLAND'S RECOVERY STRATEGY

Natural England's Red Squirrel Recovery Strategy (NECR669, published 14 April 2026) is the most comprehensive government-commissioned assessment of the red squirrel crisis to date. Produced by the Zoological Society of London and developed through structured decision-making workshops with over 60 stakeholders, it evaluates 18 management strategies against six objectives: red squirrel recovery, cost, public acceptability, animal welfare, non-target species bycatch, and socioeconomic benefit.

Key findings we welcome

- The strategy confirms red squirrels are Endangered (Britain's Red List for Terrestrial Mammals) and that their range has contracted by as much as 95% in England.
- Doing nothing, maintaining the status quo, or switching to non-lethal grey squirrel management alone all result in a high probability of mainland extinction within 25 years.
- Regional strategies combining targeted grey squirrel management with red squirrel translocations show genuine promise, with stakeholders expressing preference for Northern England-focused approaches.

- England-wide grey squirrel suppression offers the greatest recovery potential, though at higher cost, and could also reduce the estimated £37 million annual damage to woodland caused by grey squirrel bark stripping.

Critical gaps we identify

While the strategy's evidence base is strong, the document's value as a catalyst for action is limited by several significant omissions. These are not criticisms of the science. They are observations about what the strategy does not do, and what must therefore be done next.

GAP	DETAIL	IMPLICATION
No implementation timetable	The strategy states its "next step" is a decision on a national strategy to take forward. No date is given for that decision. No milestones. No phased rollout.	A species facing a 25-year extinction window cannot afford an open-ended process. Every year of delay narrows the options available.
No named delivery body	The report does not identify who will implement the chosen strategy. It explicitly notes its conclusions are the views of the authors, not necessarily Natural England.	Without clear institutional ownership, the strategy risks becoming a reference document rather than a catalyst for action.
No habitat protection framework	The strategy focuses almost entirely on grey squirrel management and red squirrel translocations. Habitat protection, forestry practice and enforcement of existing law are barely addressed.	Red squirrel habitat continues to be felled in stronghold areas. A recovery strategy that does not address habitat loss addresses only half the crisis.
No funded research pathway	Squirrelpox vaccine and grey squirrel fertility control are modelled as "possible future tools" but with no commitment to funding, no partnership timeline and no deployment pathway.	The strategy acknowledges these tools could transform outcomes but offers no mechanism to accelerate their development. The Moredun vaccine remains stalled.
Public acceptability framed as constraint	One of six decision objectives is "minimise opposition to grey squirrel management." The 55.7% public opposition to lethal control is embedded in the framework as a reason to downgrade the most effective strategies.	Public concern can be addressed through education, transparency and humane best practice. Framing it as a constraint provides a structured justification for choosing the least ambitious option.
Six-year process to reach "first step"	Pilot workshops began in 2020. Main workshops in 2023. Working groups in 2024. Publication in April 2026. The foreword describes this as "a crucial first step."	The species has been declining throughout this entire process. A "first step" after six years, with no second step defined, is not commensurate with the urgency the strategy itself describes.
England-only framing in a Britain-wide crisis	The strategy is necessarily focused on England. But red squirrel populations cross borders. Strongholds exist in northern England, Scotland and Wales, with conservation efforts already underway across all three.	Without a coordinated Britain-wide recovery framework, parallel strategies risk gaps, duplication and inconsistent enforcement. Red squirrels need a national, joined-up plan.

Sources: Natural England, NECR669 (April 2026); NE blog post, 14 April 2026. Full report: publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6061891536027648

3. THE ENFORCEMENT GAP: LAW VS. REALITY

Red squirrels are not unprotected in law. They are listed on Schedules 5 and 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. They are also recognised as a Species of Principal Importance under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. It is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take a red squirrel, or to damage or destroy a drey or shelter. Forestry Commission guidance (Operations Note 65) sets out survey requirements and seasonal restrictions. The UK Forestry Standard references a 20% biodiversity set-aside. Natural England's own technical documentation acknowledges that GB-wide Red List assessments can underestimate extinction risk at England scale. The problem is not the absence of protection. It is the absence of enforcement.

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS
Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Schedules 5 & 6)	Offence to kill, injure or take red squirrels, or damage/destroy dreys and shelters.	Large-scale felling of red squirrel habitat continues. There appears to have been limited publicly visible enforcement action in relation to woodland protections affecting red squirrel habitat.
Operations Note 65 (Forestry Commission)	Survey before felling in red squirrel areas. Avoid breeding season (Feb-Sept). Retain drey trees. Maintain canopy connectivity.	Advisory only. Compliance is voluntary and unmonitored. Entire plantations have reportedly been cleared without publicly available evidence of survey or seasonal restriction.

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS
Conservation of Habitats & Species Regs 2017 (Schedule 2)	European Protected Species receive the strongest UK protections: mandatory licensing, habitat assessment, development restrictions. Bats, dormice, otters and beavers are listed. Beavers were added to Schedule 2 in 2022, seven years after reintroduction.	Red squirrels are NOT on Schedule 2. A species native to Britain for 10,000 years has weaker legal protection than beavers reintroduced in 2015. This is the single most significant gap in the legal framework.
UK Forestry Standard: 20% biodiversity set-aside	Landowners advised to retain at least 20% of woodland for biodiversity in publicly funded schemes.	Inconsistently implemented, rarely audited. No meaningful penalties. Commercial felling routinely clears habitat entirely.
WS3 squirrel management grants	Countryside Stewardship grant for grey squirrel management by private landowners.	Limited uptake. Not widely promoted. Many landowners in key regions unaware the grant exists.

The cumulative effect is a species that falls between the cracks of multiple policy instruments. Red squirrels are protected enough to appear safeguarded on paper, but not enough to prevent ongoing habitat destruction. Enforcement responsibility is diffused across agencies with no single body accountable for outcomes. Conservation without delivery becomes managed decline.

4. SAVE OUR REDS: FIVE-POINT EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

The following actions are practical, cost-aware, implementable within existing policy frameworks and measurable. They form the basis of a coordinated Britain-wide recovery framework that addresses every interconnected thread of the red squirrel crisis. They complement and build upon the evidence base established by NECR669.

AT A GLANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Legally protect red squirrels and their woodland habitats 2 Enforce existing wildlife law with named accountability 3 Deliver and audit biodiversity set-aside properly 4 Fund and fast-track vaccine and fertility control, with a public timetable 5 Deploy rangers across red squirrel strongholds in Great Britain

1 Legally protect red squirrels and their woodland habitats

Red squirrels must be added to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (Schedule 2), as beavers were added in 2022, granting stronger legal safeguards for one of Britain's most threatened native mammals. Alongside this, all known red squirrel habitats must be designated as protected zones. No large-scale felling should proceed without mandatory wildlife impact assessment, independent oversight, and enforceable penalties. If a woodland supports red squirrels, it must not be cleared without legally enforceable protection in place.

Measurable outcome: Red squirrels added to Schedule 2 within 12 months. Zero habitat clearances in designated red squirrel zones without completed wildlife impact assessment.

2 Enforce existing wildlife law, with named accountability

Red squirrels are already protected in law. That protection is too often ignored in practice. Government must properly enforce existing legislation across all red squirrel areas, with clear responsibility placed on Forestry England, land managers and relevant authorities, alongside meaningful consequences where protections are breached.

Measurable outcome: Published annual enforcement report covering all red squirrel zones, with named responsible officers.

3 Deliver and audit biodiversity set-aside properly

Biodiversity protections already exist within forestry guidance and public woodland schemes. These must now be implemented in reality, not simply referenced on paper. All publicly funded woodland schemes should demonstrate genuine biodiversity protection, including demonstrable habitat retention for red squirrels, supported by transparent monitoring and public reporting.

Measurable outcome: Annual published audit of biodiversity set-aside compliance across all publicly funded woodland schemes.

4 Fund and fast-track vaccine and fertility control, with a public timetable

Immediately restart and fully fund the squirrelpox vaccine programme in partnership with the Moredun Research Institute. Publish a clear national timetable for grey squirrel fertility control, moving beyond small-scale trials toward practical deployment. If public funding has already been allocated, the public deserves transparency: where is it going, and what is being delivered?

Measurable outcome: Published timetable with milestones for vaccine development and fertility control deployment, with transparent reporting.

5 Put rangers on the ground now, not next year

Significant funding has been announced for red squirrel conservation, yet local groups continue to ask the same question: where are the rangers? Dedicated, trained wildlife rangers must be deployed immediately across red squirrel strongholds in Great Britain to monitor populations, support volunteers, and respond rapidly to threats on the ground.

Measurable outcome: Named ranger deployment across all red squirrel strongholds in Great Britain within 12 months.

5. THE PUBLIC MANDATE

This is not a niche concern. The Save Our Reds campaign petition on Change.org has gathered over 80,000 signatures. In November-December 2025, Save Our Reds conducted a national awareness survey that received 1,590 responses. The results are unequivocal.

SURVEY FINDING	RESULT	SURVEY FINDING	RESULT
Should the Government enforce and strengthen protections for red squirrel habitats?	99% Yes	Should woodland felling in red squirrel areas require a wildlife impact assessment first?	97% Yes

The survey also asked: *What do red squirrels mean to you personally?* Over 1,000 people wrote substantive responses. These are not data points. They are voices.

"Part of my childhood, feature in many children's stories still enjoyed by my grandchildren. I'd be really sorry to lose them and for my grandchildren to have no hope of seeing them in the wild."

"They are the native squirrel, stunning, beautiful animals - and without a serious change in policy and mindset to protect our wildlife, they will be extinct in England. It's a disgrace."

"If we allow another species to go extinct, I believe that will be the tipping point and many will follow suit."

"Remind me of my childhood. They are part of England's heritage - who puts a grey squirrel on a Christmas card? It's always a red one."

"If we don't help them survive, who will?"

Source: Save Our Reds National Awareness Survey, Nov-Dec 2025 (n=1,590). Distributed via Change.org, social media and campaign networks. Full results: saveourreds.uk. Note: the survey was conducted before conservation status was formally corrected to Endangered (Britain's Red List for Terrestrial Mammals); the original survey wording used "Near Threatened."

6. WHY THIS MATTERS NATIONALLY

The red squirrel crisis is not an isolated conservation issue. It is a test case for whether Britain's environmental protection framework functions in practice, and whether the gap between policy and delivery can be closed before irreversible harm is done.

- **Biodiversity:** Red squirrels are a native woodland indicator species. Their loss signals wider ecosystem degradation at a time when the UK has committed to halting biodiversity decline under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- **Woodland resilience:** Grey squirrels cause an estimated £37m per year in timber losses through bark stripping. Protecting reds and managing greys delivers economic as well as ecological returns, and supports long-term woodland resilience.
- **Cultural identity:** Red squirrels are among Britain's most recognised and cherished native species. Their loss from England would represent a profound cultural as well as ecological failure.

- **Public trust:** If a species this well-known, this legally protected and this publicly supported can disappear through institutional neglect, what confidence can the public have in conservation commitments more broadly?

The interactive Save Our Reds decline map (saveourreds.netlify.app) allows users to drag a timeline slider from 1876 to the present day and watch red squirrel range collapse across Britain in real time. It is freely available to view, share and embed, and has been featured in national BBC coverage of the campaign. Natural England's recovery strategy subsequently confirmed the picture the map makes visible: a species in active, accelerating retreat.

Our native red squirrels really ought to be the ambassadors of nature conservation within the UK. As many of us know, us humans have caused lots of harm to nature within our beautiful and renowned green isles and just as we have caused issues, we must now seek to address it. And that includes our precious native flora and fauna - of which our delightful and cute native red scamps are a part of.

- Terry Abraham, filmmaker and Save Our Reds CIC ambassador (BBC documentary: Cumbria's Red Squirrels)

Our call to government

We are calling on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to respond to the findings of NECR669 with a published implementation timetable, named delivery body and funded action plan within 12 months of publication - by April 2027. We are further calling for the development of a coordinated Britain-wide red squirrel recovery framework that addresses habitat, enforcement, disease, research and ranger deployment as parts of a single integrated strategy.



Britain does not lack red squirrel policy. It lacks enforcement, accountability and joined-up habitat protection. Conservation without delivery becomes managed decline. We are not asking government to reinvent conservation policy from scratch. We are asking it to enforce, coordinate and strengthen the protections that already exist. The time for structured delivery has now begun.

- Save Our Reds CIC, May 2026

About Save Our Reds CIC

Save Our Reds CIC is a Community Interest Company established in 2026 to coordinate national action for red squirrel conservation across Great Britain. Founded by Marie Carter-Robb, journalist and campaigner, the organisation works across media, policy and public engagement to bridge the gap between conservation evidence and government delivery.

Key References

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