



Red Squirrel Leprosy

What is red squirrel leprosy?

Over the years conservationists from Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels have had a number of queries accompanied by photographs of red squirrels with a distinctive skin disease. Since 2005 a few of these animals were caught and given a detailed post mortem at the Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies, when the organism causing the disease was identified as similar to *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*, a bacterium causing leprosy.

Little is known about how the disease spreads in red squirrels. Individuals with the characteristic symptoms have been observed



visiting bird-tables over many months, so they are able to live reasonably well with the disease for an extended period, alongside other squirrels which appear unaffected, although early symptoms may not be obvious. Grey squirrels are not known to suffer from the disease.

Professor Anna Meredith of Edinburgh's Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies, urged members of the public to report sightings of infected animals.

"We suspect this disease is more widespread than the six cases we have confirmed," she says.

What does leprosy in squirrels look like?

This is a skin disease of unmistakable appearance: there is gross swelling and loss of hair around the snout, lips, eyelids, ears, genitalia and sometimes feet and lower limbs. This bare skin has a "shiny" appearance. The squirrel is usually in generally poor body condition and may have a heavy burden of parasites like fleas, ticks and mites.



What should you do if you see a red squirrel with suspected leprosy?

Professor Anna Meredith at the Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies is keen to see how widespread this disease is in the wild. Therefore notify your nearest Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) Project Officer of your observation: try to get a photograph of the affected animal so that Professor Meredith can provide a preliminary diagnosis. If the animal is very poorly, arrange for either SSRS or the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to try to catch the animal for humane euthanasia.

If Professor Meredith or any of the team from SSRS advise that the squirrel is likely to have leprosy then remove all artificial feeders (including bird feeders). These should be emptied, thoroughly cleaned and sterilised. SSRS staff can post you a suitable cleaner. Don't panic! Leprosy is very difficult to catch so the risk is considered very low as long as you take simple sensible hygiene precautions. Wear disposable gloves and thoroughly wash hands and all equipment that has been in contact with the squirrel.

Is leprosy a danger to Scotland's red squirrel population?

We do not believe that leprosy is sufficiently common to pose a danger to more than just individual red squirrels. The main disease threat remains Squirrelpox virus, which if not managed, could potentially enable grey squirrels to replace reds throughout Scotland.

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