

Phoenix member and wildlife photographer **Will Nicholls** understands red squirrels better than most.

## My special neighbours

**You may, or may not, have been lucky enough to see a red squirrel before. These beautiful animals are very timid and a sighting is a moment you will never forget. I am very lucky to have a pair of red squirrels living in a small wood next to my home, but I still have to wait for around four hours to have even a chance of spotting them.**

They have regularly told me off for being too close. Their distinctive “chuck chuck” call is used to warn other squirrels of danger and is unmistakable if you know what you are listening for. They have russet fur, although sometimes it can appear to be greyer. In winter, they grow long tufts on their ears and their coat thickens and darkens. With their long toes and sharp claws, they make athletic tree climbers and can

be seen leaping from one tree to the next.

Often, I leave my two red squirrels a small buffet of hazelnuts, but they also eat pine cones, fungi, shoots, and fruits of shrubs and trees. If they are feeling adventurous, they occasionally even eat birds’ eggs. They prefer to live high in the canopies of Scots pines, but will also live in deciduous or mixed woodlands. Red squirrels may get into the habit of stripping bark from trees and eating the juicy sap layer below, much to the distaste of commercial forest owners.

They live in nests called dreys, which they build in the forks of trees. These hygienic animals will have more than one drey, so that they can move between them and prevent the build-up of fleas and disease. As they do not hibernate, they happily share their drey with other squirrels, huddling together to keep warm in winter.

## Feather dust-up

Red squirrels live alongside other animals and the interactions between them can be fascinating. I have seen a red squirrel run into a clearing and ambush a blackbird that was feeding on some apple I had left on a log. But it will also take on much larger birds. On more than one occasion, I have watched a red squirrel jump up and clash with a pheasant in mid-air. It continued its attack until the pheasant gave up and retreated, allowing the victorious squirrel to feed alone.

In the mating season, a male and female red squirrel can be seen to chase each other around tree trunks and across the woodland floor as a form of courtship, erupting with chirps of excitement. I have watched my two squirrels doing exactly this, one peering round the side of a tree in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the other. Just recently, one squirrel was sitting on a branch eating a hazelnut, when I spotted another little red face come into view right behind it. Creeping up on each other like this further adds to their playful natures, making them truly lovable creatures.

## Red’s in trouble

However, it is not all song and dance when it comes to red squirrels. In the United Kingdom, red squirrels are greatly threatened by the grey squirrel, which was introduced from America in the late 1800s. Grey squirrels carry a disease known as the squirrel pox virus which is deadly to reds. The grey squirrel is also much more efficient when foraging and leaves the red squirrels little food to eat. There are over 2.5 million grey squirrels in Britain, but only 140,000 red squirrels left.

Efforts to protect the red squirrel are proving successful in some areas and provide hope for the survival of our native squirrel. Charities such as the Red Squirrel Survival Trust are working hard to make sure you will be able to walk through woodlands where they still survive and enjoy the sight of a red squirrel playing in the branches above your head.

