

Cobnut and Walnut Growers Face Extinction Without Proper Squirrel Control

Alexander Hunt, Chairman of the Kentish Cobnuts Association, describes the problem faced by nut growers in the UK and what needs to be done to keep grey squirrels at bay.

At our regular nut growers' suppers held in October by the Kentish Cobnut Association, of which I'm chairman, we always seem to end up talking about grey squirrels. It's hardly surprising, as grey squirrels have the power to wipe out up to a third of our crop. That's sizeable damage when you consider my own Potash Farm, near Sevenoaks, yields 25 tons of cobnuts alone, and a concern, given we are now marketing an array of added value products from biscuits to chocolates and fudge.

The UK's grey squirrel population has never been more prolific than it is today and the havoc they wreak is the problem which affects nut growers more than any other. In recent years, some growers have not even had a chance to harvest because of the damage, which is starting to happen earlier and earlier in the growing season, ultimately impacting on the consumer as well as the producer.

Damage is caused by the squirrels stripping bark, causing trees to deteriorate and threatening a reduction of the woodland which is such an important part of our heritage. Unlike red squirrels, which are vulnerable to the squirrel pox virus, the grey squirrels are immune, so the only effective methods of control, in my opinion, are shooting and trapping. Other effective deterrents include not putting up nesting boxes for birds and maintaining as barren an environment as possible.

Grey squirrel control needs to be tackled throughout the year, starting as soon as the canopy of leaves disappears in late autumn and you can see their dreys in the bare branches. January to March is the time to look for the dreys and get rid of them, while April to June is the time for shooting if you choose this route. These are also the months to start trapping and looking for new



Images courtesy of Chris Jeffrey LRPS

dreys. If you know your property, you will be familiar with your most vulnerable spots; this is important, as grey squirrels tend to return to the same places.

July to September are the really critical months, when you should be shooting every dawn, we find trapping the most effective method of containment. If you bait a walnut trap with cobnuts and vice-versa, you will catch more squirrels. You have to check the traps every day and be very careful when you do; traps are not to be handled by the amateur, as a caged squirrel is a very dangerous thing.

There is no financial help available directly to landowners from the government, although the Forestry Commission claims to have been spending a six-figure annual sum on monitoring the problem. The Forestry Commission acknowledges grey squirrels pose a complex and profound challenge, attempts to evaluate the damage they cause and

encourages humane methods of control.

Effective control over a ten-acre property should cost no more than £3,000 a year. A nut grower can still expect to lose 20 per cent of his crop, but that's a lot better than losing the entire harvest.

I think we could go further with a public education drive, letting the people who buy our cobnuts know they absolutely should not be used to feed grey squirrels, whose propensity for crop damage is not fully understood outside farming circles. I would suggest all nut growers who sell online put up a paragraph about squirrel damage on their website and do their best to discourage consumers from feeding grey squirrels.

Alexander W J Hunt FNAEA MBIAC
Kentish Cobnut Grower
Cobnut and Walnut Tree Supplier
www.kentishcobnuts.com
www.walnuttrees.co.uk