



The red squirrel is the only native species of squirrel in the United Kingdom with approximately 75% of their population living in Scotland. They can also be found in Northern Ireland, Northern England and Wales, with smaller populations in the Lake District, Isle of Wight and Brownsea Island in Dorset. Red squirrels live in both coniferous and broadleaved woodland.

As the name suggests the fur of the red squirrel is red, although it can also be black, brown or grey, depending on the time of year and its location. No matter what colour their fur is, all red squirrels have a white-cream belly. They have a long tail (14-19cm), which is almost as long as their body (18-22cm). They also have distinctive ear tufts which, depending on the season, can be quite long. Just like humans they can be right or left handed, but unlike humans they have 4 fingers and 5 toes.

They build nests, known as dreys, in holes in trees and against trunks in forks of branches. They are made using twigs and lined with leaves and mosses, and a single squirrel can have 3-4 dreys at any one time. A female has up to two litters a year, with 3-4 babies, known as kittens, in each. When they are born they are blind, deaf, hairless and toothless, and are reliant on their mothers. They are weaned at about 10 weeks and are then ready to leave the drey. The survival of the young squirrels depends largely on the severity of their first winter.

Only 1 in 6 red squirrels survive beyond 1 year. The average life span is 3 years but they can live for up to 6 years. One of the main threats to the survival of the red squirrel is a deadly virus called squirrel poxvirus that is passed to them by grey squirrels. Their main predators are birds of prey and mammals such as pine martens.

Red squirrels eat a wide range of foods including seeds, pine cones, larch, spruce, fungi and fruits. During the winter their activity decreases and they can remain in the drey for several days. They rely on food stores that they collected during the autumn and have stored in trees or just under the ground.

Interesting facts about red squirrels:

They are good swimmers.

They shed their coat twice a year.

Beatrix Potter wrote a story about a red squirrel called Squirrel Nutkin.



Name:



Questions:

1. Where in the United Kingdom is the highest population of red squirrels?
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2. The Isle of Wight and Brownsea Island are two places where red squirrels survive without the threat of grey squirrels. Why do you think this might be?
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3. Describe a red squirrel for someone who has never seen one.
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4. What is a 'drey' and where would you find one?
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5. Describe a newborn red squirrel and what is it called?
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6. How old are the squirrels when they are ready to leave the nest?
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7. Give one reason why grey squirrels pose a threat to red squirrels.
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8. Name three foods that a red squirrel eats that are found in coniferous forests.
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9. Why do you think that the red squirrel is not so active in the winter?
.....
10. Use a dictionary to help find the meanings of the following words as used in the passage:
species:
coniferous:
predator:

Name:



Answers

1. The highest population of red squirrels in the United Kingdom is in Scotland.
2. Any suitable answer that suggests that it is easier to stop grey squirrels from getting onto the islands.
3. A red squirrel is mainly red with a white cream belly. They have a tail that is nearly as long as their body and tufts on their ears. They have 4 fingers and 5 toes.
4. A drey is the name of a squirrels nest and it can be found in the branches of trees.
5. A newborn red squirrel is blind, deaf, hairless and toothless and called a kitten.
6. Red squirrels are about 10 weeks old when they are ready to leave the nest.
7. Grey squirrels pose a threat to red squirrels because they carry a deadly virus called squirrel poxvirus which they pass on to them.
8. Three foods that the squirrel would find in a coniferous forest are: pine cones, larch and spruce.
9. Any suitable answer that suggests bad weather and the fact that there is not so much food.
10. species: group of animals of the same kind
coniferous: a tree that has cones and has leaves that stay green all year
predator: an animal that lives by killing and eating other animals