

Flanders Tackles Tree Squirrel Invasion

Documented successful vertebrate eradications on the mainland remain scarce. Yet, reporting on successful campaigns is much needed to counter pessimism on ambitious programmes to tackle invasives and to allow conservation practitioners, wildlife managers and scientists to learn from previous experience.

In 2005, bark stripping and cable gnawing were observed in a suburban park in western Flanders (northern Belgium). The damage was linked to the occurrence of Pallas squirrels (*Callosciurus erythraeus*), a species of tree squirrel native to Asia. The population most probably originated from escaped animals of an abandoned zoo in the nearby amusement park or from a nearby pet shop.

Like grey squirrels, Pallas's can reach very high densities and outcompete native red squirrels. It is a known carrier of several parasites but their impact on native species is unknown. Bark stripping by this species can be severe and cause damage to trees in forests, parks and tree plantations.

Meanwhile, this invasive species is established in Belgium, Japan, Argentina, France, Italy and The Netherlands. To avoid further damage to ornamental trees in the Flanders park, the park manager decided to start trapping. Low-tech mesh wire live traps were placed near the trunks of large trees, baited with peanuts, walnuts or hazelnuts. Traps were checked daily in order to minimise detention time and impact on bycatch. An unexpected number of 46 squirrels were removed from the site during the first three months. This number increased from 100 in 2006 to 130 individuals by spring 2007. It was soon

acknowledged that the problem had been underestimated and further action was no longer affordable for the local manager alone. Thus, regional authorities became involved.

Considering potential damage, exotic status and invasive behaviour, authorities and stakeholders quickly agreed on action. By the end of spring 2008, an additional 78 were caught. After a period of 18 months without further sightings, squirrels were again reported in the park. Digital photo traps were installed to check for any remaining squirrels. In successive years, the number of animals removed increased to 248 in total, and by 2011, the last known animal was removed. Although the control started relatively quickly and the extent of the invasion was limited, the campaign still took over five years and required an investment of over €200,000 including 18 months of post-

eradication surveying.

With this population eradicated, four populations now remain in Europe and control campaigns are either ongoing or planned for all of these. Adding Pallas's squirrel to the list of species of EU concern currently under development for the new European Union Regulation on the prevention and management of IAS, should provide incentive to minimise escape and establishment of this squirrel at the continental scale. With comprehensive risk assessment for Belgium now available, and EU-wide risk assessment in preparation, the process of adding Pallas's squirrel to the list should be pretty straightforward.

Tim Adriaens & Jan Stuyck

Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO), Brussels



Photo courtesy of ©INBO

SQUIRREL

If you would be interested in advertising in Squirrel please contact
Kerry-Anne.Rookyard@kendallscom.co.uk
01394 610022

ESI, East Bank House,
Tide Mill Way, Woodbridge,
Suffolk, IP12 1BY

Tel: +44 (0)1394 386919

Email: mail@europeansquirrelinitiative.org