Protecting the North East’s Red Squirrels!

28/11/2011

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has today awarded a confirmed grant* of £247,700 to the Northumberland Wildlife Trust for an important conservation project that will help protect the iconic red squirrel across the North East.

The four-year project, Red Squirrels Northern England, will encourage urban and rural communities across Northumberland to come together and help protect the red squirrel – made famous by Beatrix Potter in her book Squirrel Nutkin. Northumberland Wildlife Trust will work with their partners Natural England, the Red Squirrel Survival Trust and Forestry Commission to deliver the programme.

Up to 25 ‘focus communities’ will be involved over the course of the project with special learning activities happening in those areas. A series of guided walks and talks will give the whole community the chance to get involved. Local schools will have the chance to go on field trips and learn how to record and monitor red squirrel activity.

Volunteers will play a key role in the project and will receive training in order to 'Adopt a Woodland’, undertaking regular squirrel monitoring to detect squirrel presence or absence within a specified area. The first year of the project will include activity in Rothbury, Cramlington, Wark, Cornhill-upon-Tweed and Slaley.

Red squirrels arrived in England from Europe across a land bridge after the last Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago. As a native species, the red squirrel is an integral part of our countryside and our natural heritage. The red squirrel is of regional and national importance in maintaining eco-systems and biodiversity heritage.

Many of the remaining 15,000 red squirrels on mainland England live in the North East of England where the species faces particular threats in resource competition and disease transfer with grey squirrels.

Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund North East, said: “We have some wonderful native wildlife in the North East and collectively we have a responsibility to ensure their survival. This project will give people of all ages the opportunity to learn more about the famous red squirrel, help monitor and record squirrel activity and the role it plays in the North East’s ecosystem. The Heritage Lottery Fund is proud to be a part of this project that will inspire and empower local people to help safeguard this important species for future generations.”

Nick Mason, Project Manager for Red Squirrels Northern England, said: “We are delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund can help us develop new grass-roots red squirrel conservation activity in Northumberland. Effective local red squirrel groups, like Ponteland Red Squirrels, make a huge conservation contribution and this project will encourage new groups to form and existing groups to grow.”

Sally Hardy, Secretary of Ponteland Red Squirrel Group, said: “This exciting funding will help local groups grow their skills and capacity, while allowing us to offer assistance to new communities interested in conserving red squirrels. The Northumberland groups can’t wait to get started!”

Notes to editors

* A confirmed award means that money had already been earmarked by HLF for the project in question and that the full amount has now been secured.

This grant will shape part of overall Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE) project. RSNE is a new red squirrel conservation partnership project that builds on the efforts of previous initiatives in order to protect red squirrel populations in northern England through targeted conservation actions.

RSNE was officially launched on 17 February 2011 by HRH The Prince of Wales at Hutton-in-the-Forest in Cumbria.

RSNE is principally based in Cumbria, Northumberland, Merseyside, Lancashire, north-west Durham and the Yorkshire Dales, in and close to areas where red squirrels are still living free in the landscape.

The partners are the Wildlife Trusts, Forestry Commission, Natural England and the Red Squirrel Survival Trust. The project also works alongside the volunteer community (group members of the Northern Red Squirrel network) and private landowners to achieve its objectives:

Ensure red squirrels maintain and where possible increase their geographical range in northern England by undertaking carefully planned grey squirrel control in specific areas.

Obtain detailed scientific evidence tracking red squirrel population and range changes, through bi-annual landscape-scale monitoring and tailored research projects.

To find out more visit the Red Squirrels Northern England website.

There are 18 local red squirrel groups working already working across Northumberland. More information about their location and activities can be found at www.northernredsquirrels.org.uk.

Further information

Laura Bates, HLF Press Office on 020 7591 6027 or lbates@hlf.org.uk

Nick Mason, Red Squirrels Northern England on 07917 182 018 or nick.mason@rsst.org.uk.