Forest of Dean
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Pest Control Information - Squirrels

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Summary

The squirrel is not a pest of public health significance; in so far that it is not a particular vector of disease. The main problems concern the damage that can take place when they enter roof spaces of houses. This includes damage to woodwork and ceilings, electrical insulation from wiring, roof insulation and the contamination of water tanks. The best way to minimise problems caused by squirrels is proofing to exclude them by blocking gaps and entrance holes with wire netting. However this may entail significant cost.

Details

The Grey Squirrel was introduced into Britain in the latter part of the last century from North America. It has since then spread throughout most of England and Wales.

Biology

Squirrels normally build nests (or dreys) of leaves and twigs in the forks of trees and may also use hollow trees as dens. The roof spaces of house can also provide a suitable refuge.

There are two breeding seasons a year, the first litters being born in February and March and weaned after 10 weeks. Second litters are born in June and July leaving the nest in August and September.

Grey Squirrels will eat a wide variety of items including nuts, fruit, buds, birds' eggs and nestlings. In suburban gardens much of their diet comes from food deliberately put out for them. Surplus food is often buried for retrieval at a later date.

The presence of squirrels can often be identified from sightings, dreys, gnawed nuts and stripped bark. Noises from the roof space and gnawed fascia boards may often be signs of squirrels.

Health Risks and Damage to Property

The squirrel is not a pest of public health significance in so far that it is not a particular vector of disease (unlike rats and mice). The main problems concern the damage which can take place when they enter the roof spaces of houses by climbing the walls or jumping from trees.

Once inside they may chew woodwork and ceilings, strip the electrical insulation from wiring, tear up roof insulation to build dreys and sometimes drown (and thus contaminate the contents) in water tanks.

Prevention Methods

Where squirrels enter the roof spaces, the potential cost of repairs justifies the expense of proofing to exclude them, for example, by blocking gaps and entrance holes with wire netting. Proofing measures must be tailored to the specific site and the determination, ingenuity and sharp teeth of the squirrel should not be underestimated.

Proofing is a specialised task and serious infestations may need the assistance of specialist firms.

Control Measures

Squirrels may legally be destroyed by several methods including shooting, trapping and poisoning. Trapping and poisoning are controlled by legislation which limits the types of traps and how they may be used; poisons are similarly controlled. Rat poison (rodenticide) is not approved for the poisoning of squirrels.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 prohibits the release of captive animals back into the wild. Squirrels poisoned in roof spaces are prone to die in inaccessible places, making recovery of carcasses difficult and leading to problems of smell and flies.

Conclusion

The problems caused by squirrels are minimised if they are prevented from entering the roof spaces of houses. The cost of proofing can be significant and must be borne by the householder and possibly undertaken by a specialist contractor. Proofing measures render destruction unnecessary and avoid creating an ecological vacuum which will soon be refilled by incoming squirrels.