

SQUIRREL SYMPOSIUM

Kelso, 13th September 2016

Opening presentation by James Joicey, Ford & Etal Estates, North Northumberland

If there is one issue that unites us all as land-owners, land managers, stewards of the countryside – whatever Job Description best suits us – it is that we are faced with an almost impossible task: how to make sure that we keep everything in balance? We juggle financial return against a sense of stewardship; efficient production of raw materials against food safety; keeping the countryside healthy in terms of jobs and economics, against providing the natural environment that the overwhelmingly urban-based population can enjoy. I am not the only one in this room who struggles constantly to balance these things out.

Right in the middle of this battleground, plenty of skirmishes and conflicts are going on, which we must keep a careful eye on. These are the conflicts within nature, mostly entirely seeded by mankind – sometimes inadvertently. It is rare to see them resolved without much time and effort, yet left to their own devices they risk upsetting the essential balance of things very seriously.

No surprise then, in this afternoon's context, that I want to focus on these. It is the problem of Invasives. I want to summarise the effects that these have on land management, and I particularly want to do so in order that our panel of distinguished speakers this afternoon, who help us by understanding and developing the science and by working on potential devices to check the spread of Invasives, can understand – and therefore address – the myriad pressures which we are under. Landowners and land managers are the point of delivery of practical control and conservation work on the ground. The process and procedure is often guided by science – it is the practical skills and hard work which can make the difference. They have to make some pretty tough decisions as to how, or where, or when, or more importantly if, they are willing to act to help.

It also matters that our practical control and conservation work has an effect on a landscape scale, not just on our own patch. We need to get a result across the bigger picture.

First, there are the Native Invasives that we must not overlook: Ragwort, Gorse, Bracken, Badgers, Carrion Crows, Magpies

Then, the Non-Natives – the ones that cause the conflicts. We have all heard of Ponticum, Grey Squirrels, Signal Crayfish, Himalayan Balsam, Japanese Knotweed, Ring-Necked Parakeets, Canada Geese, Canadian Pond Weed, Giant Hogweed, Sika Deer, Chinese Water Deer, Muntjac, Ruddy Duck. To my knowledge, the Tweed Valley has not yet welcomed the Water Primrose, Quagga Mussel, Asian Hornet, Killer Shrimps or Carpet Sea-Squirt. But a quick look at the Non-Native Species portal on the internet will provide you with details of 300 of these things, and it will provide (to quote it) “access to distribution data for over 3000 non-native species in GB”

On top of these, come the Reintroductions - Lynx (postulated for Kielder and the forest areas in the Borders), or the Beaver (real, with arguments on both sides, indecision by agencies, and no real likelihood of it ever being sorted out one way or the other.)

Briefly, my view on the third of these categories (Reintroductions) is quite clear. We should

be concerned at conserving what we already have, and dealing with the problems of Invasives, before worrying about Reintroductions. They are probably going to make our jobs a whole lot more complex.

In the Non-Native category, it is worth mentioning the Coypu and Zander as examples of pretty successful eradication programmes (perhaps along with the Ruddy Duck?). It can be done. Professor Tony Martin of Dundee University is promoting mink eradication on the UK mainland, his successful programmes in the south Atlantic (on rats) and the Scottish islands showing the potential.

So knowing how to address the Grey Squirrel/Red Squirrel issue is a challenge for us all. The one thing that makes us all want to do everything that we can is that we are in a critical area for squirrels. According to the IUCN, the Grey Squirrel features in the top 100 of the world's worst invasive species. Grey Squirrels have been effectively eradicated on the island of Anglesey and the Red Squirrel population has come back so successfully that they are beginning to re-populate the mainland. After several years of consistent control, the City of Aberdeen is just about free of Greys, and Reds are returning to local parks and gardens. Specifically it's about help on two fronts. Firstly, to reverse the fortunes of the Red Squirrel – which we still have – and secondly to contain (or, better, reduce) the spread of Greys and the Squirrelepox disease that they carry which is fatal to Reds. Some of you have done some superb work – even to the extent of seeing Reds return. I am afraid I cannot claim any recovery of Reds at Ford & Etal. For those that have, our speakers will be interested in knowing what has driven you to do this and what challenges you have had along the way.

When it comes to the arguments in favour of, or against, the various possibilities of control, we are faced with a battery of choices, a cacophony of sound. We risk being confused, losing confidence or even just being apathetic. But we also risk pursuing what we might call the Quick Fix option, by adopting or pursuing one cause to the exclusion of others, which can include illegal releases. Nature is complex, and so there are always holistic considerations to be made. The consequences of action either in favour of the Red, or against the Grey, must be thought through very carefully. Doing something unilaterally or in isolation is fraught with problems and risks. If it goes wrong, or is not thought through properly, it can lead to a worse situation, and then a sense of apathy, or at best reluctance to do anything at all, for fear of upsetting people, upsetting other interest groups, upsetting gamekeepers, upsetting farm tenants, upsetting the shooting syndicate, upsetting the government agency with whom you have been careful to build up good relationships.

Grey Squirrel control is more urgent than just damage to tree/timber quality from bark stripping. There are now cases where there is no new planting or restocking with broadleaved trees because of the damage and tree death that Greys will cause to young plants emerging from tree shelters and to pole-stage crops. There is the dawning realisation in areas like the National Forest that the massive investment of public money into tree planting has resulted in a haven for Grey Squirrels. Were the consequences of planting the National Forest really, and clearly, thought through? There are those in that part of the country who are bordering on becoming hysterical, such is their desperation and frustration with trying to deal with Greys for decades. For them, a Quick Fix option soon becomes very attractive. There may be some who are so convinced of the beneficial effects and so desperate to control the Grey Squirrel that they might consider illegal releases into their region without due consideration of the collateral damage that they might cause. At that point the spectre of prosecution looms, because in some cases an animal killed in a kill trap, or shot, does lead to prosecution, and in

Scotland that implies vicarious liability.

The BASC and the National Forest are running a pilot project of a squirrel control club: BASC members get some sport from shooting at fixed point grey squirrel feeding stations; and forest owners get some free control. BASC are keen to do more nationwide. The Northern England group uses a lot of excellent local volunteers to carry out a range of conservation activity including Grey control. Some groups run fixed point feeding stations, similar to BASC, allowing great partnership between land owners/managers and volunteers. However, there can be problems, such as is happening in some parts of Cumbria where the Forestry Commission is not playing ball. The ESI has been working with a local landowner whose seat in the House of Lords has allowed him to ask several Parliamentary Questions.

I think that many landowners are sometimes a little reluctant to think outside the box. We tend to think that we have to do everything – either ourselves or through our employees or contractors, and they imply one thing: expense. We are not always good at delegating things like monitoring to others, especially to the volunteer groups. I confess I wasn't good at it, once upon a time. I am not sure that I am even now, but I have come to see that it works extremely well. I am very conscious that amongst us this afternoon are some whom once upon a time I would have been hesitant about: volunteers and volunteer groups. Landowners and land managers have not always been terribly good at embracing volunteers – but in my experience, here in the Borders, the volunteers are exceptional: keen, educated, understanding (that's the crucial bit) of the problem and how to go about it, efficient and effective. As landowners and managers we engage with people who are (often, but not deliberately), just like ourselves, ignorant of the science but wanting to help.

I have done two things recently. Firstly, I now invite the local Wildlife Group to do surveys of all species on our SSSI and SAC ground. They do it quinquennially. They are all 'informed amateurs', often with great knowledge of (say) moths and butterflies, or lichens. They get involved in surveying or trapping for a range of reasons - from exercise and activity in retirement, to a sense of social responsibility, to a friend telling them to..... They always tell me that they get a real buzz out of what they do and (as very often happens) finding something unexpected or strange; they live locally and often pop in and out from their own personal interest (as opposed to the consultant who probably only visits once or twice and is not familiar with the patch); they produce an excellent report, which in turn allows me (and them) to get a sense of what is changing on our land – hugely important baseline data when it comes to assessment of the condition of the area of land. They are fun to talk to, fun to be with, and the occasional get-together is a very effective opportunity of saying Thank You.

Secondly, along with George Farr of Pallinsburn, Frank Dakin at Duddo and three other landowners, we have given our ground for a pilot project through the University of Exeter and the Animal & Plant Health Agency. It has just finished, having run for a full year. It was potentially controversial. Our first concerns were to ensure that all permits and licences were in place, our second concerns: that the work would be discreet. The full project has been carried out now and has not given us a moment of trouble. In looking around the hall, I am wondering how many hectares of Pilot Ground might be available for similar projects.

Our guest speakers are going to outline their work, and how they see the future of their work – what their chances of success are in the work to restore Reds or reduce Greys. We welcome them warmly and thank them for making the long road to Kelso. They will already know that delivery of what they are working on (be it a trap, a pill, a form of bait) depends upon us land

managers being ready, interested and willing to see it through – either ourselves or through the work of volunteers. Maybe we can offer them ground to conduct practical pilot work, to see if it really works to everyone’s satisfaction. I see that working with them is very much parallel to working with volunteer groups or universities.

But we also need to think about other issues too, such as cross-compliance – especially where land is let to tenant farmers with their own Stewardship schemes, or where shootings are let to third parties. And are the agencies happy with what we propose to do about an Invasive Non-Native? Some years ago, I was asked to keep the sandy banks of the River Till nice and loose and sandy so that a rather uncommon sand-loving, sand-living beetle could thrive; at the same time another agency was urging me to stabilise the sandy banks of the River Till so as to prevent erosion. There are also the ever-present conflicts between forestry interests, the production of commercial timber and the many environmental benefits that forests provide to society. What is the public perception of forestry, or of sandy-banked rivers, or indeed of Grey Squirrels and Red Squirrels? Does perception matter if nature risks becoming so very out of kilter?

It is a very complex and fraught world – and as I said at the start it represents just one of the hundreds of strands of work that we have to keep an eye on when we pursue our roles as land managers. Let’s now hear from the experts, whose work is crucial to everyone, and let’s hear how they see us – either as obstacles or (I hope) how they can guide us and encourage us to be conduits to greater success. I hope what I have just outlined is helpful to them and that they can understand the many pressures and conflicts that surround us.