



Grey Squirrel Damage

The last couple of years have seen a lot of damage by grey squirrels stripping the bark from young trees, many of which were planted after the 1990 storms and have now reached a particularly vulnerable stage. The impact of grey squirrels on the Chiltern woods means that is perhaps the most threatened area of woodland in the country as grey squirrels survive well in beech/oak woods.

It has been known for some time that beech, sycamore and maples are favourite trees for the squirrels to strip bark from and other locally native species including oak, ash and wild cherry have been planted as they were considered a lower risk. Evidence from a number of woods is that they too have been damaged. This can affect survival, reducing choice at the thinning stages, but perhaps the biggest impact is on the quality of trees as the majority suffer some damage, frequently to the leading shoot so that side shoots then develop into the leader.

Most native broadleaved trees (and also some conifers) suffer bark damage. Hornbeam, birch, goat willow, sweet chestnut and hazel are other trees affected.

Grey squirrel damage can also be severe in the canopy of mature beech trees. I believe this is the most common reason for branches to snap from the canopy and this has three impacts. Firstly there is the safety risk of branches dropping on to



paths. Second there is the appearance of the trees where the crown suffers repeated breakages of branches and thirdly there is likely to be an impact on seed production from damaged canopies reducing the chance of natural regeneration occurring in sufficient quantity. There is also growing concern that the high population density of grey squirrels is having an impact on the survival of some woodland birds, as the squirrels may take eggs and nestlings, they may also be competing with dormice for food. Grey squirrels have already driven out the red squirrel from most of England and are spreading a virus to the reds that still survive in other parts of the UK.

What can be done to reduce the chance of damage? The Forestry Commission have issued a practice note (April 2003) on Controlling Grey Squirrel damage to Woodlands by Brenda Mayle, Harry Pepper and Mark Ferryman. They are also working on a new policy for grey squirrels.

Photo (top) shows squirrel damage to a large beech tree and (bottom) a young cherry damaged by squirrels between its whorls of branches, note the new shoots growing beneath the damage.