

# The Red Squirrel

Scientific Name: *Sciurus vulgaris*

Irish Name: lora rua

The Red Squirrel is a small animal, with a long bushy tail and tufted ears. It is actually a rodent, which makes it a relative of the rat and the mouse. Just like its cousins, it has strong, sharp teeth that are constantly growing. For this reason, the squirrel is always gnawing on its food to keep its teeth in shape. Its diet consists of hazelnuts, pinecones, buds, shoots, mushrooms, fruit and berries. In order



to store food for winter, it feeds from morning until evening and though it does not hibernate, it does become less active during the cold winter months.

Mating occurs in January and February and young kittens are born after about 5-6 weeks. They are born naked and blind and it takes seven to ten weeks before they can feed for themselves.



The Red Squirrel has few predators in Ireland, with the Pine Marten being one of the few.

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### Home Sweet Home

The Red Squirrel is a secretive animal and not often seen, spending most of its time in the trees. It lives in a drey, which is a round structure built against tree trunks and constructed out of sticks and leaves.

### FACT FILE

**Colour:** Reddish-brown in summer with white underside. The coat may turn greyish in winter.

**Length:** 35-45 cm.

**Diet:** Hazelnuts, pinecones, buds, shoots, mushrooms, fruit and berries.

**Habitat:** Forests and woodlands.



### The Red Squirrel vs. the American Grey Squirrel

The red squirrel is the original Irish squirrel, unlike the American Grey squirrel which was introduced into Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century. Since its introduction, the presence of the Grey squirrel has become a problem in Ireland, especially for the populations of Red Squirrel. The Grey squirrel is bigger and stronger and usually out-competes the red squirrel for food. It also carries the squirrel pox virus, from which the grey squirrel can recover but if it is passed on to the red squirrel, it is usually fatal. Since the American Grey squirrel's introduction into Ireland, together with a decline in tree habitats, the Red Squirrel population has fallen dramatically in Ireland. The American Grey squirrel is now considered an alien species here.



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