

Continuing decline of the grey squirrel population on Loch Lomondside

John Mitchell

22 Muirpark Way, Drymen, Glasgow G63 0DX

An increasing scarcity of the hitherto well established North American grey squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* in the woodlands of east Loch Lomondside first drew my attention during the late 1990s. The suspected cause of this decline is potentially the result of population expansion into the area by predatory pine marten *Martes martes* (Mitchell, 2001). That pine martens are capable of successfully pursuing grey squirrel through the tree canopy to affect a kill was witnessed by a gamekeeper on the Buchanan Castle Estate in early April 2004 (Mitchell, 2005). Further observations in the same area showed that by the beginning of 2012 the grey squirrel, once familiar at bird feeding tables, was no longer observed in gardens in the village of Drymen. Additionally, there were several sightings of pine martens in this area during the previous months.

Less information is available regarding any change in the population status of grey squirrels elsewhere on Loch Lomondside. An exception to this is the ever popular Balloch Park, situated on the loch's southern basin, where grey squirrels have always been relatively easy to observe. During the course of a short walk, a dozen or more individuals could until recently be seen foraging on the grass lawns. By the spring of 2012, however, a visitor to the park would have been lucky to come across more than one or two grey squirrels.

Several factors may be involved in the Balloch Park grey squirrels' fall in numbers; one being disturbance from tree-felling that had taken place in order to contain an outbreak of a conifer disease. Secondly, there were unverified reports of the systematic culling of nuisance grey squirrels by local residents whose gardens adjoin the park (Lewis Pate, *pers. comm.*). Finally, there remains the possibility of predation by pine martens within Balloch Park. Their presence within this park was confirmed in September 2010 when a single pine marten was live-trapped and released at an adjacent farm (*Lennox Herald* 1/10/2010).

REFERENCES

- Mitchell, J. (2001). *Loch Lomondside*. New Naturalist. No.88. Harper Collins, London.
Mitchell, J. (2005). Grey squirrels and pine martens at east Loch Lomondside. *The Glasgow Naturalist*, 23(3), 59-60.