

A taste for greys

Food from the forest needn't be all mushrooms, berries and spring greens. A bit of grey squirrel meat makes a conscientious choice for the carnivore conservationist, says Emma Chapman.

'Control' is the word people usually use for it. Grey squirrels are a problem, and they must be 'controlled'. They're a problem, of course, because our species took them from their original habitat in North America and introduced them to Europe, where they compete rather too successfully with the native reds. They're able to make use of food sources that are indigestible to reds, and they carry the squirrel pox virus, which does them no harm but is lethal to the natives. The combination is devastating. Over the last few decades the progress has been inexorable – in a line across Britain which moves, roughly speaking, and with a few exceptions, north. In many woodlands where there used to be reds, there are now only greys.

And so it has been decided that, in the interests of ecology, grey squirrels

must be controlled – or, to put it bluntly, killed. They are trapped and shot in their thousands across Scotland. It is not my purpose here to question that decision. For the purposes of this article, take it as a given that large numbers of grey squirrels are being culled in Scotland with good intentions of ecological conservation. And Ken Neil, one of Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) project officers, confirms that, in many cases, their carcasses are being buried in holes in the ground.

Now, I'm all for feeding the worms, but with natural resources as with human-made ones there's a hierarchy of use to consider if you want to minimise our collective ecological footprint. I'm part of this ecological system, as much as the worms are, and I need to eat. My food choices are relatively limited, whereas the worms will thrive on almost anything

biological, even human excrement. Fresh squirrel meat could provide part of the solution to an ecological problem (what do we feed to all these humans?), whereas buried squirrels become an ecological problem – the worms can't eat them fast enough, so they'll decompose anaerobically, producing that notorious greenhouse gas, methane.

Am I sure they're worth eating? Well, back in 2006 I was staying in Northumberland, and one evening I was part of a group discussing the reds versus greys issue with the local red squirrel officer. She was a lovely, committed vegetarian, but her audience – myself included – were vociferous in our support of the 'shoot 'em and eat 'em' solution. The very next day, happenstance gave me the chance to eat my words – or at least their consequences. We found a grey squirrel, dead, neatly killed by a car which had squashed its little head flat, leaving its still-warm body intact. I have limited experience of cooking meat, and only one previous experience with a whole carcass, but I got a book and a knife, made myself a nice cup of tea and figured out how to skin and gut the beautiful little creature.

I stewed the meat, very simply, so as to get a good idea of its basic taste and qualities. It was delicious – a combination of the gameyness of rabbit and the richer, fattier meat of a chicken. And, as a supplement to my almost exclusively vegetarian diet, it lasted for several meals, providing valuable protein, fat and doubtless many trace nutrients that are hard for my body to get from plants.

That evening, by yet further coincidence, the radio news announced the start of a grey squirrel cull in England. The red-grey frontier territory of Northumberland, with a red stronghold in the vast conifer plantations of Kielder, was to be a



A grey squirrel. Photo: Flickr user Rovert Taylor, used under a Creative Commons Attribution License.

I took any opportunity to rant about the gross wastefulness of killing these fat little mammals and then just throwing away their corpses.

major hotspot. For the next two years I took any opportunity to rant about the gross wastefulness – and disrespect – of killing these fat little mammals and then just throwing away their corpses.

I'm passionate about wild harvests and foraging because of a long-held personal dream – the dream that I can be, in a very real, practical sense, part of a reforested landscape. I dream that I can both help to reforest the land, and also depend on it for my own basic needs. Many people hold at least an inkling of the same vision, and I like to think that this – heavily bolstered by consumer desire for healthy food – might be part of why a market has started to emerge for the meat from these small critters. A year or two after the cull started, the *Hexham Courant* reported that, within a few miles of my own furry encounter, local business Ridley's Fish & Game was selling as many braces of *Sciurus carolinensis* as it could get hold of.

My question now is – has this more enlightened trend reached Scotland yet? My inquiries have revealed that some of the culled squirrels are fed to red kites (in Aberdeenshire) or to wolves (in Dundee), and that a Glasgow restaurant has experimented with serving them to customers, so the idea of wise use may well be taking root. Are there any Scottish butchers selling this woodland delicacy yet? If you find one, please let me know – and if your own ethics permit, please try it for yourself.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels
www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk

Emma Chapman is the Secretary of the Scottish Wild Harvests Association and maintains the ForestHarvest website (www.forestharvest.org.uk) on behalf of Reforesting Scotland and SWHA. She writes a blog as City Forager at <http://cityforager.wordpress.com>

I'm part of this ecological system, as much as the worms are, and I need to eat.

...And food from the water

There are certain species that are a pest in certain places. Grey squirrels, infamously, are a case in point. Below the surface of Scotland's lochs and waterways lurks another – the pike (*Esox lucius*), most likely introduced to Scotland in the Middle Ages.

On the pest stakes, the grey squirrel ranks far higher than the pike, but there are occasions when these fiercely carnivorous fish are a nuisance to trout stocks and their numbers have to be reduced. If a pike seizes a smaller fish, the prey stands no chance, as backward pointing teeth convey it inevitably down the larger fish's gullet. The attrition on parr, smoults and on larger fish can be great. With dwindling populations of natural salmonids, the pike poses a problem in certain parts of Scotland.

Twice I have been lucky enough to be the recipient of pike culled from lochans in the upper Tweed catchment, where trout were being threatened.

If you are ever offered a pike, here's what to do. Firstly, beware those teeth! Wrap the fish's head in a cloth before you gut the fish and scrape off the scales. Then salt it well, inside and out, putting some butter in the gut cavity. Then butter some foil, wrap the pike, and put it in the oven. A 3lb fish takes about 35 minutes at 350-400°F (175-200°C). A larger one will take a few minutes longer, but take care not to overcook it.

Serve delicately, trying to extract fillets of the fine white flesh from the array of sharp little bones which are the problem. A buttery sauce, made from the juices, goes well with it.

If you have any fish left from the meal, turn it into the smooth, light little rissoles known as quenelles (recipes may be found on the internet). Preparing quenelles is a culinary challenge that is worth it, at least once in a lifetime.

Fi Martynoga



A successful young pike fisherman.
 Photo: Per Ola Wiberg, used under a Creative Commons Attribution License.