

## Did I really just see a *black* squirrel?

*Ian Jackson from the Great Ouse Valley Trust explains a Cambridgeshire rarity*

A quick movement on a low branch on the tree overhanging the water caught my eye. It was a daring-do squirrel reaching to a clump of last-year's dried Ash keys and swinging wildly with the effort. As it nibbled away, a grateful Mallard below quacked its thanks as the crumbs dropped its way. But wait. This was no ordinary squirrel – it was black! Was this a different species, an invader perhaps? My curiosity aroused I started investigating. Little did I realise what a rarity I had just seen.



Photograph by Nigel Spowell

The first thing I discovered is that the rare Black and the common Grey Squirrels are the same species, but with different fur coloration. The Grey Squirrel is in fact the invader, introduced into the UK from North America back in the 1800s. It was considered a rather fashionable addition to country estates but, as usually happens, it escaped, spread readily and competed with our own native Red Squirrel, now with much reduced distribution.

But what about the Black Squirrel? The first sighting in 1912 was in Letchworth, Hertfordshire and its range, strangely, is restricted to the counties of Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. This suggests that some of the escapees must have been the black variety, a genetic variation. It also suggests that the most likely fashionable estate responsible was at Woburn in Bedfordshire. Thank you the Duke of Bedford! Another of his escapees is the Muntjac deer, now widespread not just in the Great Ouse Valley but also across the Fens.

So, Black and Grey squirrels can mate and produce black, or melanistic, offspring. This occurs in other animals too – Jaguars, for example, and Leopards, sometimes called Black Panthers. (Remember the local press reports of sightings a few years ago? All unconfirmed!)

Why does this happen? The scientific explanation is that 'it is an adaptive response enabling better camouflage and survival in the environment'. In particular, this means Black Squirrels are better equipped to survive cold winters. And it seems to be working in Cambridgeshire: in some villages Black Squirrels now outnumber greys – Girton, for example, and on Holt Island Nature Reserve in St Ives, where I spotted mine! The Trust is interested in other Black Squirrel hotspots in the Valley – do let us know of your own sightings via our website or Facebook page.

#### HOW SQUIRRELS NUMBERS COMPARE (UK)

Grey Squirrels 2.5 million

Red Squirrels 120,000

Black Squirrels 25,000

**The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk)**

