

Follow the Fortunes of Charles, an Orphaned Red Squirrel

In the first week of April 2010 Jerry Moss, Squirrel Ranger for Whinfell Forest, collected a red squirrel kitten from a couple who had rescued him after he and his nest, or drey, crashed to the ground in their garden in Great Ormside near Appleby.

In the wild, an event like this would result in certain death but in this case help was at hand from Sarah McNeil, Jerry's partner, who took on the task of hand rearing him, a job she was experienced in and had undertaken before.

She named the five week old Charles after the Prince of Wales, patron of the Red Squirrel Survival Trust and from whom she had received a letter that very morning.

Sarah said "As at the 11th April Charles fits in the palm of my hand and is about the size of a tennis ball when curled up. He is being kept in one of my woolly hats lined with pampas grass and leaves to recreate the drey and his mother's body. The hat is now housed in a large rat cage which keeps him warm enough without overheating and once he's big and strong enough he'll be transferred into a large outdoor squirrel pen and will eventually be released into local woodland, probably when he is 3 months old.

Currently he is being fed on syringes full of 'Lactol' milk which comes in powder form and is mixed with warm water to produce a solution high in both protein and fat. I feed little and often, about every two hours but have to be careful as too much milk in one sitting could kill him. In the wild he would suckle until about eight weeks old and then begin to naturally forage for himself. I'll be putting chopped nuts in his cage for him soon but will continue with some milk for another six weeks or so, to keep his strength up".



Follow Charles' development by following the diary below:

18th April 2010

Charles is getting bigger and stronger by the day.

He is moving around and exploring his cage and I have introduced a platform on a higher level for him to climb on. He's still a bit wobbly but coming on fast.

He is still on a milk only diet but feeding has changed from every two hours to every three and he's sucking in the milk now rather than me having to push it to him with the syringe. It's still like having a baby in the home but at least it's becoming less tiring and time consuming. I think I'll try putting a few chopped nuts into his cage next week.

At present, I still have to handle him at feed times but as he gets stronger I will do this less and less as it is very important that he does not become humanised. Much as I love him, I have to remember that he is a wild animal and must not become dependant on humans which could hamper his chances of survival when released.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil



25 April 2010

Young Charles has become more active just of late, and I have realised that he can move around the outside of his cage quickly too!

He is putting on weight and looks to be filling out well. This doesn't surprise me after seeing how much milk he consumes in a day.

This week I have introduced young Charles to a mixture of chopped, mixed nuts as well as diced apple. All of these accompany his regular drinks of warm milk which he still enjoys very much. In the beginning he picked around at these treats but soon acquired a taste for all of them.

Although Charles is getting stronger each day, he is not able to sit upright just yet. He crouches over as he eats and looks quite timid.

This cheeky little Squirrel is also a very vocal character. He often makes chirpy noises and especially when he is being fed his milk.

As young Charles settles into his new life with us humans, he remains oblivious to all his well wishers who are still inquiring about his well being.

Life for this little red is going very well as he has everything he needs in his cage to keep him healthy. This includes my fleece hat which he still climbs into when his cotton white belly is full!

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil



2nd May 2010

Charles in the spotlight again!

As well as growing a bit more, young Charles has been in the newspaper yet again this week! This time to help the Cumbria County Council launch their new library cards.

The library services have used one of my red squirrel images for the fronts of their new membership card and have also kindly included the PDRSG web site address on there too.

This is great news for the group as visitors can log on and learn more about Red Squirrels in Cumbria as well as further afield.



I feel very honoured to be part of this launch. Not only does the image cheer up the library card, but it also raises the profile of our endangered reds!

The beautiful squirrel image that covers the card front is that of a previous orphan which I hand reared with the help of my family. She was known as "Wendy". This gentle, people friendly red squirrel kitten was sadly unable to be released back into the wild for health reasons. Wendy is the one responsible for my voluntary red squirrel work which I do now, and which has become one of my many passions. Even after her very sudden and tragic death, Wendy continues to raise awareness through her heart melting images. Each year I try to include one of her photographs in her memory to my range of fundraising cards.

In my latest collection I have captured her smiling face close up. Not surprisingly this card is proving to be very popular.

I do believe she did not die in vein though, as she has taught many people many things about red squirrel behaviour and who knows, maybe Charles will be on the next set of cards if he poses well. But at the moment he is doing his own little bit for red squirrel conservation, (and very well at that).

My friends and family have commented just recently on the amount of times Charles and I have been in the news, saying that people will be asking for our autographs next. Funnily enough, my postman asked me for my autograph just the other day after telling me that he had seen us in the news. It was then that I realised he meant I had to sign for a package! It is good to know that your friends can keep you grounded isn't it.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil

9th May 2010

This week, Charles looks to have had a big growth spurt. His tail has bushed out and he now sits upright when he eats.

A lot of things have changed in seven days, as his natural instincts are starting to kick in. The other day I gave him a sugar snap pea and he leapt to the ground floor of his cage to bury it in the mossy bedding. Nuzzling it in with his nose, it was soon out of sight.



Charles's favourite food at the moment is cucumber, he cant wait to take it off you and munch away at it.

His personal hygiene is also coming along brilliantly. He washes himself each time he has finished his milk, I just love the way he cleans his tail too, by grabbing it bit by bit and burrowing his nose deep into the dense fur with his mouth as if he were nibbling at fleas. Fortunately that's one thing I have not seen on him which is very unusual for a squirrel!

This week I have noticed a mountain of moss appearing in Charles's fleece hat. He has been busy dragging bits of it inside for new bedding, and is now full to the brim and looking very cosy indeed.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil

16th May 2010

Young Charles has had a very relaxing week again this week. He's been enjoying bits of sunshine here and there and has been constantly raiding my fruit and veg cupboards! Having an orphaned squirrel around the place means you get to eat a great range of vegetables which benefits us all. His Appetite is getting bigger and bigger by the day, and his acrobats are getting more daring.



Each time I put food into his cage now, he pounces on my hand and nibbles my fingers, so I have introduced him to a small soft toy in the form of a red squirrel, and he loves it! Our previous red squirrel orphans each had a soft toy to play with and just like cats, squirrels love to roll around and have fun too.

This week I received a letter from Clarence House assuring me that Prince Charles was flattered with my name choice for young Charles and not offended in any way. His Royal Highness was also delighted that we had managed to secure such brilliant coverage for the plight of the red squirrel. I didn't quite know how he would feel when the news of young four legged Charles had reached Clarence House. But after I received this reassuring news, I must admit, I did breath a huge sigh of relief that no one was upset. Anyway, its good to know that we have got royal approval and as always, massive support from Prince Charles.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil

6th June 2010

Moving House

This week Charles has been transferred into a much larger pen outside. He is enjoying very much the extra space and the new surroundings. Everything in Charles's new home is a scaled down version of what he will expect to see in the woodland on the day of his release. His nest box and feeder will be accompanying him when that day comes, but until then he will continue to enjoy jumping among the branches and running around the sawn off tree stumps in his new abode.



The recent warm weather has been very kind to young Charles as it has encouraged him to explore his new outdoor pen rather than him being curled up in his hat if it had been cold. He still enjoys sleeping in my fleece hat which I have popped it into a nest box for him for more protection against the elements.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil

23rd June 2010

Charles is continuing to make very good progress, and he is still enjoying his large outdoor pen. He is in peak condition and this is mainly down to his healthy diet of seeds, nuts, fruit and veg.

His coat has changed colour recently. He has developed a dark streak down his back, and the tip of his tail has turned blonde. He is also losing his ear tufts. All of these things are very natural changes which occur throughout the course of the year in most red squirrels. These colours will change yet again when winter arrives, so Charles' ear tufts will grow back bigger and bushier. Many red squirrels lose their tufts altogether during the summer months, whereas the grey squirrels do not have any at all.



Charles has now got to grips with his flip lid feeder and has now moved into the spare nest box. There is not as much bedding inside this one so its helping him to keep cool in this very warm weather. When the outdoor pen was built, we fitted this certain nest box up with a mini camera which we attached inside to monitor the resident squirrels progress, but we soon learned that this was a waste of time as they would burrow under the bedding and that was the last we seen of them!

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil

20th August 2010

Charles Moves House

Charles continues to do very well. He is still very healthy and active and will be released back into the wild very soon.

Jerry and I are still monitoring the sight where Charles will be released. We are looking for signs of grey squirrel presence and sickly red squirrels as

there have been a few confirmed cases of the squirrel pox virus just recently. It is vital that we look out for either of these because the last thing we want is Charles to be infected with this deadly disease.

On a happier note, Charles has been making my family giggle this week. Not content with two nest boxes in his pen, he has made himself a new home in his flip lid feeder. He has pulled some filling out of his stuffed squirrel toy to line the inside of the half filled food store and has spent the night out in it too. It must be a nice feeling to have your own stash of goodies under your bed!

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil



21st August 2010

The Great Escape!

I am very pleased to announce that squirrel Charles has been successfully released back into the wild.

At the time of his freedom, PRSG friends, author, broadcaster and self confessed grumpy old man, Robin Page, along with his wife Lulu and the Mail on Sunday's photographer, Les Wilson were in our local area. We arranged to meet up for a chin wag at my home and also to show them just how much orphan Charles had grown since their last visit.



A few weeks previous to this, Jerry, Hagen and I had been regularly monitoring the sight where Charles was to be set free, as we didn't want the worry of the deadly squirrel pox virus or a grey squirrel presence to hamper his wellbeing.

With the area given the all clear, we felt the time was right to let him go. It was then that I asked Robin if he would like to do the honours by releasing him in woodlands on the Lowther estate. Robin was delighted to accept and there was much excitement in the air.

Jerry prepared the site before Charles' release by placing a supplementary feeder in there. He also fixed a nesting box to a tree. (Charles' old feeder which was lined with the stuffing from the soft toy as seen in his previous update). After arriving at the wooded sight, we quietly got to our posts, and with everyone heavily armed with cameras!

Lowther woodlands are stunning and already alive with red squirrels, as well as other wildlife. Jerry and Robin walked quietly to the spot so as not to stress up Charles who was being carefully carried in a portable cage by Robin. They both crouched down at the isolated tree stump in the middle of the unspoiled woodland ride. With everyone silent, Robin gently opened the cage door. No one wanted to miss this important shot so all cameras were aimed at the cage, and index fingers were already squeezing the camera shutter buttons slightly. I had my video camera pointing too, just incase anyone missed him as he entered into his new environment.

The wait seemed to take forever, then the second we started to relax - woosh - Charles was gone! He bolted so quickly that everyones reflexes couldn't keep up with him. Nobody got a photo! We were gob smacked at the speed he went out, and all we could do was laugh.

Although a bit disappointed at the quick exit, we all agreed that the moment was just brilliant.

Charles has certainly made his mark in the world by raising lots of awareness for the reds, and now he can enjoy life even more by being surrounded by his own kind, and hopefully in the future, meet a mate and successfully breed.

Since Charles' release, my family and I have enjoyed close up sightings of him. All of these are mostly in the same area where he was set free. This is great news as he knows where his nest box is as well as his supplementary feeder.

Two days after the release, I stood on that same spot along with Jerry and Hagen. We were amazed to see our furry friend chewing happily on a fresh larch cone right above our heads. We knew straight away that it was Charles as he didn't run off, and he has a dark bushy tail with a blonde tip whereas the Lowther squirrels at this time of the year have a distinctive blonde tail.

Startled by a very vocal Jay, Charles dropped the half chewed cone which landed near my feet. With a smile on my face, I immediately picked it up and put it in my pocket as a keepsake.

In the meantime, Les Wilson had been busy emailing some photographs of Charles which he took of him (before his departure) to the mail on Sunday, where the staff got to work and ran another brilliant story on young Charles that same weekend.

Les is no stranger to the Penrith and district red Squirrel group. He donated his time back in April of this year when he raised £300 for the group by running a red squirrel photography workshop on the beautiful Lowther Estate.

Just like Les, Robin and his wife, Lulu are also a great support to the group. Last year, Robin donated a stack of his books which jumped off the shelves and which raised lots of money for PRSG. This October, he will be launching his new childrens book all about red squirrels. Look out for that one as a donation from each copy sold will go towards helping the red squirrel.

I would like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to our friends, Robin, Lulu, Les and the Mail on Sunday for their continued support, and for making this occasion a very memorable one for us all.

Story and photos by Sarah McNeil