

What colours will you give this squirrel? Grey, red, or something else entirely?

Artwork created by Luke Scoffield, shared as part of YESI InTREEgue network's interactive tree trail on the University of York's campus.

In the UK, we have both red and grey squirrels. Today, we think of the red squirrels as beautiful and native to the UK, and worth protecting. But they used to be seen as pests, hunted, and had to be brought back from European populations even before the grey squirrels were introduced by Victorian land owners from North America. The grey squirrels can damage trees and gardens, and carry a disease which only harms red squirrels. Consequently, we think of the greys as a species who needs to be 'managed', which can mean killing them.

The story of squirrels in the UK shows that:

- how humans see other beings changes
- we as humans are more responsible for how 'nature' turns out than we acknowledge
- how we see animals and trees - whether we decide to love or hate them - has serious consequences for these beings
- red or grey squirrels are all individuals, and we can build connections with them no matter whether they are 'loved' or 'unloved'

Below is a research-based story by Judith Krauss about one grey squirrel, Theodore.

Grey squirrel Theodore, my companion: connection against the odds

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This story builds on a co-authored publication with Mathew Bukhi Mabele and Wilhelm Kiwango in Journal of Political Ecology.

Artist Luke Scoffield created beautiful squirrel drawings to summarise the research visually. These artworks were supported by funding from Judith's research allowance provided by the Department of Politics, University of York, UK (10230027).

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This is my story of Theodore. He is probably called something else. But the human writing this account has given him a name, because that is, for better and worse, what humans do: we give names, we make meanings (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Once humans are long extinct and this text enters Theodore's descendants' consciousness, they will probably be furious at this grotesque misrepresentation of their ancestor. Yet this is what I will call him.

Theodore is cuddly, an excellent climber, always hungry, and grey – a grey squirrel. At this point, listeners from the UK may recoil in horror that a GREY squirrel would be the protagonist – after all, everyone knows that grey squirrels are (delete as appropriate) an invasive alien species, destructive, insatiable nuisances, lethal to red squirrels. Yet because of this bad rap, it may be all the more important to tell a story centred on him - about where Theodore and his species-mates have come from, and how grey squirrels have been vilified in ways that absolve humans of responsibility. But it is also a story of how human-more-than-human connection and care can grow.

Theodore obtained his name because he looks a bit like a teddy bear. He is fluffy, he is quite round – no body-shaming here, I would be even rounder in the absence of central heating on this wet patch of land between Irish Sea and North Sea, vulgo England. His character also resembles that of a much-loved, but much-battered cuddly toy. No matter how many times (34, in this observation) other squirrels chase him,

relentlessly, off a feeding place – he will take the (figurative and literal) high ground, fleeing for the tree tops, until other squirrels disappear, and he can resume eating.

Naturally, my story is grounded in and refracted through my own world. If Theodore could tell his story in a way that I can understand, he would make meaning very differently. He might not be aware of my existence, other than as a human he has occasionally charmed to empty her pockets of food (let's face it, I am a pushover). Someone of a different class, race, positionality, in another context watching another urban squirrel, would have a different name to give, a different story to tell, shaped by how they have been socialised into thinking about squirrels, and how squirrels have been socialised into behaving around humans. Yet those limitations notwithstanding, this is my story of Theodore.



Theodore's story starts long before our paths intersected. His ancestors were introduced into the UK from North America in the 19th century, by English Victorian estate owners who thought grey squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*) would make for a nice addition to their little kingdoms (Middleton, 1931; Wauters *et al.*, 2023). Since, they have become part of the landscape, outnumbering their red counterparts (*Sciurus vulgaris*) by an estimated 30:1, due to competing for similar habitats and a disease which greys carry, but is only dangerous for the reds (Signorile, Lurz, *et al.*, 2016). Red squirrels now occupy endangered status everywhere in the UK except in Scotland, whose conifer-driven woodscapes are somewhat friendlier to reds (Coates, 2015, 2023; Mathews and Harrower, 2020). Red squirrels, reinvented especially through Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* children's book (Kean, 2000, 2001), are the poster children of saving nature in the UK, attracting donations to conservation organizations and Lottery funding.

Much of western conservation is based on a loved-unloved dichotomy (Bird Rose and van Dooren, 2011) – loved others that can be the cute faces of conservation campaigns, pluck at the heart strings as cuddly toys or sports team mascots and are worthy of care, compared with unloved others, who are at best ignored, or at worst targeted for death, partly in the name of conserving loved others. Applying this logic to the UK, red squirrels are loved, native, worthy of care, while grey squirrels are unloved, aggressive destroyers worthy of death (Rose and van Dooren, 2011), with a pinch of anti-American sentiment thrown in (McClaughlin, 2018). These perceptions also permeate the UK's Houses of Parliament, UK nature NGOs, commercial

foresters' offices, and royal abodes, as King Charles III has championed a trust to support the 'fight for the survival of the red squirrel' (His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, 2021).

Through such belligerent language, these sentiments are mobilised to justify culling thousands of unloved grey squirrels every year (Crowley, Hinchliffe and McDonald, 2018). While this normally affects more rural grey squirrels than urbanites like Theodore, various London parks have resorted to culling, and now fine people feeding grey squirrels for littering (Newham Recorder, 2019), partly because of legislation around 'invasive alien species' (European Union, 2019) – in itself a concept to be problematized (Boonman-Berson, Turnhout and van Tatenhove, 2014). The metaphor of Theodore being a battered cuddly teddy thus also exemplifies his species' status: although urbanite Theodore himself does not threaten any red squirrels, his whole 'invasive alien' species is a problem to be 'managed'. These spectacles of nature, images which mediate social relations with more-than-humans, matter as they produce and reproduce reality for humans and more-than-humans. And they raise questions about whether this 'conflict' between reds and greys, and their respective human supporters, itself becomes a spectacle of nature, with certain organizations presenting themselves as best-placed to 'solve' it (Igoe, 2010).

As is often the case, this easy categorisation of reds = good and greys like Theodore = bad conveniently ignores complexities. For example, without enthusiastic translocation from humans, the greys would never have been able to spread that fast and far (Signorile, Lurz, *et al.*, 2016; Signorile, Reuman, *et al.*, 2016). What is more, human forestry choices shape whether the larger grey squirrels or the smaller reds thrive (Harris, Soulsbury and Iossa, 2006). Moreover, humans' erstwhile view of the reds as 'pests' had led to fluctuating red squirrel populations long before Theodore's ancestors entered stage left, which had required red squirrel reintroduction from mainland European stock (Harris, Soulsbury and Iossa, 2006; Coates, 2023). Ironically, that would pull red squirrels' 'native' status into question, if collective sentiment cared about such detail. Fundamentally, all these complexities exemplify a political ecology of responsibility (Komi and Nygren, 2023), the idea that humans need to take responsibility for their policy and construction choices shaping these spaces of encounter, which fail to recognize squirrels' (and others') needs for food, habitat, shelter – that is, on top of being responsible for grey squirrels populating this wet island in the first place.





At the same time, just because I ran into a charming squirrel, I cannot ignore that Theodore and his species-mates inflict suffering on other beings (Crowley, Hinchliffe and McDonald, 2018). Grey squirrels are undoubtedly awkward creatures (Ginn, Beisel and Barua, 2014), though I am sure they would say the same about humans. Grey squirrels dig up plant pots and bulbs for food, ruin lawns to stash away fall-back food, harm plants by chasing each other viciously and trees by bark-stripping, running afoul of humans' constructions of gardens, lawns and commercial forestry at every turn. Obviously, grey squirrels are not awkward at the scale of the tigers, elephants, jaguars or other charismatic megafauna that attract conservation donations, often supported without knowing or caring about the serious threats to life and livelihoods they can pose (Mathur, 2021; Banerjee and Sharma, 2022; Kiwango and Mabele, 2022). If we ask others to live with the 'wild' and accept the burdens they come with, what (comparatively miniscule) burdens are we (privileged 'nature-lovers') willing to accept in our own gardens or commercial woodlands? (De Silva and Srinivasan, 2019)

Theodore inspired me to want to understand these animals' complex, contradictory lives, but also capture that they look back (Derrida and Wills, 2002; Haraway, 2007; Lorimer, 2007). Humans famously struggle to appreciate non-human languages (Ingold, 2004; Latour, 2004), which complicates more-than-human research (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Madden, 2014; van Bommel and Boonman-Berson, 2022). My answer was to spend a lot of time with them in a space they share with humans through a disciplined patience (Hartigan, 2017; Ejsing, 2023; Granelli, 2023; Alexiou *et al.*, 2024). On top of reading humanities, social-science and natural-science based studies, I engaged with other humans' posts about them on social media. And I observed them near a human-supplied feeding station in an urban green space for 30 days, for one hour a day (Bonnington, Gaston and Evans, 2014; Jagiello, Dyderski and Dylewski, 2019), every day just after first light, when they are most active. I got to know not just Theodore, but other squirrels based on their fur shades, scars, sex, sizes and rough ages (Bonnington, Gaston and Evans, 2014). Their diversity of behaviour and personality questioned any sense of grey squirrels as a monolithic 'known' (Margulies and Bersaglio, 2018).

So where does this leave us? I have tried to tell Theodore's story as best I can, despite all remaining limitations and unknowns. I learned how much humans bear responsibility for how they have shaped, and continue to shape, the 'nature' we share with more-than-humans. Theodore's story also highlights the dark sides of

conservation for those deemed unloved, expendable. It has also raised questions about how easy it is to demand care for the 'wild' when serious burdens are borne by others.



But this story about – if I may be so bold – my companion (Haraway, 2007) Theodore has also shown how human-more-than-human connection and care can grow. Humans feed greys in gardens, in parks. They appreciate them as office window visitors that brighten their day, and talk about it on social media.

Does that change culling policies, or the mindsets that facilitate culling? Does that stop biodiversity loss and climate change largely caused by the choices of people who look like me, and the corporations I am enabling and who enable me? Not yet. But reflecting critically about how we connect with other beings to me is central to facilitating change.

So maybe this story charts a hopeful way to the future, of learning to appreciate seemingly burdensome beings that manage to thrive despite us (Tsing, 2015), instead of pining for an earth that no longer exists while ignoring the call to respect all life as modelled by Indigenous schools of thought (Collins *et al.*, 2021; Mabele et al., 2022). Maybe it also teaches those of us who are wealthy and privileged a lesson about humility in labelling others as burdens.

And maybe, just for today, that is enough. Thank you.

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