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Scientists design contraceptives to limit grey squirrels

By Justin Rowlatt climate editor



UK is making good progress and could soon be put to the test in field trials, say government scientists.

The mass birth control plan involves luring grey squirrels into feeding boxes only they can access, using pots containing hazelnut spread. These will be

The project could help eradicate the grey squirrel in the UK without killing them, says environment minister Lord Benyon. It should reduce the "untold damage" grey squirrels do to woodland

ecosystems and native red squirrel populations, he says. • Invasive oyster expansion threatens estuaries

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The government scientists leading the research say the contraceptive, which makes both male and female grey squirrels infertile, should be ready to deploy

spiked with contraceptives.

in the wild within two years.

Grey squirrels, first introduced from North America in the late 19th century, damage UK woodlands by stripping bark from trees to get at the nutritious sap beneath. The species has flourished in the UK. There are now reckoned to be 2.7 million

grey squirrels here. The animals target young trees, typically 10-50 years old, and favour broadleaf species including oak, beech, sweet chestnut, and sycamore.

They can kill or maim trees, leaving scarring that allows an entry point for

The damage they can do threatens the effectiveness of government efforts to tackle climate change by planting tens of thousands of hectares of new woodlands, environment minister Lord Goldsmith has warned.

other tree pests and diseases which can stunt their growth.



15,000 remaining in England. Grey squirrels are significantly larger and stronger than reds and carry a

squirrel pox virus that is deadly to reds but to which they are immune. The traditional way of managing the grey squirrel population is by culling

them. But grey squirrels breed rapidly and populations can recover quickly. A century of culling programmes has failed to reduce the population.

Contraceptives for squirrels Dosing the animals with a contraceptive drug is a more humane alternative and will ultimately be more effective, says the lead scientist on the project, Dr

Giovanna Massei, from the government's Animal and Plant Health Agency

(APHA). She says her team have developed a vaccine that prompts the immune system to restrict the production of sex hormones, which leaves both male and female

in were two particularly enterprising mice.

squirrels infertile. The drug is not permanent, and further tests are being carried out to find a dose that has a long-lasting effect and is safe to use in the wild.

The team have also developed a special feeding hopper with a weighted door

designed to keep out species other than squirrels. Trials in Yorkshire and Wales showed 70 per cent of squirrels in each wood visited the bait boxes over a four day period - the only other animals that got

The plan is to bait the hoppers with pots of a hazelnut paste greys find "irresistible" and which will be laced with the new contraceptive. The scientists are also exploring special feeders to be used in areas where

there are both red and grey squirrels. These will be triggered by a plate which

weighs the animals and only lets the heavier greys get access to the bait.



mammals including rats, mice, deer, and wild boar. The research is being funded by the UK Squirrel Accord (UKSA), a partnership

The contraceptive scheme is an important additional non-lethal tool for

managing grey squirrels, says Kay Haw, the director of the UKSA.

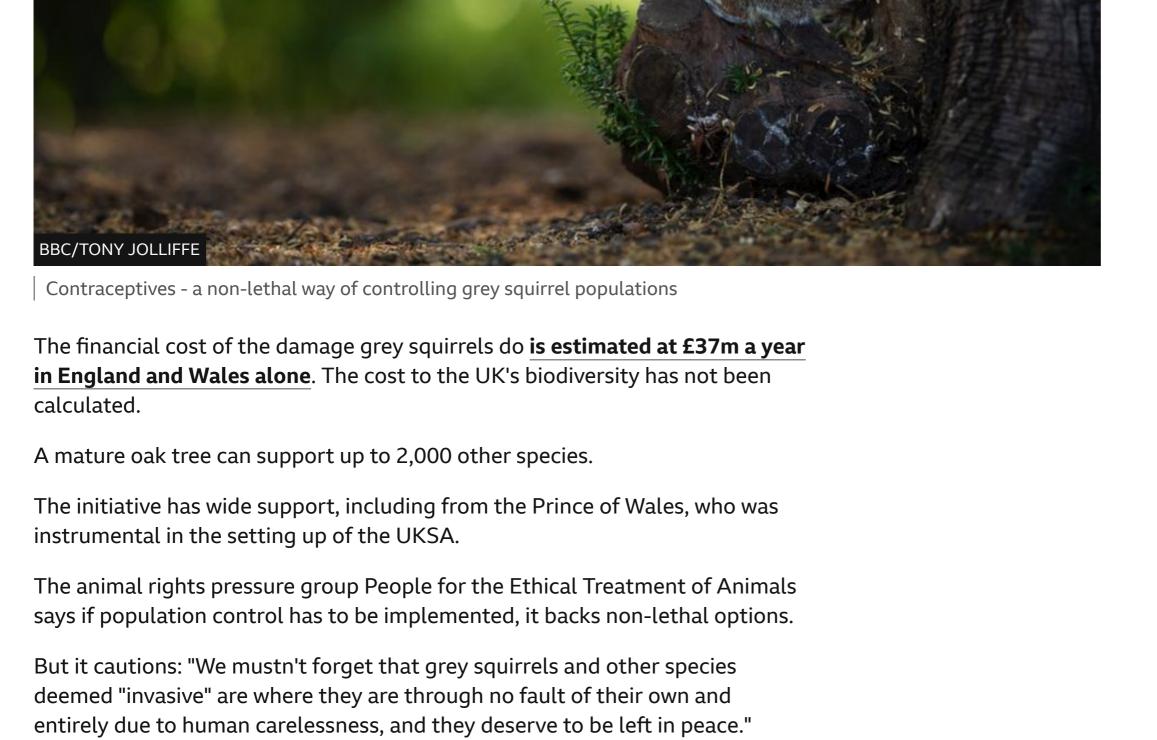
the research and development of the project.

keep back the grey squirrels", she says.

"Red squirrels now only survive in island ecosystems where there aren't any

grey squirrels or where a red squirrel community group are working hard to

of forestry and conservation organisations. It has raised just over £1m to cover



should also be made to encourage pine martens back into their previous haunts across the country. These predatory mammals - a native UK species that has suffered historic

The broadcaster and naturalist Chris Packham believes a species-specific oral

contraceptive could be a "dream ticket" if it proves to be economically viable

widespread and extremely numerous invasive animal" and suggests an effort

He describes the project as "non-violent direct action" to control "a

persecution - have been shown to reverse the spread of invasive grey

squirrels in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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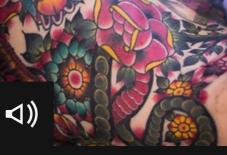
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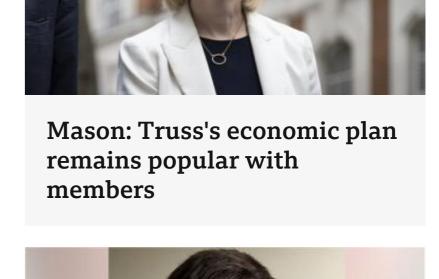
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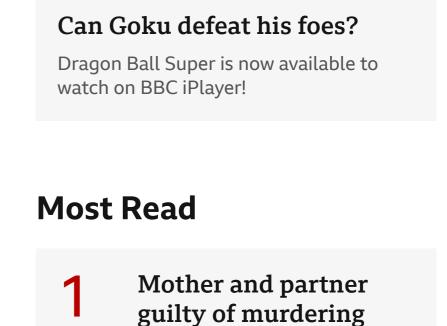
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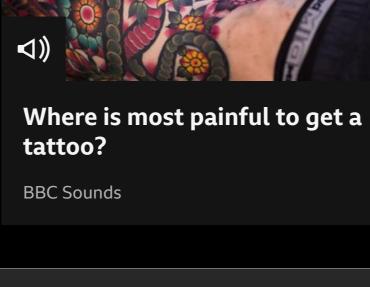
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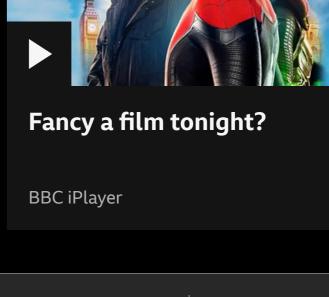
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