# Armchair Sciurologist?

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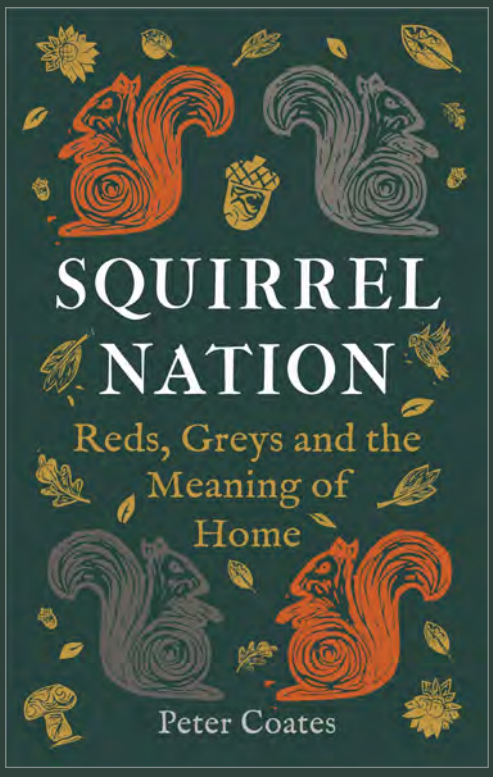


*Review of:*
Peter Coates, *Squirrel Nation: Reds, Greys and the Meaning of Home*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 336 pp. 36 illus., 10 in colour. £16.99 (hb).

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Peter Coates's *Squirrel Nation* is a well-written, extremely rich and detailed reflection on the fluctuating relationship between the humans of the United Kingdom and the squirrel populations with whom they share space. Red squirrels, generally deemed an emblem of native British fauna, are now limited to Scotland and a few strongholds in mostly more coniferous habitats in Wales and northern England. Grey squirrels, often styled as destructive invaders imported from North America by the Victorians, now outnumber the reds—in part because of a vicious squirrelpox virus, carried by greys and lethal only to reds, but also because of human-shaped landscapes that favour the larger greys. Across seven chapters plus a preface, Peter Coates draws on newspaper, (social) media and literary sources, academic work from different disciplines, legislative and policy debates, as well as royal and celebrity advocacy to trace how over time both reds and greys have been subject to love and hate, to cages, disease, and anthropomorphism. In sum, despite the contemporary discourse in the UK distinguishing vehemently between the loved red squirrel and the unloved grey squirrel, Coates highlights that the two species share more similarities than meets the eye. He asks not just whether we should learn to live with the greys, but whether we ought to love them too.

Hailing from Formby, one of the last remaining red squirrel sanctuaries in England, Coates describes himself as "an armchair sciurologist" (11). But *Squirrel Nation* attests to an extensive knowledge on human–squirrel relations that belies Coates's rhetorical self-deprecation. His work focuses predominantly on the UK while also engaging with the North American context from which the grey squirrels originated. He shares extensive knowledge on the two squirrel species and humans' responses to them, but also on individual squirrels and how their actions polarize personal and public opinions. His examples range from fabricated text messages between imagined grey and red squirrels in the Daily Star newspaper to passionate appeals in the Houses of Parliament for red squirrel support. The book meticulously traces the ever-shifting love-hate triangle between reds, greys, and the humans of the UK. The wealth of everyday encounters documented between the British—foresters, conservationists,


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researchers, authors, celebrities, politicians, members of the public—and red or grey squirrels illustrates just how ingrained squirrels are in national and natural consciousness.

*Squirrel Nation* reveals many ways in which greys and reds have traded places on the loved–unloved spectrum. In the first chapter, Coates foreshadows how much of a journey human perceptions of squirrels have been on in the UK. Across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth it was, in fact, the native red squirrels who were seen as destructive pests, while the introduced greys were available to buy as cuddly toys for a time. Lately, though, things have flipped the other way. Coates observes that it is now an instance of rare bipartisan agreement that greys must be controlled and killed (25). In chapter one and beyond, Coates explores how many of the undesirable qualities now ascribed to greys, such as damaging young trees or a seasonal carnivorous nature, were the bane of foresters' and bird lovers' existence even when the reds were the only squirrels on these isles—same complaints, slightly different genes.

Usefully nuancing the monolithic perception of the good, native, British red squirrels, Coates emphasizes in the second chapter that, historically, red populations were routinely killed by trigger-happy humans and threatened by habitat loss or disease. Indeed, more than once the reds required reintroduction mostly from northern Europe, long before the greys entered stage left. Then, in chapters three and four, Coates details grey squirrels' origins in the US and their subsequent—mixed and partly lethal—reception in the UK. He highlights that the forms of squirrel nationalism that paint reds as good natives and the greys as invaders partly manifested as anti-Americanism: characteristics like greed were ascribed by some to both humans and squirrels hailing from North America.

*Squirrel Nation*'s attention to shifting human–squirrel relations illustrates some unintended consequences of the loved–unloved distinction, but also tentative signs that this distinction may be abating. For example, Coates highlights that during the Second World War, grilled squirrel and squirrel-tail soup were proposed as potential answers to Britain's widespread food shortages (154). Yet

whatever culinary appeal squirrels had was complicated by their concomitant characterization as tree rats. So began the intensifying "war on the grey peril", as Coates entitles his fifth chapter. In chapter six, Coates shares important reflections on the reds' valorization and commodification vis-à-vis the greys' criminalization and vilification. On the one hand, the reds: supported and protected by then-Prince Charles, and the subject of £2.46m in funding from Scotland's Heritage Lottery Fund. On the other, the greys: instrumentalized for a smear campaign against a Brexit-opposing politician, and the subject of abiding verbal toxicity, even though warfarin, an anti-coagulant poison bait intended to control the greys' numbers, was banned in 2015.

Even so, Coates proposes in chapter seven that the UK is now "learning to live with (and to love) the grey" (224). He emphasizes that, while public perception of greys may have shifted from initially adored to generally abhorred over time, there have always been those asking fellow Britons not to be beastly to the greys (234). And the number of those with a soft spot for the greys may be growing, as suggested by radio station callers advocating for the greys' right to live, greys' featuring in advertising, or some researchers and conservationists speaking out for the greys. Chapter seven also shares recent genetic research demonstrating that certain aristocrats played an outsized role in facilitating greys' original expansion, as genetic stocks suggest that grey squirrels would not have been able to populate the UK in the same way without humans releasing them to estates in other parts of the country (244).[1] This underscores that vilifying the greys, rather than problematizing the humans who have facilitated their translocation and expansion, is problematic. The last few pages (252 onwards) highlight vital biological information about similarities between greys and reds, questioning the red–grey binary.

1 See A.L. Signorile et al., "Using DNA Profiling to Investigate Human-Mediated Translocations of an Invasive Species", *Biological Conservation* no. 195 (2016): 97–105, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.12.026; and A.L. Signorile et al., "Mixture or Mosaic? Genetic Patterns in UK Grey Squirrels Support a Human-Mediated 'Long-Jump' Invasion Mechanism", *Diversity and Distribution* 22, no. 5 (2016): 566–77, https://doi.org/10.1111/ddi.12424.

I wonder, though, how this book might have read if these important insights had been shared earlier on. Much of the book focuses on the red–grey distinction, with obvious justification. Nevertheless, it might have been interesting to read those earlier pages with the knowledge of key similarities between greys and reds, to problematize and nuance the species dichotomy. Similarly, the genetic research that demonstrates just how much of a role humans have played, and arguably continue to play, in shaping both squirrel species' separate but intertwined fates, could have shone a somewhat different light on the greys' vilification. Incidentally, some maps or charts documenting reds' and greys' shifting habitats, habits, and numbers in time and space would have been useful to provide complementary types of visual information than the book's existing portfolio. The book contains beautiful archival and more recent photos of squirrels as well as various products utilizing squirrel imagery; there are prints of artworks such as murals or lithographs, but no maps or charts.

There are further examples of where some tweaks might have created an even more readable and important book. I am led to believe that creative writing students are advised to kill their darlings, that is, to eliminate points that they love but don't serve the story. In this book, anecdotes from newspapers, popular culture and Parliament can seem overwhelming in their abundance. At times, the reader has to work hard to connect the dots from these insights to the key messages of the wider story. Moreover, there are some instances where more critical engagement would have been desirable. Coates's stated focus is on foregrounding "the connection between nature, in the form of animals, and the notion of the nation" (10). However, as the sentence "a synonym for nation is country" (26) suggests, he does not differentiate very much between English, Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh relations with greys and reds.

Furthermore, would that focus on nature and nation not have required more critical engagement with social and political science texts which problematize struggles around national identity, land and borders in the diverse contemporary UK context, and

problematic ideological links between nation and nature?[2] There are passing nods to Sara Ahmed (30) and the Comaroffs (31), but it is not spelt out in any great depth what their thinking might lend to critical analysis of the above-mentioned dynamics. Moreover, Coates's understanding of the home, which takes the presence of a garden for granted, does not problematize the racial, class, gender, generational, and economic dimensions of this presumption. The presence of "the garden" (26) will be predicated on a particular type of home and a particular vision of spare time for gardening, all of which is proving increasingly unattainable for significant (especially younger) parts of the current UK population. Similarly, Coates writes: "For many who live in the country(side), rural Britain *is* Britain" (27). While this may be the case, does that not risk neglecting the UK's growing, diverse, urban population, who incidentally will be much more likely to encounter squirrels in parks than in a private garden? On all these counts, some robust editing to reduce the wealth of observations and foreground links to the main story, but also invite critical reflection on one's inherent positionality and presumptions—useful to any author, including this reviewer—might have created an even more readable and worthwhile book.

*Squirrel Nation* also leaves largely untouched highly pertinent debates in (global) conservation and environmental policy. The book's final idea, namely that attitudes to the greys may (and should?) be shifting, could have been even more fascinating had it been tied more explicitly to the repercussions of dominant conservation thinking, which generally prioritizes loved species while often disregarding or sometimes targeting the unloved.[3] Coates might also have

2 See Jevgeniy Bluwstein, Connor Cavanagh, and Robert Fletcher, "Securing Conservation *Lebensraum*? The Geo-, Bio-, and Ontopolitics of Global Conservation Futures", *Geoforum* (2023) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103752; and Gargi Bhattacharyya, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Sita Balani, et al., *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

3 See Sarah L. Crowley, Steve Hinchliffe, and Robbie A. McDonald, "Killing Squirrels: Exploring Motivations and Practices of Lethal Wildlife Management", *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1, nos. 1–2 (2018), 120–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848617747831; Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, Introduction to "Unloved Others: Death of the Disregarded in the Time of Extinctions", special issue of *Australian Humanities Review* no. 50 (2011): 1–4; Thom van Dooren, "A Day with Crows—Rarity, Nativity and the Violent-Care of Conservation", *Animal Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–28.

had more to say on the current fierce disagreements about how to manage conservation and space in a time of rampant anthropogenic degradation of and changes to biodiversity. He might also have had insights on whether we, and especially those of us with historically high ecological footprints, should curtail our resource consumption to protect these furry beings. Finally, if, as Coates articulates in a gem of a sentence—"grey squirrels excel at making our world theirs" (49)—would it not have been worth engaging more with the rise of more-than-human perspectives, and how humans' and squirrels' world-making intersects?[4]

In sum, these criticisms aside, for anyone with a deep interest in squirrels and their ever-fluctuating relationships with humans in the United Kingdom, this rich book is a must-read. It comes with all the strengths of a labour of love, namely great breadth and depth of knowledge and longstanding immersion in a topic that the author cares about deeply. However, it also harbours some of the weaknesses of a labour of love, such as a lack of critical distance, a mountain of material, and a risk of key messages becoming buried. Maybe that is quite fitting for a self-confessed armchair sciurologist. After all, squirrels famously save up a lot of different foodstuffs, and they bury their acorns too.

4 See Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and especially Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), for more details on how human and nonhuman world-making interrelate.