Contrast in daily activity patterns of red squirrels inhabiting urban park and urban forest

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Abstract

The Eurasian red squirrel is one of the species that has well adapted to urban habitats and is habituated to human presence. Its urban populations differ from those in rural habitats in terms of e.g. abundance, spatial organisation and behaviour. Food availability affects the ecology of red squirrels, so in this study we hypothesise that in the urban park with supplemental food, red squirrels will alter their activity rhythms to benefit from human presence. We therefore compared seasonal changes in the daily activity patterns of two red squirrel populations, inhabiting two different areas in Warsaw: a busy urban park (with plentiful supplemental feeding) and an urban forest reserve (closed for public). Between September 2018 and July 2019 we used camera traps to monitor red squirrels activity round-the-clock. In the park (contrarily to the forest), the number of records of red squirrels per 100 trap days was lowest in summer and highest in winter. Probably squirrels in the urban park, were able to maintain high activity during winter thanks to all-year-round availability of supplementary food. Daily activity patterns differed seasonally and between the study sites. In the forest they resembled those recorded in natural habitats, i.e. two activity peaks, one after the sunrise and second before the sunset. In contrast, park squirrels showed mostly one activity peak, beginning some hours after the sunrise and lasting until noon/early afternoon (depending on the season). Park squirrels were almost exclusively day-active, while forest squirrels were also recorded before sunrise and after sunset. We suggest that park squirrels shifted their activity to times with higher visitor frequency, which, assuming, increased chances to obtain supplemental food.

Keywords: camera-traps human disturbances Sciurus vulgaris supplementary feeding

Introduction

Historically, urban habitats have been ignored as potentially suitable wildlife habitats (McCleery et al., 2014). However, many animal species may adapt to these specific conditions (Jackowiak et al., 2021; Jasińska et al., 2021; Lesińska et al., 2021; Gryz and Krauze-Gryz, 2018; Francis and Chadwick, 2012; Alvey, 2006), by changing e.g. their diet preference, home range size, behaviour, including vigilance and activity budget (Ritzel and Gallo, 2020). Wildlife species exhibit a variety of responses to human presence, ranging from attraction to habituation to avoidance (review in Patten and Burger, 2018). In example, bobcats (Lynx rufus) and coyotes (Canis latrans) clearly avoided humans by becoming more nocturnal (George and Crooks, 2006), while striped-field mouse (Apodemus agrarius), which is strictly nocturnal in nonurban habitats, became diurnal in town parks, despite the constant presence and high levels of human activity (Gliwicz et al., 1994). Understanding impacts of increasing urbanisation on wildlife is crucial for conservation of animal species (McCleery et al., 2014).

Eurasian red squirrel Sciurus vulgaris is one of the species that has adjusted to urban habitats and is habituated to human presence (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a,b; Kostrewa and Krauze-Gryz, 2020; Uchida et al., 2019; Fay et al., 2016; Reher et al., 2016; Ręzouki et al., 2014; Babinska-Werka and Zółw, 2008). In the past few years, research interest in urban populations of red squirrel has increased (reviewed in Fingland et al., 2021), and they were shown to differ from rural habitats, e.g. abundance of this species increased with human population density (Jokimäki et al., 2017), individuals occupied smaller home ranges compared to rural populations (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a; Hämmiläinen et al., 2018), and utilized various urban structures (Hämmiläinen et al., 2018). Animals spent more time on the ground and frequently interacted with humans (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a,b), and an increasing boldness was one of the most prevalent behavioural modifications (Uchida et al., 2016, 2019). Surprisingly, little is known about activity pattern of red squirrels inhabiting cities. Yet, in Hamburg it was noted that red squirrels inhabiting city centre were less active throughout the day than their conspecifics in semi-natural habitat (Thomas et al., 2018). Nevertheless, that study was based only on late-winter/early-spring data.

Readable available food in urban environments is believed to be one of the reasons why numerous animal species are thriving in cities around the world (review in Spelt et al. 2021). In urban conditions, red squirrels are offered various sources of supplementary foods including the gathering of food from bird feeders as well as the provision of nuts offered directly by park visitors (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a; Kostrewza and Krauze-Gryz, 2020; Krauze-Gryz and Gryz, 2015; Bosh and Lurz, 2012). It has been shown that supplemental food is a crucial factor that may attract squirrels in urban environments (Jokimäki et al., 2017), and this extra food is most important when natural food availability is low (Magris and Gurnell, 2006). Because food availability (i.e. tree seeds) affects the ecology of red squirrels (Jokimäki et al., 2017; Selonen et al., 2016; Wauters et al., 2007, 2008), we can hypothesise that in the urban park with plentiful supplemental food, red squirrels will alter their activity rhythms to benefit from human presence. Indeed, food provided by humans to wildlife in urban areas may lead to changes in behaviour of animals that use this resource (Sol et al., 2013; Lowry et al., 2013). For example chipmunks (Tamias striatus), in urban environment altered their seasonal behaviour patterns, i.e. there was no reduced activity levels, normally observed in rural habitats, because...
of human-supplied food resources (Ryan and Larson, 1976). Cuppus (Myocastor cuppus) in the urban habitat (differently that in non-urban areas) were active during the day and early evening and this reversal of activity patterns was attributable to deposition of human food in the city area during the daytime (Meyer et al., 2005). Finally, gulls adapted their foraging behaviour to human time schedules when beneficial (Spelý et al., 2021).

The aim of a study was to compare seasonal changes in the daily activity patterns of the two red squirrel populations inhabiting the same city but two utterly different areas: a busy urban park and an urban forest. Both green spaces are within city districts. Nevertheless, one is expected to be highly influenced by the human presence and supplementary food from park visitors, whereas the effect of human disturbance on the other population should be negligible. Indeed, an earlier study showed that park squirrels significantly altered their behaviour in response to human presence by spending more time on the ground and tolerating close contact. Moreover human-delivered nuts made the bulk of a diet (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a). We hypothesise that daily activity patterns of squirrels inhabiting urban park will also differ from those observed for forest squirrels as they may adjust their activity to benefit from supplemental feeding.

Materials and methods

Study area

We conducted our study in Warsaw (52°14′13.37″ N, 21°1′13.1″ E), Poland, a large city with approximately two million inhabitants. It is located in the central part of the country, a region that is affected by both the mild oceanic climate of Western Europe, and the harsh and dry continental climate of Eastern Europe and Asia. The duration of the growing season is approximately 210 days, the total precipitation measures 600 mm per year, and the mean ambient temperature ranges from -4 °C in January to 18 °C in July. Nevertheless, the minimum temperature may drop below -30 °C and the maximum temperature may rise above 35 °C.

This research was conducted in two green areas. The first was an urban park (together with historical buildings) named Łazienki Royal Museum (52°12′27.60″ N, 21°1′34.80″ E). The park was formed in the 17th century, is located in the city centre and is very popular among visitors and local inhabitants: every year the park is visited by more than 2 million people (Kruczek, 2015). Squirrels are often fed nuts by visitors (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a,b; Krauze-Gryz and Gryz, 2015). The park covers 76 ha and it has 92 species of trees and shrubs. Tree cover is about 70% and about 20% of trees reach more than 140 years (Babińska-Werka and Żółw, 2008). Tree species are mostly deciduous, e.g. hornbeam (Carpinus betulus), common oak (Quercus robur), beech (Fagus sylvatica), as well as hazel (Corylus avellana), walnut (Juglans regia) and North American walnut (Juglans nigra) (Babińska-Werka and Żółw, 2008).

The second study site was Natolin Forest Reserve (52°8′20″ N, 21°4′25″ E), which is located about 10 km from the city centre (we assumed the Palace of Culture and Science to be the most central point of the city). An area of the reserve measuring 105 ha has been protected since 1991, the reserve is closed to the public and a permission is needed for entrance. Although this land was formerly parkland, spontaneous regenerations of woodland occurred during the post-war period, nowadays the whole area of the reserve is tree covered. The oldest stands are more than 250 years old, dead or fallen trees are left for natural regeneration, only natural regeneration occurs, in practice very little human intervention is allowed. Trees are mostly deciduous, e.g. hornbeam, common oak, ash (Fraxinus excelsior), elms (Ulmus spp.), hazel and black alder (Alnus glutinosa).

In both areas avian predators were present, this included tawny owl Strix aluco (Gryz et al., 2008), and sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus (Gryz J., pers. observ.). One pair of the Northern goshawk Accipiter gentilis nested in the Natolin reserve (Gryz J., pers. observ.), while corvids (mainly hooded crows Corvus corone and rooks Corvus frugilegus) were numerous in the Łazienki park (Beliniak A. pers. obs.). As for mammals, red fox Vulpes vulpes (Jackowiak et al., 2021), stone marten Martes foina (Krauze-Gryz D., pers. obs.), and free-ranging domestic cat Felis catus were present in both areas, with the last species being recorded very often in the urban park (Krauze-Gryz D., pers. obs.). In the Łazienki Park, squirrel density was estimated to be more than 2 ind./ha (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a; Babińska-Werka and Żółw, 2008) whereas in the Natolin Reserve it was 0.29 ind./ha (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a).

Camera-trap data collection

In this study, we used camera traps to monitor red squirrels activity, i.e. the number of squirrel observations per hour of a day (e.g. Andreoni et al., 2011; Jasińska et al., 2021; Cerbo and Biancardi, 2013, please see below for more details), and round-the-clock. The study started in September 2018 and ended in July 2019. We used camera traps (LTL - Acorn 6210MC/MG, USA), which recorded date of the observation, time (24 h record) in Central European Time (CET). Each camera trap captured three still images, and a 5-sec video, shortly one after another (no interval was set). It also recorded date and hour. Cameras were located in front of the live-traps for squirrels (squirrels were live-trapped for another study, this data is not analysed here but the study design was similar to Krauze-Gryz et al. (2021a,b), about 20-150 cm above ground (depending if a trap was located on a ground or in a tree on a wooden platform). Traps were pre-baited with unshelled hazelnuts and walnuts for seven days (mostly around 8-10 AM), and then baited and set for five to nine days. They were set at dawn and checked after approximately 2-4 h, depending on the temperature, and blocked open for the night (with nuts left inside). After every checking and securing traps, bait was provided, regular baiting ensured the presence of food at all times (including night). Five camera traps, located at least 100 meters apart, were placed in each study site. In the forest, the camera traps were set at one of trapping points (i.e. locations of live-traps) that were distributed on a regular grid. In the park, due to its representa-
For all observations of squirrels recorded before noon we calculated time (n of hours) that elapsed from the sunrise, these values (2.4 and 2.5 for park and forest, respectively) did not differ between the two study sites (Kruskal-Wallis test, H=0.055, p<0.05). Nevertheless, in both study sites (Fig. 3), differences were found between seasons (Kruskal-Wallis test, park: H=45.22, p<0.001, forest: H=50.61, p<0.001). In the park, in winter, squirrels were recorded earlier than in spring or autumn, as shown by Mann-Whitney post hoc test (p<0.05), i.e. in winter squirrels were recorded on average two hours after the sunrise, while in other seasons approximately three hours after the sunrise. In the forest, red squirrels were recorded approximately three hours after the sunrise in spring and autumn, less than two hours in autumn while in winter they were observed mostly before the sunrise (mean=-0.48) (Fig. 3). In this case, Mann-Whitney post hoc test showed differences (p<0.05) between autumn and winter and the remaining seasons.

Similarly, for all observations of squirrels recorded after noon we calculated time (n of hours) before the sunrise. On average, observations of squirrels in the forest were recorded closer to the sunset (on average 2.4 hours before the sunset) than those in the park (3.5 hours before the sunset) (Kruskal-Wallis test, H=18.04, p<0.001). Again, for both study sites (Fig. 4), seasonal differences were found (Kruskal-Wallis test, park: H=36.00, p<0.001, forest: H=17.12, p<0.001). In the park, red squirrels were recorded shortest before the sunset in autumn (2.7 hours before sunset) as compared to other seasons (i.e. in spring and summer this was approximately 5 hours before the sunset). Differences were also found between winter and spring (Mann-Whitney test for post hoc-comparisons, p<0.05). In the forest, in winter, red squirrels were on average recorded almost at the sunset, i.e. 0.4 hours before the sunset, while in spring and summer this was approximately three hours before the sunset (Mann-Whitney test for post hoc comparisons showed differences between spring and autumn and winter, p<0.05).

### Discussion

In this study we compared seasonal changes in the activity patterns of red squirrels based on camera traps observations in two study areas: a busy urban park (with plentiful supplemental feeding) and an urban forest reserve (closed for public). These two habitats were located within city districts of Warsaw, and the study was conducted in the same months in both areas, which was supposed to minimise an influence of abiotic cues such as photoperiod and temperature. Daily activity patterns differed seasonally and between the study sites. In the forest, they resembled those recorded in natural habitats, i.e. two activity peaks, one around the sunrise and second around the sunset. In the park squirrels were almost exclusively day-active. We suggest that park squirrels shifted their activity to times with higher visitor frequency, which, assuming, increased chances of obtaining supplementary food and may allow for limiting time devoted to food search. This is the first paper that shows changes in the activity patterns of red squirrels in relation to urbanization round-the-year.

In the park, the number of records per 100 trap days was lowest in summer and highest in winter. This high activity level in winter seems counterintuitive because at low temperatures, resting in the nest is an important behavioural response, which decreases the energy costs of thermoregulation (Wauters and Dhondt, 1987). Moreover, the effect of temperature is more distinct in deciduous habitats, which do not provide much shelter for squirrels in winter (Wauters et al., 1992) and deciduous trees dominated in this areas. In contrast, in the forest the

### Table 1 – Number of trap-days, squirrel records in total and records per 100 trap days as recorded by camera traps by season in the two study sites in Warsaw: park and forest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Trap days</th>
<th>Squirrel records</th>
<th>Records per 100 trap days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>113.3</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>113.3</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>167.0</td>
<td>104.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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number of records was lowest in winter and highest in summer, which reflects typical decrease in the activity level of red squirrels with low ambient temperatures (Bosh and Lurz, 2012; Wauters et al., 1992) because of the high thermoregulatory cost of foraging at low ambient temperature and shorter day-length (Bosh and Lurz, 2012; Wauters et al., 1992; Pullianen, 1973). Abundant and predictable food sources in urban habitats can result in minimal physiological responses to the seasons through small changes in metabolism and conductance. In one study in Germany, squirrels were able to maintain a high body mass and positive energy balance year-round despite living in a climate with large seasonal changes in temperature. This was because of the presence of diverse food trees, and artificial food supplemented by cemetery visitors, as well as the modification of activity patterns (Turner et al., 2017). Probably also in our case, red squirrels in the urban park were able to maintain high activity during winter thanks to all-year-round availability of supplemental food. Also, higher temperature in the city centre (Kim, 1992) might have allowed for high activity in winter. The lowest number of observations in summer may result from high availability of natural food combined with a very high frequency of park visitors (including tourists) during holidays. Squirrels are offered so much food they are unlikely to search for alternate food sources less often.

In spring and autumn, forest squirrels presented crepuscular activity, similarly to what was recorded in other rural habitats, both in coniferous and deciduous habitats (Wauters et al., 1992). In turn, park squirrels were mostly recorded in the morning, between the sunrise and till noon, with no afternoon activity peak. In warm months, red squirrels in rural habitats show bimodal activity pattern, with a rest period in the warmest hours of the day (Wauters et al., 1992; Wauters and Dhondt, 1987; Tonkin, 1983). In our study, no clear rest period was visible, possibly also due to small sample collected in the summer. In winter, we

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1** – Percentage of records of red squirrels in hours of a day in subsequent seasons in the two study sites in Warsaw: park and forest, as recorded by camera traps. Hours of the earliest and latest times of sunrise or sunset (converted to CET) are given above the graphs. The total number of records of squirrels in each season was in the park: spring 108, summer 19, autumn 153, winter 324; and in the forest: spring – 139, summer 73, autumn 42, winter 25.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2** – Seasonal changes in the share of records of red squirrels in four parts of 24-hour day: dawn (one hour before sunrise), day, dusk (one hour after sunset) and night as recorded by camera traps, in the two study sites in Warsaw: park and forest. The total number of records of squirrels in each season was in the park: spring 108, summer 19, autumn 153, winter 324; and in the forest: spring 139, summer 73, autumn 42, winter 25.

![Figure 3](image3.png)

**Figure 3** – Seasonal changes in the mean (±SE) number of hours than passed from the sunrise to time of observations of red squirrels as recorded by camera traps in the two study sites in Warsaw: park and forest. Only observations that were recorded before noon (CET) were taken into analysis. The number of records of squirrels in each season was in the park: spring 95, summer 6, autumn 106, winter 303; and in the forest: spring 82, summer 54, autumn 23, winter 18.

![Figure 4](image4.png)

**Figure 4** – Seasonal changes in the mean (±SE) number of hours before the sunset to time of observations of red squirrels as recorded by camera traps in the two study sites in Warszaw: park and forest. Only observations that were recorded after noon were taken into analysis. The number of records of squirrels in each season was in the park: spring 10, summer 13, autumn 47, winter 17; and in the forest: spring 57, summer 19, autumn 19, winter 7.
noticed the clearest difference between the two populations: activity of park squirrels was unimodal, i.e. they were recorded almost exclusively after the sunrise and till noon. In turn, forest squirrels showed crepuscular activity. As shown by earlier studies, winter activity of squirrels was unimodal in coniferous forest (Stein and Barmoen, 2017; Wauters et al., 1992; Wauters and Dhondt, 1987), and bimodal in deciduous forest (Wauters et al., 1992). In our case, both study sides were deciduous, so other factors should have affected this result. Consequently, forest squirrels were observed across all defined times of a 24-hour day (e.g. night, dusk, day and dawn), while in the park squirrels were almost only active during a day. In general, red squirrels are exclusively day-active, and the start of activity is closely related to sunrise (Wauters et al., 1992). Yet, when length of day is shortest, squirrels can be active soon after the first light, thus somewhat before sunrise and after sunset (Wauters et al., 1992; Wauters and Dhondt, 1987). Indeed, in a study conducted in South Korea, which also involved camera traps, about 11% of photos were captured in night time photo rate (Lee et al., 2019). In the urban park we did not record any images of active squirrels before the sunrise and after the sunset and very few observations came from dawn (with none from dusk or night). It seems that squirrels in urban forest behaved more like their conspecifics in natural habitats and park squirrels changed their activity rhythm, i.e. their activity concentrated shortly after sunrise (as in natural habitats) and in the subsequent hours. We may assume that one of the possible factors driving this difference was the presence of park visitors and supplementary food supplies provided by people (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a; Kostrzewa and Krauze-Gryz, 2020). Red squirrels can reduce activity and foraging time if food items are energy-rich and easy to handle (Wauters et al., 1992) and food availability affects duration of activity during a day (Wauters and Dhondt, 1987; Tonkin, 1983). Availability of anthropogenic food increases the habitat quality, especially in urban habitats (Fingland et al., 2021). Consequently, activity of red squirrels may be altered by food provisioning in urban parks (Thomas et al., 2018), which may also help animals to maintain a positive energy balance (Turner et al., 2017). It was previously suggested that food provided by people may be more important than abiotic factors in urban habitats (Thomas et al., 2018). The primary abiotic environmental cues influencing red squirrel activity timing appear to be temperature (Wauters et al., 1992), photoperiod (i.e., day length, Wauters and Dhondt, 1987; Tonkin, 1983) or a combination of both (Holm, 2018). In our study, in both study sites, we compared data collected during the same month, with similar weather conditions (recordings were conducted at the same time or maximum seven days apart). We may thus assume that differences in activity patterns between urban and forest squirrels were not driven by those abiotic factors. We suggest that park squirrels shifted their activity to times with higher visitor frequency. Indeed, they also changed their behaviour in a way that made receiving food from people more likely, i.e. squirrel spent much time on the ground and often approached people and begged for food (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021a).

This was different from population of squirrels inhabiting wildlife park in Ireland, which altered their activity to avoid human encounters, were observed to concentrate their activity in non-public areas and moved into public areas when the human disturbance was lower (Haigh et al., 2017). The big park, this was rather a quiet zone, which was not close (at least our study plot) to any busy road, no vehicles were allowed there and gardeners used only electric cars. Also, times with highest noise (i.e. rush hours) did not seem to affect activity of squirrels, i.e. animals were mostly active in the morning but had a rest in the afternoon.

Although in this study we did not test directly an influence of supplemental feeding on shifts in the activity patterns in the population of urban squirrels, we suggest this factor played the crucial role. Squirrels in this park were shown to differ in their behaviour, i.e. some squirrels spent most of their time on the ground and reacted positively to people (approached them and/or begged for food), while others were mainly arboreal and reacted to humans with alert or escape behaviours (Krauze-Gryz et al., 2021b). Assumingly, activity patterns of certain individuals could also differ, which should be investigated in future studies.

To sum up, this study showed differences in daily activity patterns of the two urban populations, inhabiting the same city but different green areas with various levels of human disturbance. Urban forest squirrels showed mostly typical crepuscular activity, while park squirrels were active from the morning and until midday. We suggest a reason for these differences could have been a year-round access to supplementary food in the urban park, i.e. squirrels stayed active at times when park visitors were present and often provided food. This difference complete our earlier findings on how far urban park squirrels differed from their forest counterparts in other aspects of ecology (i.e. space use, food choice and interactions with people) and points to very high plasticity of this species, inhabiting human-dominated landscapes. Nevertheless, as we compared only two study sites located in one city, and we did not have independent replicates for the two populations, we cannot exclude other factors that could have played a role. Thus, more studies are needed to confirm that red squirrels changed their activity rhythms to benefit from human presence.

References


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Supplemental information

Additional Supplemental Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table S1 Number of days of trapping in the two study sites.