

Any male will do for a female red squirrel

Any male -- including close kin -- will do for the female red squirrel, who mates rather indiscriminately, according to a study that records this rather unusual trait in animals.

Researchers from the University of Alberta, Canada, and Sheffield University, UK, studied a population of red squirrels over three years near Kluane National Park in southwest Yukon.

Males mating with multiple females is quite common in the animal kingdom, females that multi-mate is much harder to explain.

Through their observations, it was noted that when female red squirrels chose to copulate, genetic relatedness was not a factor.

'In males, the benefits of multi-female mating are well established, but in females the benefits of having many offspring is limited, making the reasoning for multi-male mating more puzzling,' said Jeffrey Lane, who conducted the study.

The researchers also found that the relatedness of parents had no effect on the neonatal mass and growth rate of their offspring. Whether or not an offspring survived to one year of age wasn't affected by having related parents either.

'Detailed investigations into the social and genetic context of multi-male mating in red squirrels and other mammalian species should help to provide insight into the evolution and maintenance of this behaviour,' said Lane.

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