



The Red Squirrel Diaries 2023

Spring in the Air

Spring is a very busy time for the red squirrels in Tollymore Park. They are refurbishing old dreys and building new ones. The squirrel drey or nest looks like a round football made of sticks usually about 10m up the tree and built on a strong branch and against the tree trunk. The tree species the red squirrel seems to prefer to build in is the larch, so have a look in the larch trees the next time you are in Tollymore Park. Already the volunteers are reporting that they are seeing female reds who are feeding their young which are called kittens.

Red Squirrel Feeding

Thankfully the red squirrels continue to prosper in Tollymore Park. Throughout the winter they made good use of the supplementary feeders but now they seem to have returned to eating buds, flowers, fungi and gnawing on last year's tree cones for their seeds.

Squirrel Pox Virus

There have been reports over the past year from other red squirrel groups about the deadly squirrel pox in their areas, but thankfully we have had no evidence of it in Tollymore Park. We continue to put up cameras and monitor the health of the red squirrels, but of course also depend on all of you to report via our website any sick or dead red squirrels you come across. Also please report any grey squirrels you see as they carry the squirrel pox virus.

www.tollymoreredsquirrelgroup.com

Thank you.

Dead Red Squirrels Story

Forest Service (DAERA-NI), our partners in Red Squirrel Conservation in Tollymore Forest Park moved their centre of operations in this area from Castlewellan Forest Park to Newry, Co Down. A freezer on the Castlewellan Park site was previously used by Tollymore Red Squirrel Group (TRSG) to keep any recorded carcasses of dead red squirrels found but it is now no longer available as it had to be removed. TRSG approached Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) and asked if the red squirrel carcasses would be of any use to their students for research purposes. QUB accepted the carcasses and said "the carcasses will be partially thawed and combed through for ticks. Any ticks collected will be pooled and tested for a number of pathogens including *Borrelia spp* and *Babesia spp* as part of a project looking at tick-borne diseases and animal health in Northern Ireland. Following this, the carcasses will

be dissected to look for internal parasites as part of a separate prevalence project." It is good to know the dead red squirrels are being put to use helping themselves and other wildlife species. We will likely receive the reports from QUB when the students have finished their thesis. TRSG volunteers were pleased to help in this instance, but alas they will no longer be collecting and storing red squirrel carcasses.

Down Forestry Planning

Tollymore red Squirrel Group was invited to comment to Down Forestry Planning (DAERA-NI; Forest Service) on their tree planting programme for the next ten years. Our main comments to them concerned the recent disease driven loss of larch trees in local forests and the isolation of areas of forest and the impact these factors have on red squirrel conservation. The Forest Service is unlikely to plant further larch trees for timber production due to this new disease. The Larch tree has been one of the most prolific forestry trees in our area, an excellent seed cone producer and is currently depended upon by the red squirrels for feeding and for drey building. The consequent loss of larch will have a negative impact on the survival of the red squirrel. We have requested Forest Service consider planting replacement food source tree species favoured by the red squirrel in their tree planting plans. Tree species such as Scots Pine, Norway Spruce, Lodge Pole Pine, Beech, Hazel etc. which are all beneficial to the red squirrel. Also that any planned felling of healthy larch for commercial purposes be put on hold at this time until the replacement tree species mature to seed producing age.

So if you are thinking of planting any trees, please give a thought to the red squirrel and plant native where possible.

Red and Grey Squirrels & Pine Marten Survey

Over the Autumn and Winter of 2022 TRSG volunteers helped with the Ulster Wildlife Northern Ireland Survey of squirrels and pine martens. The volunteers are keen to help out with any project that enhances the conservation of the Red Squirrel. We look forward to seeing the results.

Nature Presents at the Ulster Museum

One of our McComb Red Squirrel Feeders was lent to the "Nature Presents" event in Discover Nature at the Ulster Museum. This was part of the Northern Ireland Science Festival. "As part of the display a stuffed pine marten and grey squirrel were placed beside the Tollymore Red Squirrel Group's Feeder. The objects generated a lot of discussion as most people had never seen a pine marten, and were convinced the feeder was a squirrel trap! (Grey Squirrels seem to have had a bad press with the general public). But the resurgence of pine marten numbers locally alongside increasing red squirrel numbers interested a lot of people as an instance when nature itself can fight back. The restoration of red squirrels with judicious feeding and monitoring in Tollymore Park and elsewhere was also of great interest and a lot of people were keen to know where reds could be seen. The squirrel feeder drew people to the discussion table and proved to be a popular talking point." These are very positive and encouraging comments from the organiser of Nature Presents and we were glad to be part of it.

Upcoming Event

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group

Tollymore National Mountain Centre, 32 Hilltown Road, Bryansford
Tuesday 9th May 2023

6.30pm A.G.M. Admission Free Followed at

7.30pm 'THE SECRET LIFE OF DONARD FOREST' Admission £3

An illustrated talk by Andy Carden with lots of exciting photos
Tea or coffee provided

Photo: This charming photograph of a mother Red Squirrel and her two kittens was taken by Ludwig C. Timm. The mother red squirrel had built her drey on the bathroom windowsill of his home in Germany.

21.4.23



Lawrence

Aye McComb