



Tollymore Red Squirrel Group

Reg. Charity No: NIC102355

Autumn Diary – 2023

A Red Squirrel Summer

The red squirrels in Tollymore Forest Park appear to have had a very successful summer, probably due to the exceptionally good weather we had in May and June. Kittens, big enough to have left their dreys were being observed in late April and early May throughout the park. Two or three litters of kittens may have been born over the summer as kittens were still being seen in early Autumn. A regular camera/observation health check was kept on the red squirrels as disease can often break out in an enlarge population especially over the summer months.

Reports from the Red Squirrel Feeders

The supplementary feeders in Tollymore Park are filled once a week with a 1/3 mixture of sunflower hearts, shelled peanuts and corn niblets, as well as some hazel nuts in their shells. Usually by this time of year the red squirrels have abandoned the supplementary feeders and are feeding on their favourite natural foods such as beech nuts, larch cone seeds, Scots pine cone seeds, hazel nuts etc. This has not happened this year; the feeders are still being emptied by the red squirrels in 2-3 days, the same as they were being emptied during the hungry days of summer.

Again the weather is likely the cause. If you remember in late spring and early summer we had very little rain at a time when the tree seeds were developing in their shells or cones. This likely impeded the development of the seeds, meaning that most tree seeds are withered in or are absent from their shells and cones. This is not good news for the wildlife that depends on these particular seeds. So instead of the volunteers having a break from feeding the red squirrels this autumn and early winter we will have to make sure we keep an eye that the red squirrels do not go hungry. We have heard that other forests have been experiencing the same lack of the necessary tree seeds for the red squirrels this autumn. Fingers crossed next year is a mast year.

Red Squirrels go Out and About

Thanks to the support we get from members of the public we often get reports of sightings of red squirrels. This past few months we have been receiving sightings from all over the place instead of mostly just within Tollymore Park. Individual red squirrels have been recorded in and around Newcastle; Dundrum Road industrial estate, near Cillian Fort, beginning of Bryansford Road, Enniskeen Hotel in the trees, the Slieve Donard Hotel grounds feeding on Scots pine cones etc. The reasons may be that the juveniles were seeking a new woodland territory for themselves or that there was not enough feed for them in Tollymore Park or more likely many reasons or a reason we do not understand.

Red takes the plunge!

In June this year Julia one of the local supporters of the red squirrel group was out walking in Island Park in Newcastle with her son Finn when she heard a 'plop' into the edge of the water of the river. Thinking that it was an otter she quickly turned on the video camera on her phone and captured a red squirrel swimming across the breadth of the Burren River. It climbed out of the water on the far bank and without even a shake went on its way. Well done to Julie and Finn and thank you both for passing this information and video on to us.

Working with Forest Service (DAERA-NI)

If you have visited Tollymore Forest Park recently you may have noticed as you pass through the vehicle entrance of the Barbican Gate and look down on your left hand side you will see that the plots of Douglas fir trees there have been thinned out by the Forest Service Harvesting Team. This work procedure was carried out to allow the remaining Douglas fir trees to spread out and put on more girth and height. This trunk of this species of slow growing fir tree is favoured for use as electricity poles and telegraph poles. The Harvesting team kindly informed Tollymore Red Squirrel Group of their plans to carry out this operation and this gave the volunteers plenty of time to walk the area of Douglas firs and mark any of the firs that held current red squirrel dreys etc. prior to the felling. These marked trees were left standing. We are grateful for this successful working partnership with Forest Service and the red squirrels are too!

Gondola Ride through Donard Wood

There is a significant population of red squirrels resident in Donard Wood. In March 2023 we wrote to the Mourne Gateway Project at Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NM&DDC) as we were concerned about the possible construction and usage of a gondola ride from Donard Park in Newcastle to a visitors centre in Thomas Mtn. Quarry, and the predictable damage this project would do to the natural environment of the area. We were particularly concerned about the population of red squirrels. The principle trees of this wood are mature Scots pine, larch and various other forestry trees, plus natural regenerated areas of native trees.

Donard Forest is one of the few forests left in Northern Ireland that is made up predominately of a mixture of native trees of species suitable for the red squirrel. We were very concerned that by creating a wire line through the trees of Donard Forest for the proposed gondola would cause considerable disruption to the wildlife there in both its construction and its proposed usage; enough to likely drive the red squirrels away. Its construction would also considerably reduce the size of this piece of precious woodland.

We asked that they please bring to a halt these proposed plans for a gondola due to the damage its construction and usage will cause to the local environment and wildlife, and in particular the red squirrel.

2022 Red Squirrel, Grey Squirrel and Pine Marten Presence and Absence Survey

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group was one of the many groups and organisations who helped with the above survey. The group volunteers set motion cameras at twelve sites and recorded

the wildlife at each site. Ross McIlwrath, Priority Species Officer with Ulster Wildlife organised this survey and his report came out in 2023.

The survey found that the number of woodlands surveyed with red squirrels present remains comparable to the 2017 survey, suggesting that the population is holding steady.

The survey also showed that the presence of grey squirrels had declined slightly since 2017. The introduction of grey squirrels from North America to Ireland in 1911 decimated native red squirrels as they outcompete their smaller cousin for food and carry the deadly squirrel pox virus, to which greys are immune.

The survey also found that pine martens were present in almost double the number of sites compared to a previous survey in 2017 and had now spread over all of Northern Ireland.

Ross McIlwrath commented that "it was fantastic to see pine martens spreading and returning to areas where they haven't been seen for many years. Their recovery will hopefully boost our much-loved red squirrel populations as we are seeing that in areas with a strong pine marten presence, greys are retracting. Red squirrels have evolved to live alongside these native predators unlike the non-native grey squirrels.

However, we cannot get complacent as red squirrels are still in trouble from grey squirrels and habitat destruction. Many red squirrels have disappeared from small areas of woodlands and urban areas, and as a result have become increasingly isolated and fragmented populations.

We need to continue to work with partners, landowners and local conservation groups to control the spread of greys, create a more connected landscape to allow red squirrels to spread and recover, and ensure continued long-term monitoring of these three species".

A very worthwhile survey and it was great to have been part of it.

Meeting with Amy Dickson NM&DDC Biodiversity Officer, Castlewella Forest Park

At the beginning of the summer volunteers from TRSG meet with Amy to talk about the red squirrels and what the group are doing to help conserve this native species in Tollymore Park. There is a healthy red squirrel population in Castlewella Park and the group would be glad to help in any way they can. Good Luck Amy.

Once again thank you to all the supportive members of the public who send in sightings of red squirrels and other related information.



Red Squirrel with Scots Pine seed cone

John McComb

Janette Adams
15/2/25

Angela Hayes

13/2/25

