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Lagan Valley Red Squirrel Group

Transcript of presentation to Northern Ireland Red Squirrel Forum 24/11/09

Lagan Valley Red Squirrel Group (LVRSG) had its first formal meeting in August 2007, so we have been in existence for over 2 years. We are a small group of individuals connected to Belvoir Forest who have a particular interest in the plight of red squirrels. The group was set up in response to the growing number of grey squirrels seen within Belvoir and the surrounding woodlands.

Red squirrels first appeared in Belvoir Forest in 1983. Belvoir remained a reds only forest until 2002 when the first greys were sighted. Since then, grey squirrel numbers have increased and sightings of reds have become less frequent. However, we know that red squirrels are still present within Belvoir Forest.

Whilst the group were originally focused on Belvoir Forest, we realised that our activities would have to extend further afield. We chose the name "Lagan Valley Red Squirrel Group" to enable us to involve neighbouring landowners. The group meets once a month and invites various relevant groups and individuals to meetings depending on the agenda.

To date we have been involved in a number of activities. With the cooperation of Forest Service (FS) we have set up a number of red squirrel feeding stations. We record sightings of red and grey squirrels and to this end we have developed our own recording card focused on Belvoir Forest. Working with Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), FS, and Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP) we have recently developed a recording card for wider distribution to the general public, from which we hope to receive more records. We have enlisted help from LVRP volunteers, who have begun regular survey work concentrating on squirrels within Belvoir Forest. Recently LVRSG took part in a Woodland Trust event at Belvoir Forest where we provided information on red squirrel conservation and led several guided tours. We intend to undertake further events in the future.

LVRSG have also developed proposals for a number of red squirrel conservation projects. In partnership with FS and LVRP we hope to install a high level feeder and viewing point where the public will be able to see red squirrels feeding within the canopy of the trees. Connected to this will be an information point in the form of an interactive kiosk. We are also developing our own website promoting the group and the issues surrounding red squirrels specific to the Lagan Valley.

As a group we feel that Belvoir Forest offers a fantastic opportunity to promote red squirrel conservation. Belvoir has been synonymous with red squirrels for many years and has a high public profile. To lose red squirrels from Belvoir would be a

travesty. For this reason we feel that there should be a significant and sustained effort into maintaining reds at Belvoir. Grey squirrel control is vitally important in achieving this. Unlike the Tollymore group, LVRSG have not been given permission to carry out grey squirrel control. We are reliant on FS to carry out culling within Belvoir but due to constraints on FS resources we feel that culling is not taking place at an effective level.

The group have encouraged neighbouring landowners to undertake grey squirrel control. Belvoir Golf Club are willing to do this but with much of the surrounding land being owned by various councils there is severe resistance to culling. We had hoped that the proposed funding of two grey squirrel control officers might help to increase the level of culling, however we are disappointed to learn of the withdrawal of this funding.

We realise that Belvoir is not within a Red Squirrel Preferred Area but we feel that Belvoir forest falls within the criteria set out at 5.2.4 of the All Ireland Species Plan as a "site that does not meet criteria for defensibility, but may maintain viable Red squirrel populations because of the presence of active and committed local conservation groups"

Our ultimate aim is to see Belvoir Forest designated as a red squirrel reserve with the surrounding Lagan Valley used as a buffer zone. We feel that if we can continue to knock back the numbers of greys we can continue to preserve reds. However, our group need help and support, especially in grey squirrel control. We can feed reds, record numbers and raise awareness, but without adequate grey squirrel control we will see the demise of red squirrels at Belvoir.