

## Tollymore Red Squirrel Group

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group was founded in March 2004 when Forest Service staff & concerned individuals established the group because of the diminishing red squirrel population in Tollymore Forest Park. The grey squirrel had arrived in Tollymore Park by the mid 1990s.

Despite recommendations from red squirrel groups in England not to feed red squirrels if greys were present, the group began a supplementary feeding programme, as there were no alternative conservation methods available. Coincidentally in 2004, a survey of all squirrels in Tollymore Forest Park was undertaken by a Masters student from QUB. This survey recorded 11 red squirrels & 24 grey squirrels within the park. In 2008 this survey was repeated by members of Tollymore Red Squirrel Group after 4 years of focused culling & supplementary feeding, the results showing a substantial increase in red squirrel numbers with 103 reds & 3 greys recorded. The 2008 survey report will be published in December 2009.

At present TRSG consists of 5 active volunteers who carry out the supplementary feeding programme managing 16 feeders throughout Tollymore Forest Park & several outlying Forests. One of these volunteers is responsible for designing, developing & refining the red squirrel feeder, which has evolved from its humble wooden beginnings in 2004 to the current galvanized metal hopper version.

Staff from Forest Service & Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT) attend red squirrel meetings to offer support, advice & practical help. Forest Service wildlife officers take responsibility for the active culling of grey squirrels within Tollymore Forest Park, with 298 grey squirrels culled since 2004. The group also have a business sponsor in Unicorn Containers who have been producing galvanised steel squirrel entrances for the feeders, & are helping develop CAD (computer aided design) diagrams of feeders, the purpose of which will be to share knowledge with other interested groups. TRSG provide advice & support to all interested parties who have been in touch with them.

TRSG run educational squirrel events in partnership with Forest Service & MHT throughout the year. The most important event being red squirrel day as part of the national red squirrel week, which has been consistently attended by approximately 400 visitors each year. The group has encouraged the take up of feeders by local schools with 2 feeders currently managed by Shimna Integrated College & Shannaghmore outdoor education centre.

What TRSG need from NIEA & the NISF:

- The All Ireland Red Squirrel SAP 2007 recommendations carried out e.g. red squirrel refuges set up & actively managed by statutory agencies & red squirrel officer(s) appointed within NI.
- To pressure local councils, (through RPA) to take on responsibility for active grey squirrel management (culling) across NI.
- To put in place codes of practice for;
  - Dealing with a squirrel pox outbreak - URGENT
  - Supplementary feeding of red squirrels
  - Culling of grey squirrels
  - Guidelines for individuals & groups setting up squirrel feeding stations & traps in gardens, private woodlands etc.

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- To establish & support red squirrel groups in areas where there are red squirrels, but where no groups currently exist (e.g. Fermanagh etc), & to provide both new & established groups with financial support for their supplementary feeding & culling programmes.
- To establish & maintain a trap loan service & best practice culling training programme.
- To work with Belfast Zoo to establish a breeding programme for reds to conserve the NI gene pool.
- To ensure the NISF meets at least 3 times a year, & that the meetings have specific actions points & person(s) responsible for those actions. Also an update on the action points at the next meeting.
- To collaborate with the ROI red squirrel forum to share best practice, experience & minimise repeated effort.

Surveys by Tangle (1999) & O'Neill and Montgomery (2003) have illustrated the rapidly diminishing population of red squirrels on this island. More recently, studies of squirrel pox antibodies prevalent in grey squirrels have shown an increase in the percentage of grey squirrels now carrying this virus. This may mean we are not far away from seeing an outbreak of pox virus amongst our Irish reds. It is imperative that NIEA take prompt action in order to prevent the extinction of the red squirrel in Northern Ireland

**TRSG is committed to the conservation of red squirrels but are limited in the area that we are able to cover. We greatly welcome this opportunity to feed into this universal approach to red squirrel conservation & will support NIEA in any way we can.**