



In January 2012 we had the disappointing news from the Lagan Valley and Belvoir RSG (Belfast) that after 3 weeks intense trapping on a transect grid no red squirrels were seen or captured. 163 greys were caught and dispatched during this exercise which was part of process to determine if there was any viable population of red squirrels remaining within the estate (it had been expected to run the exercise for a further couple of weeks however after interference from a 'concerned animal loving citizen' it was pulled on health and safety grounds. Seemingly this is no longer the case and what had the opportunity to be a talisman for the red squirrel conservation. The basic out come is that we believe that the red squirrel has been lost from this area.

April 2012 – A successful grant application by the Glens RSG & Tollymore RSG on behalf of the Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum (NISF) was won from the NIEA grant fund. This was for the purchase of 24 trail cameras and associated equipment.

Glens groups working with the Causeway coast and Glens trust have received grant aid also from NIEA to develop 'red squirrel trails' in the Glens of Antrim.

Grey Control

The NISF continues to development working relationships with BASC and SACS to assist red squirrel groups in grey control across NI.

NIEA purchased 100 squirrel traps (plus 30 from another project) for a trial trap loaning scheme – about 60% of these traps are currently active.

June 2012

The conservation of the red squirrel in Northern Ireland took further step forward with the formation of another volunteer group - The Ring of Gullion RSG operation in the south Down /Armagh border region where we have a mix of red and grey squirrels in a patchwork landscape of forestry and bog land.

The Ring of Gullion Red Squirrel group formed in the summer of 2012.

The group operates over an area of about 15300 hectares with at least five





healthy groups of red squirrel in different areas. There are populations of grey squirrel on the North East from Newry City, South in County Louth and West from the rest of South Armagh however sightings of greys within the Ring dyke have, thankfully, remained absent up until now.

The group has close ties with local landowners, businesses in the area, Newry and Mourne District Council and has a good working relationship with NI Forest Service. The Ring of Gullion website is linked below.

www.ringofgullion.org

<http://www.ringofgullion.org/Red-Squirrel-Group.aspx>

New red squirrel enclosure at Belfast Zoo!!

During May/June 2012 The Glens RSG assisted staff from Belfast Zoo to collect three red squirrels from the wild in the Glens of Antrim under NIEA licence for display with the zoo.

Belfast Zoo launched the enclosure on the 24th August 2012.

Three red squirrels were collected from the Glens of Antrim under NIEA licence with much of the hard work on the ground being carried out by the volunteers of the [Glen's Red Squirrel Group](#). The two females and a male were examined by the zoo vet and brought back to the zoo.

The squirrels currently have the run of two enclosures which are linked by two overhead runs. The enclosures are designed to be largely hidden from the public but the squirrels can be viewed through hide-like windows. This gives the squirrels an element of privacy. They are becoming more relaxed in their new environment and were regularly making appearances across the opening weekend.

While the primary purpose of the group is an educational role, it is hoped that they will breed and their offspring can be returned to the wild in Northern Ireland. The zoo would like to expand this breeding program if these initial steps prove successful.



The NISF has been working with Belfast Zoo and we get excellent coverage on the exciting new signage. The signage states the clear message that greys are bad and they lead to the decline of red with good photos of squirrel pox.



October 2012 - 'Red Squirrel Week' was run from 6th until the 14th October

There was wide range of activities right across the province aimed at families encompassing kids craft activities, natural history information and including short guided walks in woodlands which contain our shy red squirrels.

These events are run by the squirrel group volunteers with assistance from several local council' s Biodiversity Officers, the Department of Agriculture & Rural Development's Forest Service, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum (NISF).

October 2012



Too late for RS week 2012 we purchased a new red suit mascot suit for the NI RSGs use at events.



23-25 Nov Joint Red Squirrel Groups Visit to Cumbria.

5 NISF members crossed the Irish Sea in November to visit fellow squirrel savers in Cumbria where they met with members from Penrith and District Red Squirrel Group, Red Squirrel Rangers at CenterParcs at Whinfell, Red Squirrels Northern England and the Red squirrel Survival Trust - They are due to provide an account of their trip to the next NISF meeting in February.

Dec 2012 – interest in a Stormont Estate RSG – this is still in development but reds have been spotted nearby and a small population does exist in the hills above the estate however the estate is also overrun with greys.

Ash die back and P. Ramorum still giving us concerns.

NIEA dealing with frequent Assembly Questions etc

‘Queen’s research work’- NIEA commissioned Queens University to undertake an investigation into the transmission route of squirrel pox virus between animals. Using a new real-time PCR technique (published in late 2010) allows an accurate, specific quantification of prevalence. The work is only just finished and a final report is due shortly.

Key points include: the role of ectoparasites in the spread of squirrel pox is confirmed – fleas in particular seem to carry virus load.

Blood, faeces, saliva and surprising urine can contain shed virus particles; the numbers shed rises with advanced stages of the disease.



Frontier groups of grey squirrels pose a higher risk to reds as they tend to carry higher viral loads.

Plenty of questions still to answer:

Parasite id required.

More red squirrel samples required.

We hope to publish the full report in the next 2 months.

Jon Lees

14/01/13