



Pining 4 Red Squirrels?

Wilson Johnston, Volunteer, Heart of Down Red Squirrel Group

In reality, my connection with Nature has been lifelong. Having lived in the countryside and explored, as I presume all youngsters did in the 1960s, everything that nature provided it was music to my ears in Primary 7 (final year of Primary school in N Ireland) where we got to listen to 'The Little Grey Men' written by Denys Watkins Pitchford. <https://www.bbsociety.co.uk/>. Fast forward to retirement from education around 2016 and I was to be found volunteering with Ulster Wildlife for initially the [barn owl](#) and then the [red squirrel](#) projects.

I was spending a lot of time in [Montalto Estate](#), where a series of events transpired, that led to 'Redcoat' cuteness overload. Initially Gordon Wilson the owner of Montalto Estate, who clearly had an eye on the future, when the estate was to open to the public with a strapline of 'Reconnect with Nature', asked would I be interested in helping them with a bit of conservation type work. This was at a time of extensive forestry work and John-Francis, the conservation ranger who worked for Ulster Wildlife on the red squirrel project in the Mourne, was mentioned. I had attended a BASC grey squirrel control course and was working to reduce the population within the Estate Parkland, with an aim to create a habitat in which red squirrels could reappear after a twenty-year absence. John-Francis came down to help and we drove around while I explained what I was trying to achieve. Bringing a wealth of knowledge, he suggested I try a few things to remove grey squirrel from the area.

From late 2017 into early 2018 this continued and there now was a large clear area where many willing eyes and ears had signed up to spot grey squirrel movement. Then at 7am on Wednesday 16 May 2018 our first red squirrel made an appearance!

With assistance from John-Francis and Shanna, the Ulster Wildlife community engagement officer, a meeting was organised for 23 July 2018 to ascertain the support from the local community for the creation of a new red squirrel group. This would join the others working with Ulster Wildlife as part of the overall Red Squirrels United Project. Posters and online promotion ensured a great turnout and as they say, the rest is history. We settled on the name Heart of Down Red Squirrel Group and our logo of a squirrel inside a heart outline.



We ran educational events, gave talks, organised popups and applied for grants, (our local Council Newry Mourne and Down District Council have red squirrels as one of the key species in their biodiversity plan). Running alongside this we ran LANTRA grey squirrel courses with John-Francis and Shanna to ensure we had well trained and knowledgeable members ready to help expand the work into new woodlands.



The plan was and still is to expand north from the middle of County Down to meet up with the groups in [North Down](#) & Ards Peninsula and then south wards across County Down to link with the groups around Mourne / Newcastle / Castlewellan. At the same time our little red buddies grew in numbers.

Into this evolving picture arrived both [Belfast Zoo](#) and [DAERA](#), heavily involved in breeding native red squirrels from captured wild stock, while planning for the controlled

release of their offspring. We had the perfect location, clear of grey squirrels, with a small number of red squirrels in prime habitat to which we quickly added a release pen. Montalto had opened to the public on 21 September 2018, when one-week later Alyn and Raymond arrived from the Zoo to our release pen to add some new blood into the proceedings.

Post-Christmas and New Year, the hope was we would see some red squirrel kittens. Then on Wednesday 10 April 2019 at approx. 6pm, we spotted our FOUR little red fur balls.

This arrival was then backed up with other kittens in a separate woodland and our population was growing. As the summer progressed many visitors frequently saw the little reds, but as we headed for winter the numbers appeared to decline. At the same time reports of red squirrels started to come in from areas all around Ballynahinch town and it appeared that perhaps the young had gone exploring. Without any form of tracking available we can only guess at events, but in recent times the sightings have declined substantially. Potentially, and this is anecdotal, we have seen a very successful growth in the pine marten population. Could they be the cause in an area with almost zero grey squirrels and a young red squirrel population?





Now that Red Squirrels United has unfortunately run its course and there are no longer the John Francis's and Shanna's in post within Ulster Wildlife to turn to, we will have to renew our efforts to ensure we remain grey squirrel free and hopefully the red squirrels that are in and around the Mid Down / South Down areas, find their way back into the rolling Drumlins Parkland for the community to enjoy for generations to come.