

RED SQUIRREL HABITATS AT  
MONKSTOWN GOLF CLUB



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Monkstown Golf Club, outside Monkstown, County Cork, is a beautifully positioned course amongst well established trees of many species and with streams, pools and an old reservoir lake. The course is inhabited by a variety of wildlife, including Red Squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*). The Golf Course management wish to enhance the habitats to encourage more Red Squirrels as a feature around the course.

The grounds were walked with Hilary Madden, General Manager, and Martin Travers, Head Green Keeper, on 21 December 2016. The current situation with regards the existing population of Red Squirrels was assessed, and suggestions for improving the habitat for the species were considered.

## 2.0 CURRENT SITUATION

Red Squirrels are omnivorous, tree-dwelling, native rodents. They are opportunistic feeders enjoying invertebrates, fungi, herbs, leaf shoots, seeds, berries, nuts, but will even eat birds eggs and nestlings at times. Red Squirrels construct a nest of twigs lined with grass and leaves, known as a drey. The Red Squirrel breeds in spring with 4—6 young and again in summer. Adults in the wild can live from 3 to 5 years.

The area was laid out as a golf course and not specifically to cater for the needs of the local squirrels, so they find that the habitat suits them more by accident than design. Monkstown Golf Course has many mature trees producing seeds, nuts, berries, etc., all good food sources for the squirrels in season. In summer and autumn months there is Beech mast, Hazel, Chestnut, Hornbeam and Sycamore, Junipers, etc., along with the seeds in the cones of conifers like Scots Pine, Larch, Spruce, Cedars, Fir and Redwoods.

*Leylandii* and Lawson's Cypress were planted as boundary markers and wind breaks around the course and are in parts of the course being removed to allow other broad-leaved trees and conifers to have more room to grow. Some of the shelter belts are surrounding groups of Scots Pines and the seeds in the Scots Pine cones are a favourite food of Red Squirrels especially during the winter months.

No Red Squirrels were observed on the day of the site visit. The Red Squirrel has a very characteristic method of eating pine cones which results in the cone somewhat resembling an apple core. Large numbers of these cones were observed, indicating the presence of a number of Red Squirrels.

## 3.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT

Firstly, it is somewhat obvious to say, but a golf course is a golf-driven business and there is a need to consider the needs of the golfer. For example, it is important to have a clear line of sight from tee to fairway to green around the course. Planting of new trees must be undertaken with care and with knowledge regarding the full size of the tree as it matures.

Sheltered clusters of trees, especially where they enclose Scots Pine as a safe place to pass the winter months, are ideal habitats. As mentioned already, some of the existing shelter belts already surround groups of Scots Pines. In order to encourage the habitat for the red squirrels the following is recommended.

- Planting of Scots Pine in areas identified on the day of the visit. (Extreme left of 1<sup>st</sup> tee, in existing scots pine plantation between 15<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Fairways) Other areas of the course can be enhanced with new plantings. Planting more Scots Pines in groups in suitable areas would be beneficial for the future. They will take up to 20 years to be a good food source.

- Drifts of Hazel in damp spots, and Bird Cherry, Hawthorn, Whitebeam, and Crab Apple could be planted wherever a suitable spot becomes available. One area identified on the day was in the plantation behind the 16<sup>th</sup> Green.
- Squirrel nest boxes could also be installed in suitable locations around the course. The ecology supply company NHBS (nhbs.com) sells a range of Squirrel boxes and feeders. Alternatively, we can supply designs for these items if you have workshop facilities to construct these on-site.
- It was suggested that maybe a club member with an interest in this area might take charge of the feeders.

Within these safe zones feeders should be introduced to supplement the natural production of local foods. Feeders can be stocked with nuts, dried fruit, seeds, etc. Sunflower seeds and peanuts are ideal. The installation of feeders will boost the Squirrels diet during winter months when they are most in need. A large proportion of the young die during these cold periods mainly because of inadequate food supply.

If it proves necessary to thin out the trees for the maintenance of optimum conditions for golf, or for the management of the trees, then this must be done with care. If there are signs of Squirrel activity in the trees, then ideally they should not be touched (for example, if there are eaten pine cones on the ground or dreys in the trees). If it is absolutely necessary to remove a tree (or part of a tree), ensure that there are no dreys present. Please contact me if you would like advice on this aspect of course management.