



Mammals in a Sustainable Environment



Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council Comhairle Contae Dhún Laoghaire-Ráth an Dúin

South Dublin Mammal Workshop

Contact: Andrew Harrington, Waterford County Council, aharrington@waterfordcoco.ie

On Saturday the 3rd of March 2012, the MISE Project held a joint event with Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council at Marley House in south County Dublin. The event was attended by twenty wildlife enthusiasts, mainly from the local area and including several members of the Dublin branch of the Irish Wildlife Trust. The mammal workshop was broadly based on mammals that are of conservation concern in Ireland, and Dublin in particular. The day began with a series of talks in Marley House, with an introduction by Mary Toomey, Heritage Officer for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.



Volunteers examining otter footprints along a stream in Marley Park, south County Dublin.



SOUTHERN & EASTERN Regional Assembly Promoting Our Region



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The talks began with an introduction to red and grey squirrel ecology by Andrew Harrington, recognising squirrel field signs (e.g. feeding remains) and a description of methods used to survey for the presence of squirrels and monitoring their population, such as hair tubes for the collection of fur. This was followed by two further talks on squirrels in the Dublin area by researchers working on their distribution. Red squirrels are currently declining in the city and county of Dublin, mainly due to the growth and spread of the grey squirrel population there since the 1970s. Red squirrels are now for the most part limited to Howth Head, Killiney Hill and the Dublin Mountains (and their foothills). DLR County Council are also running a squirrel conservation project and are collecting sightings of red and grey squirrels in the area as part of this (for further information see www.dlrcoco.ie/parks/redsquirrel.html).

Geoff Hamilton described his survey work in the conifer woods in the hills of south Co. Dublin in an effort to identify a suitable area as a stronghold for red squirrels there in the face of the continuing expansion of grey squirrels. He also talked about the recently identified outbreak of squirrel pox virus (SQPV), which was found in the Republic of Ireland for the first time in Counties Wicklow and Dublin in the winter of 2011 and has the potential to seriously damage the red squirrel population in both areas. He emphasised the need to report any sightings of red squirrels that appear to be infected by the disease to the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the local Heritage Officer.

Will Carr of UCD completed the picture of squirrel distribution in Dublin with a talk on his survey work in the urban areas of Dublin. Over the past number of decades, the spread of grey squirrels have led to the almost complete disappearance red squirrels from nearly all urban areas and parks in Dublin. The only exceptions are the remnant populations of red squirrels left on Howth Head and Killiney Hill (in north and south Dublin, respectively), which are partially protected by the control of surrounding grey squirrel populations.



Peter Turner of Waterford Institute of Technology giving a talk on pine martens at Marley House

Peter Turner of Waterford Institute of Technology spoke about his work on one of Ireland's rarest mammals, the pine marten, which is currently expanding after a historical low in numbers due to persecution. Geoff Hamilton also gave a short talk on otters, one of Ireland's more common carnivores, but which is apparently experiencing a decline in numbers in the past twenty years. All of the talks gave an overview of monitoring methods for these mammals with a view to helping volunteers to become involved in surveying for squirrels, pine martens and otters. Volunteers were also provided with short guides to identifying mammal field signs for surveys.



Geoff Hamilton and Will Carr talking about squirrel field signs and monitoring at Kilmashogue Wood, Co. Dublin

The morning seminar was followed by an afternoon field session, which began with a walk through the more wooded sections of Marley Park. Along the streams and ponds on the eastern side of the park (which join the River Dodder downstream), particularly under the foot bridges for walkers, signs of otters were prominent and relatively abundant in several places. Signs found mainly included spraints (droppings) and footprints in sandy or muddy areas. Many of the spraints appeared to contain frog bones, giving some indication of what the otters in the park were eating- frogs are known to be a common food item for otters at spawning time in the spring.



Squirrel feeding signs at Kilmashogue Wood- stripped spruce cones at the base of a tree

We later travelled to Kilmashogue Wood, which is a section of conifer woodland in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains a short distance from Marley Park. Here Geoff Hamilton displayed some of the squirrel hair tubes he used to monitor the population of red squirrels in the area, but he emphasised that with the risk of transmission of SQPV these tubes should be used with care and be regularly disinfected. We found extensive signs of squirrel presence, mostly stripped pine cones that the squirrel had fed on, but one possible drey (squirrel nest) was found. Peter Turner described how to use pine marten scats as a way of monitoring their populations as has been done in Co. Waterford, but unfortunately we were unable to find any in this area! However, this is unsurprising as very pine martens have been recorded in Dublin for several decades, although pine martens are present and increasing in numbers in Wicklow and parts of the midlands and may spread from there. Overall, the day was very successful and enjoyable and we hope that this workshop will encourage volunteers in Dublin to participate in future wild mammal surveys!