

Not for the first time the native red squirrel is making a comeback in the midlands, following what COFORD described as a local extinction in Westmeath and Meath in 2007. They similarly suffered in the 17th century, when loss of forest habitat almost led to a complete extinction. Red Squirrel's more recent difficulty however is due to the arrival of the grey squirrel, its bigger, American cousin, introduced in 1911 in Co. Longford and outcompeting the red almost everywhere since then. Feeding mainly on tree seeds, reds are completely dependent on woodland habitats, and Ireland has the second smallest level of forest cover of all European countries. So while the grey squirrel undoubtedly has a lot to answer for, we have probably not done a great deal to help their plight.

Ireland was once covered by extensive native forests which were lost to exploitation for wood and fuel and clearance for agriculture. Despite attempts from successive governments from as far back as the 17th century, this unsustainable use of the Irish forestry resource has proved difficult to reverse. And while national forest cover has increased from 1% to 10% of total land area in the last 100 years, we still fall well short of our own targets for national afforestation. The benefits of Ireland's forest cover are diverse, extending beyond basic timber production to include biodiversity, wildlife conservation, environmental protection, rural development, carbon sequestration, amenity and recreation, employment and tourism.

Last year the Mammal Ecology Group from NUIG confirmed the recovery of red squirrel in a study into the population crash of the invasive grey squirrel in the midlands, the first of its kind documented for an established grey squirrel population, occurring naturally, without human intervention. The group was able to link the demise of the invasive grey to the success of pine marten in the midlands region, presumably allowing the natural re-colonisation of these areas by red squirrel.

Native pine marten also suffered much local extinction, for reasons such as loss of forest habitat, hunting for fur, and poisoning and persecution as a potential livestock predator. Once a common species throughout Ireland, for the last century they survived only in a few isolated, mainly western, populations. Accordingly they are now protected nationally under the Wildlife Acts 1976-2012 and under the EU Habitats Directive.

Find out more about pine marten, red squirrel and our other native mammals on the Vincent Wildlife Trust's webpage @ <http://www.mammals-in-ireland.ie>. They also provide a handy guide in their resource section on how to exclude pine marten from game and poultry pens.