

04/09/2026

To whom it may concern,

I am writing in relation to the proposed removal of coniferous trees within Merlin Woods and the potential retention of a section of standing conifer habitat.

As part of my doctoral research at the University of Galway, I studied the distribution, habitat use and connectivity of Eurasian red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*) across Galway City, including detailed field surveys within Merlin Woods. This research demonstrated that Merlin Woods is of crucial importance for the persistence of red squirrels within Galway City.

My research found that Galway City's established red squirrel populations are restricted to woodland east of the River Corrib with Merlin Woods representing one of only two principal population centres in the city. The other, at Menlo Woods, supports a small but persistent population, estimated at approximately 10–15 individuals in 2024. No established populations were identified in the urban woodlands surveyed west of the Corrib or closer to the city centre.

Additionally, red squirrels recorded in smaller woodland fragments and gardens surrounding Merlin Woods are likely to originate from the population within the woodland. Merlin therefore provides core habitat for red squirrels using the wider eastern Galway City area, making the maintenance of habitat quality and connectivity within the woodland particularly important.

My study found that within Merlin Woods, red squirrels used all woodland types but were most frequently detected in conifer-dominated habitat, with 57.5% of hair tubes recording presence, compared with 34.45% in broadleaf and 25% in mixed woodland. This highlights the importance of the conifer in providing food, shelter and canopy connectivity. The frequent use of baited hair tubes also suggests that these areas could be suitable for a carefully managed supplementary feeding program, particularly during winter, to help offset the loss of food resources following conifer removal.

While I fully recognise the need to consider tree safety and welcome the proposed replanting with native species, from a red squirrel conservation perspective, retaining viable sections of the existing conifer canopy wherever possible would help support the population through this transition. This would maintain some food resources, shelter and canopy connectivity while the newly planted woodland becomes established.

Given the particular importance of Merlin Woods to Galway City's red squirrel population, I would also support an appropriately designed and professionally managed supplementary feeding program during this transition. Such feeding should complement, rather than replace, efforts to retain suitable existing habitat and should be appropriately maintained and monitored.

Merlin Woods represents one of very few remaining strongholds for red squirrels within Galway City and plays an important role in supporting their occurrence in the surrounding urban landscape. For this reason, I would strongly encourage the retention of as much suitable existing habitat and canopy connectivity as can safely and practicably be achieved during the proposed works.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emma Roberts". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Dr Emma Roberts

PhD Zoology, University of Galway

Project Lead, Galway Squirrel Project (2020–2022)

Project Lead, Urban Squirrel Survey (2022–2023)