

## Squirrel Tales

By Susan Camp

On fall mornings, I love to watch the feisty gray squirrels scampering up and down trees and running along the split rail fence, often carrying nuts or acorns in their mouths. Soft and furry, with bushy tails and cheeky faces, they almost defy you to get too close. Our current, personal house squirrel, Peanut, will hop up and run along the back-porch railing, taunting the cats staring at him through the storm door. He expects a peanut for his cuteness, then flips his tail and runs away.

Bird lovers are frustrated by the gray squirrel's ingenuity at dismantling bird feeders, and will try any device or build any contraption to deter a pesky critter. The squirrel wins every time. A few years ago, we found that one had chewed through the bottom of our potting shed door and a plastic garbage can lid to steal sunflower seeds. Gardeners discover newly planted flowers and bulbs dug up or "replanted" in undesired sites.

Eastern gray squirrels are members of the Rodent family. They range from southeastern Canada to Florida, west into Texas, and north to southern Manitoba. Their gray color is caused by a blend of black, brown, and white fur. Some squirrels are black, blond, or white, but they all belong to the same species, (*Sciurus carolinensis*).

Female and male squirrels are 15-20 inches long and weigh about 1 ½ pounds at maturity. The big, bushy tails provide balance, warmth, protection, and communication. Squirrels are fast and agile, can reach a running speed of 17 miles per hour, and run down a tree headfirst. They rarely fall.

Their native habitat is mixed hardwood forest, but they also are found in suburban and urban settings. Oak, beech, hickory, and walnut trees provide the acorns and nuts that make up most of their diet. They also consume pine nuts and dogwood, black cherry, tulip poplar, and maple buds. Insects, bird eggs, young birds, and small amphibians supplement their diet when their primary food is scarce. And, of course, they eat birdseed.

Finding food is their primary mission in life. The squirrel who puts on enough fat during the warm months and "squirrels" away food for the winter is the one that will survive. Squirrels are "scatter hoarders." They bury food in random spots within their 5-acre territories. They sniff out the burying sites with their keen sense of smell and are important contributors to reforestation because the seeds and nuts they leave behind will sprout into new trees.

Gray squirrels build two types of nests, called dreys. The summer nest is a treehouse, an intricate construction of leaves and twigs, at least 20 feet above the ground. The winter nest is built in a tree cavity, often an old woodpecker nest. The squirrels line their winter nests with moss and bark. They do not hibernate and will venture out on sunny days to gather food.

Squirrels mate twice a year, and females produce two litters annually in the spring and fall. If you have ever seen squirrels chasing each other up and down trees, jumping from branch to

branch, you have observed their crazy mating ritual of several males chasing one female. Two to six small, blind, and hairless babies are born in each litter. They remain with their mothers for about 10 weeks. Most do not survive their first year. The average lifespan of a gray squirrel is about 3 to 8 years.

Many are hit by cars. Major predators include hawks, owls, red foxes, snakes, and raccoons. Squirrels vocalize with barks, trills, purrs, and squeaks, and will loudly warn other squirrels if predators are nearby.

Whether you find squirrels entertaining, with their acrobatic antics and endearing behaviors, or you become frustrated with the damage they wreak, you have to admit they are clever and curious with sharp senses of sight and hearing. You might as well enjoy them, because there is no such thing as a squirrel-proof bird feeder.

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