



Eastern Gray Squirrel

Sciurus carolinensis

Eastern Gray Squirrels are common throughout Long Island. While many people enjoy watching their antics around a backyard birdfeeder, others find them troublesome when they invade a garage or attic. Each year, many young squirrels are brought to wildlife rehabilitators. Although some are in need of help, others are mistaken for orphans though their parents are nearby.

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Natural History

The bushy-tailed gray squirrel is a highly adaptable and common resident of urban and suburban areas. Its pelage (fur) is gray interspersed with rust, its underside is a creamy white. The gray squirrel also occurs in a black (melanistic) phase.

Breeding activity begins in late January produc-

ing the first litters as early as March. A second litter, and sometimes a third, may follow in the summer or early fall. Females born in early spring can breed before their first winter, resulting in autumn litters.

Early spring litters are born in tree cavities, which provide protection from the elements. Later litters are born in large round leaf nests made of woven leaves and twigs in the fork of a tree trunk or on a limb. Leaf nests are lined with shredded bark, moss, or grass, and may be used for more than one season. Litter size can range from one to nine depending on availability of food.



Natural History, Continued...

Newborn squirrels feed on mother's milk for at least six weeks before weaning to solid foods. Spring foods include buds and catkins (flowers) of elms, oaks, and maple, and the inner bark and sap of maples. In early summer, maple and elm seeds are eaten. In late summer, seeds and fruits such as wild grapes, blueberries, wild cherries, and mushrooms are taken. The squirrels' natural diet may also include insects. In fall and winter, nuts and seeds are the main food.



Squirrels store nuts for the winter by burying them beneath leaf litter on the forest floor or hiding them in the crotches of trees. In winter, squirrels locate buried nuts by using their keen sense of smell.

Squirrels are quick and agile tree climbers and can leap eight feet or more from limb to limb. Agility is useful in escaping predators such as owls, hawks, foxes, cats, and snakes. Young squirrels in the nest must depend on their mother's protection from nest raiders such as opossums and raccoons.

The average life span of a gray squirrel is two to three years. In areas where food and shelter are adequate, gray squirrels can live up to ten years. Woodlands with a wide variety of nut-producing trees are prime habitats for squirrels.

Squirrels play a vital ecological role in the natural world. The activity of burying nuts and seeds serves as a source for future forests, as unused seeds grow into trees.

Squirrels are generally clean animals, grooming themselves and maintaining clean nests. However, they are susceptible to the internal parasites of warm-blooded animals such as roundworms, tapeworms, and hookworms. External parasites such as mites, fleas, ticks, and lice also affect squirrels. The most common serious disease that affects squirrels is sarcoptic mange, caused by the mange mite. It results in the loss of fur and in most cases eventual death of the squirrel. Squirrels are also susceptible to fibromatosis, a viral infection that causes open sores on the skin.

Like many rodents, squirrels are a prey species. Young and weak squirrels are taken by raccoons, opossums, foxes, hawks, and owls. Squirrels also provide aesthetic enjoyment for human homeowners and park visitors with their antics. They may also be a source of frustration for homeowners. As their habitats are destroyed, they often seek entry into human homes to build their nests. Capping chimneys and sealing openings through eaves into attics can prevent entry.

Legalities

In New York State, wild mammals are protected by Environmental Conservation law (article 11, title 5, section 11-0511). It is illegal to keep a wild squirrel in captivity as a pet without the proper state and/or federal permitting. If you have been caring for an orphaned squirrel and need to return it to the wild, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator for assistance. In the event a squirrel must be trapped and removed from a homeowner's property, we recommended hiring a licensed, insured, and humane wildlife control professional to remove the animals and prevent future problems.

Assisting Young Squirrels

Infant squirrels found on their own are not necessarily orphaned. In many cases, a strong wind or rain storm weakens or destroys their nest, and the young squirrels fall to the ground. Other times, a tree or branch is cut down and its inhabitants are displaced. In both cases, a mother squirrel will usually retrieve her young if she is given the opportunity.

When a litter or single infant squirrel is encountered, the young should be left in a protected area for the mother to retrieve. A shallow box placed on a low branch of a nearby tree is an excellent place to leave them while waiting for the mother to return. If she does not return before dark, the young can be taken in for the night and kept warm. The next morning they should be returned to the place where they were found. To offer protection from flies, a lightweight piece of screen may be placed over the box. If the mother has not retrieved her young by the end of the second day, and adult squirrels have not been seen, the young may indeed be orphaned.

It is important to realize that if a squirrel cannot be reunited with its parents after appropriate attempts, efforts should be made to turn the animal over to a licensed rehabilitator for care. Rehabilitators are trained to care for young wildlife in a manner that is best for the animal's future survival in the wild. Licensed rehabilitators are able to provide a proper diet and housing, and can often place young squirrels in the company of others of their age. All of these factors are essential for survival and are best provided by the animal's own parents. Therefore, in all cases, give the mother a chance to retrieve and care for her own young. Don't be a kidnapper! If you have found a young squirrel that you suspect is orphaned, contact our wildlife advisory hotline at (631) 423-0982, or email us at wildlifeadvisory@gmail.com.

Orphaned squirrels should be kept warm in a small cardboard box lined with newspaper and soft ravel-free cloth. The box should be placed in a quiet, draft-free area away from children, pets, and household noises. A heating pad on a low setting placed underneath half of the box will keep the young animal warm.

Please do not attempt to offer food or drink to an orphaned squirrel before seeking help from a rehabilitator. Cow's milk is not an appropriate source of nutrition, and there is a significant risk of a young squirrel aspirating (inhaling) liquid, potentially leading to respiratory infection or death.



Squirrels are born furless, with their eyes sealed shut.



Gradually, teeth and fur grow in, but the eyes remain closed for several weeks.



Once their eyes open, a young squirrel is capable of nibbling on solid foods, but will remain with its mother and siblings for several more weeks.

Photo Credit: Susan Saliga

Quick Facts

A squirrel's natural diet varies as the seasons change and includes everything from nuts and seeds to tree bark, buds, fruit, and insects.

Squirrels typically have a litter of 3-4 babies each spring, and additional litters may be born in the fall as well.

Seeds and nuts that are buried by squirrels and then forgotten lead to the growth of new trees and other plants.

Young squirrels that appear to be orphaned will often be retrieved by their mother if they are left alone, and they may simply be watched from a safe distance. A mother's instinct to care for her young is very strong, and babies will typically be taken back by the mother even if the nest is destroyed.

A squirrel's agility in leaping and climbing helps to keep them safe from predators such as hawks, foxes, and feral cats.



About Volunteers for Wildlife

Volunteers For Wildlife is a non-profit, volunteer organization, founded in 1982 and dedicated to preserving Long Island, New York's wildlife and natural habitats. We operate a Wildlife Hospital and Education Center at Caumsett State Historic Park in Huntington, NY. We accept and rehabilitate sick, injured, and displaced young wildlife.

Our Wildlife Advisory telephone and email services assist the general public in need of information and help with distressed wild animals. Last year, we received over 3,000 requests for help.

We have wildlife education programs for Long Island schoolchildren and adults. The participation of our permanently non-releasable birds, animals, and reptiles make these programs an exciting way to learn about Long Island's wildlife.

Volunteers for Wildlife has members all over Long Island and the New York area. We have a network of cooperating veterinarians, who provide initial emergency care to injured and displaced wildlife, and independent licensed wildlife rehabilitators throughout the New York area.

For more information on our organization and contributing your time or making a donation to our cause, visit our website: www.volunteersforwildlife.org.

Many Gray Squirrels are brought to our hospital as orphans, others are injured after being hit by a car or caught by a dog or cat. The average cost of care for a squirrel is \$45, and many are left without a donation to support our efforts. You can contribute to the care of any animal in our hospital through our "Help Our Wildlife" program, and animal sponsorships make a great gift! For more information, visit our website or call us at (631) 423-0982.