

TREE SQUIRRELS OF BEVERLY SHORES

BY: TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP

Of the 37 species of mammals reported in the Indiana Dunes (from “Mammals of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore” from 1994), 4 of these species are tree squirrels (one of these 4 species is the rarely seen and nocturnal flying squirrel). If you are surprised that there are 3 different species of squirrels active in town during the daylight hours, it is because of the dominance of the gray squirrel. You need to look a little closer to locate and recognize the difference between the three species. The largest squirrel, the fox squirrel, and the smallest squirrel, the red squirrel, are also here but less often seen.

All three of these squirrels not only scale tree trunks (and bird feeder poles) with ease, but all take cover in either tree cavities or nests formed in forks of trees made of clusters of leaves and twigs. This is why they are called “tree squirrels.”

The fox squirrel, from head to tip of tail, can measure over 25 inches. This large squirrel’s bushy tail with yellow-tipped hairs and its yellow to orange belly give it a distinctive appearance. The red squirrel measures only 11 to 14 inches from its head to the tip of its tail and has reddish brown fur with white underparts. The most commonly seen gray squirrel can get up to 20 inches long from head to tail tip but its fur is mostly grayish with some yellow touches. In the winter, the fur on the back of the gray squirrel’s ears is white while in the summer the tail has a white fur border. This squirrel also occasionally



Fox Squirrel



Gray Squirrel

appears with black fur which is referred to as melanism or as a black “morph.”

You may think that our tree squirrels are vegans. Though they mostly eat nuts, fruits, twigs, seed, buds, fungus, etc., they are also known to eat insects, small mammals, bird eggs and even nestlings. In addition, when available, red squirrels especially like cones from conifers.

The gray and fox squirrels store food in what are called “scatter caches.” This means they may bury several or even just one nut or acorn in multiple locations in the ground near their territory (or in

your favorite outdoor flowerpot) for retrieval later. Sometimes these caches are forgotten. A common sight in our forests are oak trees growing in such a tight cluster that they appear to have multiple trunks. This is the result of a forgotten gray or fox squirrel’s cache of several acorns.

Red squirrels keep “middens” or “larders” which are larger caches of food. You might locate a great pile of acorns, conifer cones or even mushrooms often at the base of a tree (or in less convenient places like attics, gutters or even under the hood of a parked car), which the red squirrels will rely on during leaner seasons. If you have a cone-bearing conifer near your house, you may have observed red squirrels eating cones or seen piles of pinecones beneath the tree.

If you didn’t realize that there were three tree squirrel species active in the daylight hours in addition to the southern flying squirrel (which is not rare, only difficult to see), remember that these animals are just a fraction of the unseen or unrecognized wildlife and plants that reside in the dunes and Beverly Shores with whom we are so fortunate to live amongst.

Look at our web site at www.bserg.org for information on wildlife, native plants and non-native, invasive plants. As always, the Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you and make

suggestions for native replacements. Don’t hesitate to contact Terry Bonace (tbonace@gmail.com) or Candice Smith (candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com) if you have questions.



Red Squirrel
