

Squirrel Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

Squirrels are mammals in the family Rodentia (rodents) and are commonly separated into two main types: tree squirrels and ground squirrels. This fact sheet contains information on tree squirrels native to Georgia. It would be hard to find anyone in Georgia who is not at least somewhat familiar with squirrels. Indeed squirrels are one of the most common and recognizable kinds of wildlife found in Georgia.

DESCRIPTION AND DISTRIBUTION

The gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is the most common species in Georgia. It is found statewide in both rural and urban areas. Gray squirrel adult weights range from 12 ounces to one and a half pounds. Though there is some color variation among gray squirrels, most are very similar in appearance. The slightly larger and more variably colored fox squirrel (*S. niger*) is also found statewide, but is less common, more habitat specific, and has more of a sporadic, patchy distribution. Adult fox squirrels range in weight from one pound to nearly three pounds. Their pelage (hair) is extremely variable, ranging from pure black to pure blond with all sorts of intermediate color schemes. Red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) are only found in the higher elevations of northeast Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountain province. They are smaller than both fox and gray squirrels. This fact sheet focuses on gray and fox squirrels.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS & FEEDING HABITS

Both gray and fox squirrels are associated with wooded habitats. Although they are often found together in the same area (sympatric), there are some differences in their preferred habitats.

In rural Georgia, gray squirrels are most numerous in mature upland and bottomland hardwood forests. These forested areas usually contain a diversity of oaks and hickories (hardwoods). Though mostly associated with hardwood forests, gray squirrels can also be found in mixed pine/hardwood forests, especially where availability of pure hardwood stands is lacking. In developed areas gray squirrels can be found in parks and neighborhoods. Gray squirrel densities can be quite high in urban and suburban areas.

Fox squirrels in Georgia tend to be most closely associated with mature pine and mixed pine/hardwood habitats. Extensive mature Piedmont and Coastal Plain pine stands with open understories and herbaceous ground cover seem to be especially dominated by fox squirrels with little or no occurrence of gray squirrels.

Oak acorns and hickory nuts provide the most nutritious food for gray squirrels, and they will also eat the flowers of these trees in the spring. Gray squirrels eat a variety of other foods including buds and flowers of other trees, dogwood fruit, mulberries, blackgum fruit, grasses and various forbs.

Fox squirrels will eat many of the same foods as gray squirrels, including acorns and nuts of those oaks and hickories often found scattered in upland pine habitats. Pine seeds are a major fox squirrel food item and they will consume various other foods such

as buds and fruits of other trees and fungi. A small portion of both gray and fox squirrel diets is comprised of animal matter such as insects and other arthropods and small vertebrates.

REPRODUCTION & MORTALITY

Both gray and fox squirrels will use leaf nests and cavity nests. The use of cavity nests is probably dependent upon availability. Many mature oaks have cavities in the bole or limbs of the tree that provide protective cover for nesting. Fox squirrels tend to use more leaf nests than gray squirrels.

There are two separate peaks of breeding activities in both gray and fox squirrels in Georgia. The first breeding time is in late winter and the second occurs in late summer. Not all females will raise two broods a year, however. The ability to conceive and raise two broods appears highly dependent on adequate food resources.

About two or three young are born in each litter. The female rears the young squirrels. They are born blind and helpless. They develop rapidly, however, and are weaned around 8-10 weeks of age for gray squirrels and 8-12 weeks for fox squirrels.

Both gray and fox squirrels have been known to reach ten years of age in the wild, but the vast majority of them probably only live a couple of years. Though not thought a major mortality factor, predation by snakes, raptors and mammals such as foxes and bobcats causes some mortality. Many different parasites and diseases also can lower squirrel survival.

MANAGEMENT AND NUISANCE CONTROL

Squirrels are game animals with a defined hunting season and daily bag limit. In terms of number of hunters and harvest, squirrels are the number two small game species in Georgia behind doves. During the 2002-2003 hunting season, 65,000 hunters harvested 803,000 squirrels. Squirrel hunting, especially with squirrel dogs such as feists and curs, is a great way to introduce a youngster to the sport of hunting.

In some situations squirrels can become a nuisance. They are notorious for robbing bird feeders. They also get into houses, especially attics. Trapping or shooting is an effective nuisance management strategy. Contact a Wildlife Resources Division Game Management office to see if a permit is required. Many times habitat modification such as trimming tree limbs away from houses and "squirrel proofing" bird feeders is all that is needed to prevent nuisance situations.