

Living with Wildlife – Eastern Grey Squirrel

By Donna DuBreuil, President

Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre – www.wildlifeinfo.ca

Squirrels, those amazing acrobats that leap from branch to branch with such ease, come in several different species in this region.

The most frequently seen is the Eastern Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*). The name sometimes causes confusion as there can be different colour variations, including grey, black or dark brown with golden highlights, even in the same litter.

The black phase is often the dominant colour here while further south you see more greys. It is speculated the gene responsible for the black colouration has some cold-weather adaptation associated with it. We too observed that black juveniles being cared for at the Centre were more 'highly-wired', displaying perhaps the extra energy needed for a winter climate.

The large bushy tail serves many purposes – as a weather protector during winter, as a rudder when leaping from high places and, observing the intensive tail twitching, as a signal to other squirrels. The tail is also used to distract a pursuing predator as the fine tail bones break off easily, allowing it to escape and explaining why we sometimes see squirrels with partial tails.

They are arboreal or live in trees and build large leaf nests known as dreys. They are diurnal or active during the day. In spring, they feed on the buds of trees and fresh leaves. During the summer, the diet consists of winged seeds of maple and elm seeds along with a wide variety of berries and other wild fruits. In autumn, they bury hundreds of hard nuts such as acorns, hickory nuts, walnuts, beechnuts and pine seeds for winter.

Contrary to popular myth, squirrels do not find buried nuts by memory but by their highly developed sense of smell. It is speculated that they find 80% of the nuts they bury. The remaining nuts often germinate to grow into new trees. In this way, they contribute substantially to reforestation.

The eastern grey squirrel has two breeding seasons each year with the first litter born between March and May and the second between July and August. The newborn are naked and blind and weigh as little as 15 grams, explaining why the female often seeks temporary shelter in soffits and attics to protect her young from predators.

It is thus very important to be patient with wildlife that may have taken up residence on your property. Check www.wildlifeinfo.ca for more information.

Next week we will tell you more about the other two species of squirrels, the American Red Squirrel and the Flying Squirrel, that live in this area.