



Branching Out

Autumn 2017

Autumn walks in Huron Woods afford residents and visitors an opportunity to observe nature at its colourful best and to observe flora and fauna preparing for the winter to come. Squirrels busily collect acorns, some to bury and others to consume right away, for not all acorns are the same. Acorns from white oak, pictured below left, have no tannins and send out roots soon after dropping to ground. They are consumed by squirrels and deer in the fall because they do not last the winter without sprouting. Acorns from red oak (below right) however contain bitter tannins. Squirrels and blue jays, bury these for later consumption.. Burial in earth diminishes tannins' bitter taste, so red oak acorns are much tastier in spring.. If forgotten and left in the ground, they sprout into seedlings. So squirrels inadvertently become one of nature's best tree planters.



SQUIRRELS OF SOUTHERN ONTARIO

Eastern Grey squirrels are the same species as Black squirrels with genetic differences causing the variations in colour. They are scatter hoarders burying nuts in a widespread area. Red squirrels, chipmunks and flying squirrels, on the other hand, are omnivores, eating seeds, fruits, insects, carrion, mushrooms and birds' eggs. They are cache hoarders concentrating cones and seeds in the base of hollow trees and tunnels. The nests of the Eastern Grey squirrel are made of leaves compacted high in the branches of deciduous trees while those of the Red Squirrels are balls of grasses often created in evergreen trees. In our Oak Savanna forest, red squirrels, are noticeably absent.

Flying Squirrels are really gliders using their flat tails to stabilize flights and to brake. Steering is accomplished by adjusting tautness of the patagium, controlled by a small wrist bone. These rodents are omnivores and cache hoarders, eating seeds, fruit, nuts, carrion, birds' eggs and mushrooms. Flying Squirrels create nests lined with leaves, moss, bark, pine needles feather or fur, in holes in mature trees sometimes those created by wood- peckers. They avoid areas of forest recently harvested. They have two litters a year and are predated by owls, hawks, snakes and foxes. Large eyes endow these nocturnal rodents with excellent night vision.

Since spruce are **not native** to which prefer evergreen forests,



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Flying Squirrels 005



Grey squirrels nest in forks of deciduous trees, making several nests for sleeping and protection in winter.



The White Squirrels in Exeter are famous. The colour results from a dominant gene not a recessive one. These are not albinos. Their eyes are dark whereas albinos have red eyes. McNaughton Park in Exeter is a prime sighting area.

Vocalizations

Vocal signals are a major component of squirrel communication; they fall into four main categories: **nesting, mating, aggressive, and warning calls**. Baby squirrels use small cries to call for their mothers, and a male squirrel chasing a female during mating season will use a series of calls that sound like sneezes to get her attention. A severely frightened squirrel will let out a small, shrill scream, while squirrels under threat may warn each other with a number of sounds that vary depending on the present danger or intrusion in their territory.

Tails

Squirrels are distinguishable from other rodents by their large, fluffy tails, which serve a number of purposes, from **temperature regulation** to visual **distraction** when facing predators. On very cold days, a squirrel will wrap his tail around his neck, like a woolly scarf. A ground squirrel, confronted by a rattlesnake, will wave his tail back and forth in an effort to intimidate or confuse the snake by creating the illusion of a bigger body mass through rapid tail movements. A squirrel may also rapidly shake his tail when **upset or frightened**. Observers of wily, determined squirrels, walking tight wires to access bird seed, are aware of the squirrel's gymnastic prowess and the part played by the tail in maintaining **balance**. When jumping from one tree to another, the squirrel quickly moves to the opposite side of the trunk, just in case a predator was watching and anticipating a squirrel snack. Preyed on by a host of predators, from **hawks and owls** to **foxes, weasels and snakes**, a squirrel's lifespan is short – in the city, cars and cats are the dominant threats. One study showed that only 25 percent of **grey squirrels** lived past one year of age; their average lifespan is a mere five months.

Body Language

In addition to shaking and waving his tail, a squirrel uses body language to convey his state of emotion. An erect or relaxed posture is an indication of alertness; foot-stomping accompanying tail-thrashing is indicative of facing down an enemy. Tail motions allow silent communication whereas vocal warnings may attract predators.

Scents Much like dogs, squirrels use scent to mark their territory and leave clues for other squirrels who may wander by. They deposit scents by rubbing cheeks or scent glands on trees, usually after gnawing on the bark or on exposed roots. The scents that squirrels leave behind can indicate territory boundaries, stress levels, social hierarchies within the territory and reproductive availability.

Branching Out is produced by Habitat Stewardship Group of Huron Woods. Sharon Callan, editor

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