

NATURE DETECTIVES



Funny Fox Squirrels: Two Pounds of Mischief

Bam, bam, bam! A fox squirrel was slamming its back against the bottom of the bird feeder.

The feeder was encircled with wire in an attempt to exclude hungry squirrels. Yet at each thump, a bit of seed tumbled to the ground, reward for the squirrel's problem-solving skills.

How can a rodent with a brain 4x smaller than a house cat's be so smart? Watching squirrels is watching thinking in action.

The fox squirrel shares reddish fur and fluffy tail with its namesake, the red fox, but this twenty-inch rodent also shares a reputation for out-smarting or out-foxing people in its quest for food and shelter. Whether they are hanging by their back toes or making death-defying leaps, fox squirrels can be funny and entertaining to watch.

Pull Out and Save

And, the Rest is History...



Despite their reputation for being a nuisance in yard and garden, not everyone dislikes fox squirrels. Some people who lived in this area in the early 1900's missed seeing these clever tree squirrels that were common in the Eastern U.S. but absent from the plains grasslands and west. So a few people brought fox squirrels from "back home" and the squirrels thrived.

If you have a pesky squirrel trying to invade your attic or nibbling your garden, don't carry a grudge against those historic squirrel re-locators. As human settlements controlled flooding and fire, more trees grew along rivers and streams, slowly forming a trail of new, wooded habitat from the east coast to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Fox squirrels simply followed the tree path westward. And as towns spread, people planted gardens and a variety of trees in their yards and city parks. Soon fox squirrels were scampering through the branches.

Tree Top Acrobat

Fox squirrels are fit for a life around trees. They can dash among the branches and scramble up and down the trunks with agility. Trees give them safety from predators and shelter from all weather.

Squirrel feet are key to their speed in the trees. They have four long toes on each front foot and five long toes on each back foot. At the ends of the toes are long curved claws. Their front paws can grab and hold things much like our hands can grasp. Their back paws can turn almost backwards to grip when they climb down headfirst or hang by their back toes to reach a tempting treat.

Escaping Danger

The first defense for a fox squirrel is to freeze. Motionless, it assesses the danger. It might flick its tail a few times in warning. If the danger is real, it's time to flee to the trees. A squirrel might give alarm barks from a high perch. It might hide, flattened against a trunk or branch or inside its nest.



Fox squirrels have big eyes that look almost as big as their ears. They see well even in dim light.

Eye placement is a big help when it comes to seeing danger approaching. Because their eyes are on the sides of their heads, fox squirrels can see a wide view from in front of their bodies to almost totally behind them.

Survival Tools

Like all rodents, fox squirrels have front teeth built for gnawing and powered by strong jaw muscles. They can use their teeth to nibble delicately on a seed, or they can chisel their way into hollow trees to make their homes.

Rotten trees are scarce so some squirrels gnaw their way into attics to find lodging.

Squirrel tails are more than stylish accessories. Held overhead, a tail is an umbrella or a sunshade. It is a fluffy blanket in cold weather. In a leap, a tail helps the squirrel balance, and in a fall it can function a bit like a parachute. And for communication between squirrels, tails are sign-language tools.

Boulder County Fox Squirrel Cousins

Chickarees or pine squirrels are noisy residents of mountain forests. Their scolding chatter makes these small squirrels easy to spot.

Tassel-eared, Abert's squirrels are shy, quiet residents of Ponderosa forests and are tricky to find. They are fox squirrel size but their ear tufts make them look a little bigger.

Searching for Food

Besides birdseed, fox squirrels search out many different foods, mostly from plants. They chomp tree buds, leaves, tender twigs and flowers. Spring brings the opportunity to add birds' eggs and baby birds to the menu. Fruits and nuts are consumed as soon as they ripen. Surplus nuts are buried here and there to be sniffed out and dug up in the dark of winter when most eatables are scarce. Fox squirrels spend a lot of time on the ground in all seasons hunting for food. A good sense of smell helps them find hidden edible tidbits.

Nesting

Nothing provides better shelter than a dry hole in a tree. Suitable trees are in short supply so most fox squirrel nests are leaf and twig constructions balanced on a stout fork of a tree and usually high off the ground. The squirrel builds up layers of leaves, pine needles, twigs, bark bits and sometimes found trash. Once there is a good pile, the squirrel hollows out a bedroom chamber and lines it with softer material like grass and shredded leaves.

Squirrels spend nights in their nests and will stay there all day when the weather is especially cold or miserable any time of year. Squirrel moms build nests to house their babies.

Baby Time

Usually in spring and again in summer, an adult female squirrel will give birth to two or three babies. Looking like naked rats, newborn squirrels are born without fur and with mouse-like tails. When mom leaves the nest, she covers them with leaves.

Danger for babies can be hungry magpies, red-tailed hawks, raccoons or snakes.

By their five-week birthdays, little squirrels have fur and can see and hear. By ten weeks they no longer get their nutrition from mom's milk. They will be on their own when they are three or four months old.

A lucky squirrel could live a dozen years if it escapes cars, great horned owls, dogs, cats, foxes, coyotes, hunters and disease. Five or six years is typical fox squirrel survival in the wild, but many will die before they are a year old.



Observing Squirrels

Fox squirrels are good subjects for nature detecting because they are fairly easy to find and fun to watch and study. If you don't have a squirrel outside your window, visit a park and look for bulky leaf nests high in trees as a sign that fox squirrels live nearby. Find a comfortable place to sit quietly. Sitting in the shade makes it harder for squirrels to see you. Squirrels are usually most active mid-morning and mid-to-late afternoon.

If a squirrel runs to the other side of a tree trunk, wait a few minutes then try throwing a pebble or twig beyond the tree to see if you can fool the squirrel into coming back to your side.

You might record your observations in a journal or snap photos. You could note the date, the weather, and what you see and hear. What was the squirrel doing? Did it watch you? Did it chatter or bark or flick its tail?

WARNING: Always remember squirrels are wild animals and can carry disease or fleas. Don't touch a dead squirrel or try to pick up a sick or injured one.

Good Things About Squirrels

Fox squirrels are wildlife clowns whose acrobatic stunts entertain us. Little do they know they are the subjects of hilarious wildlife photos in magazines and newspapers.

Whether as predators or as prey, fox squirrels are also part of complex natural food chains. And, they are sometimes tree planters. Nuts buried by fox squirrels and forgotten often sprout to become new trees.

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For more information about squirrels, see the program listed on page 13.

