



Fox Squirrel

Sciurus niger

The largest and most colorful tree squirrel in North Carolina, the fox squirrel lives primarily in mature longleaf pine and open pine-oak forests in the Sandhills and southern Coastal Plain. The fox squirrel is about twice as large as the gray squirrel, and individuals exhibit a variety of color phases and patterns ranging from gray to black to red.

History and Status

Fox squirrels were once more widely distributed in North Carolina than they are today. Their preferred habitat, longleaf pine forests, was once common in the southern Coastal Plain but has mostly disappeared from the landscape. Timber management practices favor loblolly pine regeneration and are often based on clearcutting, 40-year rotations, and suppression of natural fires which restrict the number of open old-growth longleaf pine forests.

Because fox squirrels are solitary animals, their population densities are generally low even in areas where they are considered common. Large areas of habitat are needed to support viable populations. Stable populations of fox squirrels still exist in southeastern North Carolina but are often located in isolated pockets of habitat.

Description

Southeastern fox squirrels occur in a variety of color phases. Most in North Carolina are grayish, with various patches of black on the head and feet and

white patches on the nose, paws and ear tips. Some animals are almost totally black with dark gray patches, and others are reddish or rust colored. Rare specimens from western North Carolina are generally red and probably belong to a midwestern race of fox squirrels.

Adults are much larger than the more common gray squirrel and the western fox squirrels found in the Midwest. They range in length from 20 to 26 inches and weigh from 1½ to 2½ pounds.

Habitat and Habits

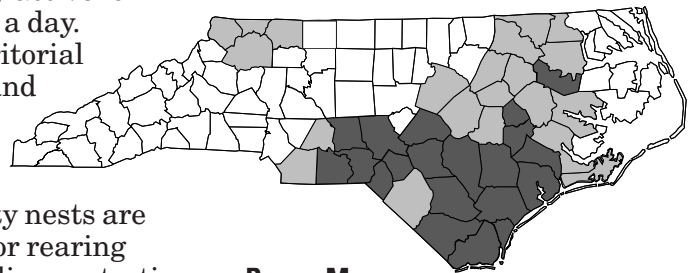
Fox squirrels in North Carolina inhabit mostly open, mature pine-oak forests. Food habits are highly variable according to season. The most common foods are seeds from green and mature pinecones, acorns, hickory nuts, buds and berries from a variety of plants, fungi, and insects.

Fox squirrels are diurnal and are generally active for eight to 14 hours a day. They are not territorial but are solitary and asocial except when breeding or rearing young. Tree cavity nests are very important for rearing young and providing protection from winter weather. They are usually found in large old hard-



wood trees, ancient flattop longleaf pines, or dead standing trees, and are often located on wetland edges next to mature pine-oak forests. Leaf nests are often constructed during warmer months in the limbs of oak or pine trees or occasionally on the ground.

The large size of the southeastern fox squirrel is thought to be related in several ways to the open forests of longleaf pine. The trees in these forests are widely spaced, requiring the squirrel to travel overland to forage rather than from tree to tree like flying squirrels or gray squirrels. Also, the green longleaf pinecones are much larger than those from other southeastern pines, and



Range Map:
Moderate 
Low 

only the fox squirrel has the size and strength to manipulate the cone and remove the nutritious seeds that form an important part of the animal's diet.

There are no natural predators that regularly capture adult fox squirrels, but individuals are occasionally preyed upon by bobcats, foxes and great horned owls. Young squirrels in the nest are vulnerable to snakes, raccoons and opossums.

Range and Distribution

The fox squirrel is a native of North America that occurs in the eastern United States, except for New England. There are two distinct populations: western and southeastern. Western fox squirrels range from the Ohio Valley, Great Lakes and upper Midwest regions south to western Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas and Oklahoma. Southeastern fox squirrels range from Texas to Maryland and south to Florida.

There are probably two subspecies of fox squirrels that occur in North Carolina. *Sciurus niger niger* belongs to the southeastern group. It is common in the Sandhills and southern Coastal Plain and also can be found in southern Piedmont and northeastern Piedmont counties. Rare specimens from western North Carolina probably belong to the midwestern group of fox squirrels and have dispersed into the state from western Virginia (*Sciurus niger vulpinus*) or the Tennessee valley (*Sciurus niger rufiventor*).

People Interactions

Fox squirrels are active during daylight hours and are occasionally seen by people. They are considered a trophy by hunters and are often mounted. They occasionally raid grain or cornfields for food and may cause some minor damage to crops.



References

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Credits

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FOX SQUIRREL

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Average Size

Length: 20-26 in.

Weight: 1½ to 2½ lbs.

Food

Pine seeds, acorns, hickory nuts, buds, berries, fungi and some insects.

Breeding

Fox squirrels generally mate in midwinter. Females breed when they are 1 year old, and occasionally, in years when food availability is high, older females may breed again in summer and produce a second litter.

Young

Litters of 1 to 5 young are usually born in February or March after a gestation period of 44 days. Fox squirrels are blind and hairless at birth and open their eyes after 4 to 5 weeks. Young are weaned at 8 to 9 weeks of age and may remain with the adult for another month.

Life Expectancy

Fox squirrels that survive to become adults live an average of 3 to 4 years. Maximum life expectancy in the wild is generally 6 to 7 years, but individuals have been known to live as long as 12 years.