

# Critter Corner: Eastern Gray Squirrels

I do most of my writing at my favorite coffee shop. I enjoy the atmosphere, the grinder whirring in the background, the bite-size pastries that reward me for sitting down to write. Besides the simple pleasure of a sweet treat, the cafe offers me a respite from distractions: chief among which is my beloved dog. She has inherited our habit of looking out of the window, loudly announcing the whole house when she sees something interesting. It's not unusual for my wife or I to yell things like "*Hummingbird!*" to each other across the house, and Belle is simply joining in the fun.

Belle's particular favorite wildlife seems to be the Eastern Gray Squirrels that frolic through the Sweetgum trees and across the picket fences, raiding bird feeders and digging into my flowerbeds. It's hard to blame her! Present year-round and always up to something new, Squirrels are quick, characterful, and entrancing to watch even when wreaking mischief.

## Squirrel Next Door



Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern\\_gray\\_squirrel.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern_gray_squirrel.jpg)

While there are three kinds of squirrels native to Louisiana, I guarantee the one most people think of first is the Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*). These squirrels average

between 16.6 inches - 21.6 inches, compared to the slightly larger Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*, 17.7 inches- 26.6 inches). The two can be found in both wild and urban environments, even at the same bird feeders, but the Fox Squirrel s generally larger and has a reddish tinge to its fur, although Eastern Grays can come in a variety of shades as well!



Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/steevithak/3348430098/>

Photo Credit: Steve Rainwater

The third variety, the Southern Flying Squirrel (*Glaucomys volans*) is rarely seen due to its small size and nocturnal treetop habits. I have personally only seen this creature twice in my life (a story for later), but they're actually rather common and widespread east of the Mississippi.



Southern Flying Squirrel (*Glaucomys Volans*)  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/52450054@N04/51290871114/>  
Photo Credit: Judy Gallagher

If you feel like you've been seeing a lot of squirrels lately, rest assured you're correct. Fall in Louisiana brings a flurry of squirrel activity; young squirrels are leaving the nest (properly called a *drey*). The drey is a familiar sight, a spherical bundle of sticks usually at least 13 feet off the ground. There's typically at least two exits: one facing the trunk to provide shelter and a second one through which to escape if needed. The inside is lined with moss, leaves, down, and whatever else can keep it soft and warm.

Mature squirrels typically breed twice a year when they're old and savvy enough to raise two whole litters. The first breeding season occurs in winter (December- February) or spring (May-June) with pups being born a little over a month later (average gestation is 44 days).

During the breeding season, male squirrels compete with each other for female attention. A female squirrel can draw up to 34 males from within a 500 meter radius when in estrus; one can only wonder if this is better or worse than trying to meet someone on the apps. Squirrels chase each other in circles around trees, demonstrating their speed and agility. A winning suitor will be rewarded with a one-night stand, along with any others the female approved. During the colder months, they may share a drey to keep warm. Maybe they reminisce about their history together.

Baby squirrels are altricial, meaning they are defenseless and rely entirely on parental care. Born blind and almost hairless, they are seldom seen by people until at least 10 weeks of age. By this point they can run, climb, and jump, although it will be 8 or 9 months until they reach adult size and over a year before they're mature enough to mate.

When kept in captivity, Eastern Gray Squirrels can live up to 20 years, but wild squirrels have it tough; one in four will reach adulthood. Of those, only half will survive their first year. Predation, starvation, disease, and cars all present challenges to squirrels. However, they have many amazing adaptations that have allowed them to survive and thrive across continents and eons.

Eastern Gray Squirrels can exhibit a variety of coat colors: black (melanistic), white (leucistic), albino (distinguished from leucitic squirrels by their pink eyes) and shades of red. In urban and suburban environments, these variants tend to fare much better than those in uninhabited regions due to less predation. Melanistic squirrels have an additional advantage in cold weather: their dark color absorbs heat from the environment, allowing them to handle temperatures as cold as 14°F while consuming less energy than their white and gray counterparts.



Melanistic Eastern Gray Squirrel

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/theforestvixendonates/14922687741/in/photostream/>

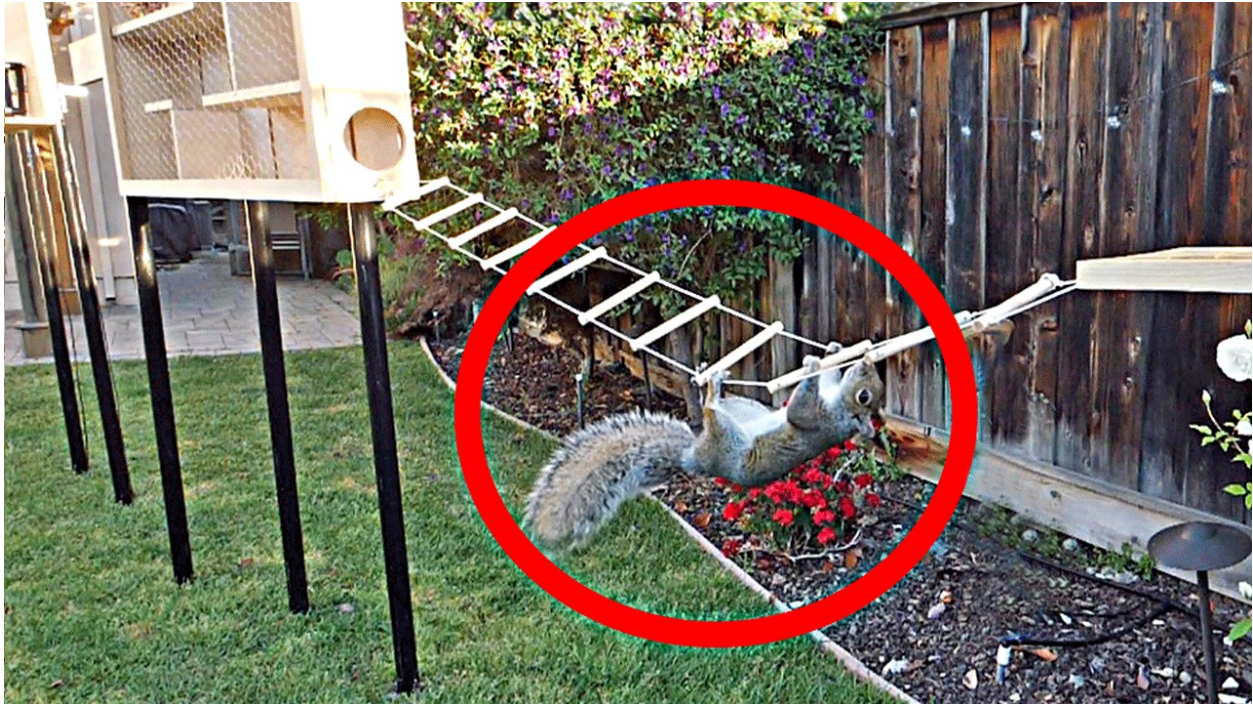
In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

### **Getting A Little Nuts**

Eastern Gray Squirrels are almost never found far from trees, and it's no wonder. A good tree is a shelter, highway, grocery store, and lookout tower all in one. Many trees in the squirrel's range depend in turn on the squirrels to propagate.

Have you ever wondered why some years it seems every step crunches with acorns, yet some years they're sparse? Or how that oak sprout came up in your flowerpot? This is the product of a phenomena called *mast seeding*. Mast is the term for the fruit and edible parts of woody trees and shrubs, although it has largely come to refer to this extravaganza. Whether due to internal cues hormonal cues or simply favorable climatic conditions, trees synchronize reproduction in pulses. Some years they set fruit in staggering numbers which are then hoarded and cached by wildlife such as squirrels, blue jays, woodpeckers, deer, and so on. Squirrels bury nuts in many small caches a behavior called *scatter-hoarding*, that also minimizes the risk of any one major loss. Soft garden soil is a particular favorite for my squirrels, as much of the rest of my soil is compacted clay.

Researchers have determined that squirrels can find up to 95% of their caches, using organizational skills such as sorting nuts by type and identifying landmarks. Squirrels can also remember how to solve difficult puzzles solved to obtain food, as anyone who has attempted to squirrel-proof anything can attest.



Engineer Mark Rober spent months attempting to build a squirrel-proof bird feeder. The squirrels beat every challenge.

Squirrels can be pests in the garden: digging, gnawing, and generally causing chaos when it suits them. There are a variety of commercial solutions and folk remedies. Hot pepper, essential oils, soap shavings, garlic cloves, wildlife netting, chicken wire, plastic owls, even motion-activated alarms have all been attempted with varying rates of success.

### **If You Can't Beat 'Em, Eat 'Em**

If you're really fed up with squirrels and local regulations permit, you could always take the predator role yourself. Squirrels have been eaten by humans pretty much as long as we've coexisted. Squirrel fur was once prized for its soft, fine texture.

My own stepdad makes a mean squirrel gravy on occasion. Pre-1997 copies of the seminal *The Joy of Cooking* included recipes for squirrel. Traditional iterations of southern classics like Burgoo or Brunswick Stew have included squirrel meat, which is low in fat but high in cholesterol and should be consumed in moderation. Like any game animal, squirrel meat carries risk of exposure to toxins like lead or pesticides in their food web. Please take appropriate precautions if you're going this route.

## **Suburban Squirrels**

It's hard to imagine modern American cities and suburbs without squirrels, at least on this side of the continent. However, this wasn't always the case. While urban squirrels may have less to worry about in terms of predation and competition, they also face unique challenges. The loss of contiguous tree cover requires squirrels to descend to the ground to move between trees. On the ground, they're at risk from cats, dogs, cars, and other hazards. It wasn't until electric and telephone wires began to criss-cross these gaps that squirrels exploded in urban centers.

Prior to this, squirrels in cities were often the result of intentional releases intended to beautify parks and add interest for workers who couldn't afford to travel far from the city. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (who designed much of LSU's campus) was a champion of the presence of nature in urban environments, believing people needed to experience the natural world for well-being and moral development. Feeding squirrels was considered as a way to encourage children to interact humanely and build connections.



Residents of Longview, WA, built a squirrel bridge to allow safe crossings.  
They named it Nutty Narrows.

Photo Credit: Ted Drake

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/draket/6490943769/>

Squirrels thrive in urban environments due to a variety of reasons. Their small size means they can easily find enough food. Their agility and speed, ability to survive falls at terminal velocity, and backward-rotating ankles allow them to navigate obstacles deftly and fearlessly. They can solve puzzles and communicate with each other with a wide range of vocalizations. While often pictured snacking on nuts, squirrels are actually omnivorous. I have personally witnessed squirrels eating: acorns, cicadas, cypress cones, mushrooms, chicken bones, and camellia buds.

Writer and educator Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Native Americans, shares this story about the relationship between squirrels and humans in her seminal book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

*It is said that our people learned to make sugar from the squirrels. In late winter, the hungry time, when caches of nuts are depleted, squirrels take to the treetops to gnaw on the branches of sugar maples. Scraping the bark allows sap to exude from the twig, and the squirrels drink it. But the real goods come the next morning, when they follow the same circuit they made the day before, licking up the sugar crystals that formed on the bark overnight. Freezing temperatures cause the water in the sap to sublime, leaving a sweet crystalline crust like rock candy behind, enough to tide them over through the toughest time of the year.*

Eastern Gray Squirrels are in fact so protean in their cleverness that they have become introduced to Europe, where they have become invasive. They outcompete native squirrel species and just like at home can be a plain old nuisance. They chew wires, nest in buildings, start fires, die in your attic and stink up the place (as my wife and I learned to our chagrin recently). Despite the hassle and the expense of repairs, part of me was sad for the squirrel still. It's hard to stay mad at something so clever and frankly cute. Squirrels have been with us for a long time and will likely be with us for a very long time to come.

## **Sources**

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