

TREE SQUIRRELS

There is undoubtedly no other animal that has developed such a love-hate relationship around our homes and gardens as that of tree squirrels. The eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) and fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) are the two species of tree squirrels found in Louisiana. Depending upon your locality, there are two subspecies of gray squirrels and three subspecies of fox squirrels that can be encountered in our state. The nominate race of the eastern gray squirrel occurs in the northwestern portion of Louisiana while the darker subspecies known as *S. c. fuliginosus* occurs in our more southern parishes. Throughout the central and northern parishes, specimens tend to show intermediate color characteristics between the two subspecies. Eastern gray squirrels regardless of their origin are often referred to as simply gray or cat squirrels.

The three subspecies of fox squirrels found in our state vary drastically in size and color. The western one-third of Louisiana is occupied by



eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

S. n. ludovicianus. These animals are characterized as the largest of all subspecies with a massive skull and slightly paler coloration than the more eastern subspecies. The bottomland hardwood forests of the Tensas, Mississippi, and Atchafalaya floodplains in the eastern and central-southern portions of the state are home to the smaller, darker subspecies *S. n. subauratus*. Melanistic or black individuals are so common in this subspecies that in local populations, they often outnumber the normal color phase. Areas east of the Mississippi River into the Florida parishes are home to the well-marked race of fox squirrels known as *S. n. bachmani*. These individuals are characterized by a large size and the presence of a patch of white on the nose and varying amounts of white on the ears, toes, and tips of the tail.



fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*)

The Problem and Control Measures:

Few other wildlife species can cause such a wide array of problems as tree squirrels. Squirrels damage trees by chewing bark from branches and trunks and their voracious diet for nuts, fruits, vegetables,

flowers, and buds, wreak havoc in yards and gardens. Their habits of gnawing on wires, wood siding and lead vent pipes cause additional problems to homeowners, along with the raiding of bird feeders intended for the benefit of others. Fox and gray squirrels breed at one year of age during two distinct breeding periods in mid-December to early January and again in June. The gestation period is around 43 days and an average of 3 young comprise a litter. Squirrels prefer to nest in tree cavities but where these are lacking, leaf nests will be constructed by using a frame of sticks and dry leaves. These nests are usually lined with leaves and bark strips which many times come from ornamental trees in surrounding yards and neighborhoods.

The close association of these animals with our forested urban environments along with their game status has created a management dilemma for homeowners. As game animals, squirrels are protected within specific hunting season dates and bag limits. Even with this option, local firearm ordinances often make it illegal to discharge a firearm at any time within city limits. Outside of legally hunting squirrels during the established open season, there are only two instances where lethal control is an option. When squirrels enter a residence or other building, homeowners have the option of using lethal control to deal with the problem and another exception is made to commercial pecan growers who can obtain a 30-day

permit to use lethal control on squirrels damaging their crops. While there are many repellents labeled for squirrel control, most are not developed for use on food crops and like all repellents, their usefulness is limited by time and weather conditions. Trying to exclude squirrels from an area is a hard task when dealing with such a nimble critter, making live-trapping and relocation the best option for homeowners. There is probably no easier animal to trap than a squirrel. Unshelled pecans have proven to be the best bait to use for this purpose and success is almost guaranteed when pre-baiting is used. This technique involves placing pecans on the outside of a live trap until animals have become accustomed to the presence of the trap and then placing the bait inside. Trapped animals should be removed a considerable distance (at least one mile) and then released. Regulations require that landowner permission be given where animals will be released.



live trap

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