

Do You Know.....about flying squirrels?

You might be surprised to learn that flying squirrels are very common in the DC-metro area. There are two varieties, the Northern and the Southern flying squirrel. This neck of the woods is home to the Southern flying squirrel, *Glaucomys volans*, meaning "flying grey mouse." These totally-nocturnal mammals measure approximately ten inches from tip of the nose to tip of the tail and weigh only 57 grams (two ounces). The Northern variety can be nearly twice as heavy and several inches longer. Neither species actually flies but rather "parachutes" from tree to tree. Flaps of skin, known as the patagia, stretch from the front wrists to the back ankles. When the squirrel extends its legs, it achieves a surface area of over 50 square inches, allowing it to glide considerable distances. Usually gliding about 20 to 30 feet, they are capable to soaring as far as 300 feet. They climb high in a tree, launch themselves and glide in a downward slope to the next tree where they immediately scamper around the trunk just in case an owl is following them. They then climb the tree and re-launch until they get to their destination. They rarely travel over ground.

Flying squirrels prefer living in forests of mature oaks or other hardwood trees, especially those with woodpecker cavities. They will build leaf nests or use attics and, occasionally, even mailboxes as nest sites. Unlike the more familiar Eastern grey squirrel, flying squirrels are very communal and are happy to accept new-comers to the nest site. If you happen to have a flying squirrel colony nesting in your attic, you need not be too concerned, They generally do not chew on



Adult female Southern flying squirrel

wires as grey squirrels do; however, their nocturnal habits may disturb your sleep. There are ways to evict them without resorting to trapping. Please contact us for suggestions. An average of three to ten squirrels will occupy a communal site but there are records of as many as 50 individuals using the same tree hollow.

The flying squirrel menu includes acorns and other nuts, insects and insect larvae, bark, buds, flowers, sap, seeds (especially black oil sunflower seeds), berries, fungi and even, occasionally, bird eggs and baby birds, particularly when the squirrel is a pregnant or lactating female and needs more protein. Unlike the grey squirrel, which is a "scatter hoarder" burying nuts randomly throughout its territory, the flying squirrel is a "larder hoarder," preferring to cache their food in one or two spots.

Their main predators include hawks, owls, cats, bobcats, weasels, raccoons and snakes. Accidents, such as drowning, striking objects while gliding and catching their patagium on barbed wire fencing also account for some deaths. They do not hibernate but remain active year-round. They will hole up on their nests during especially severe winter weather.

Flying squirrels mate in spring, have a gestation period of about 40 days and, usually, give birth to three to five young. Further south, they may produce a second fall litter. The babies are born blind, nearly hairless and totally helpless. Their eyes open between three- to four-weeks-old and they are weaned between five- and seven-weeks-old. The young usually stay with the mother for about 12 weeks and may remain with her until she has another litter. Their life span in the wild is

four to five years.

Because of their small size and nocturnal habits, flying squirrels can be extremely difficult to spot in the wild. If you have a bird feeder try loading it with black oil sunflower seeds. If a house light shines on the feeder, you are ahead of the game. If not, check the feeder after dark with a flashlight. Although quite abundant, few people have the pleasure of seeing flying squirrels in the wild.

They have coats as soft as velvet and eyes like small chunks of coal. They are, generally, pretty inoffensive to their human neighbors (you probably do not even know they are around). Flying squirrels are, simply, another of Nature's miracles and fill their own special niche in the natural world.

By Alicia Eastham, staff