

Eastern Gray Squirrel

by Sally Cureton

We've all seen the Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) gallivanting through our yards and up our trees. The genus, *Sciurus*, comes from two Greek words, *skia*, meaning shadow, and *oura* meaning tail - the squirrel sitting in the shadow of its tail. The *carolinensis* comes from the Carolinas, where its presence was first recorded. This gray squirrel is found across the eastern half of North America and is a member of the order "Rodentia." This group of living mammals comprises forty percent of all present day mammal species. There are within this group more than 365 species of squirrels. No wonder there are so many of them!

The adult Eastern Gray Squirrel weighs from 1 to 2 pounds. Because their hind legs are longer than the front ones, they are great at jumping. They can leap up to 6 feet between trees, using their tails to keep their balance. On the ground, they can run up to 14 miles per hour. Their eyes are positioned high on their head giving them a wide field of vision, without turning their head. As with all rodents, their teeth grow continually. A squirrel's teeth will grow up to six inches per year. Because they are constantly chewing, the teeth do stay short.

This squirrel builds two different kinds of nests. The one we see most often here in Massanutten is high in a tree made out of leaves and sticks and is known as a drey. It is usually located in a tree branch and will be about 1-1/2 feet in diameter. The other kind of nest that they use is one made in a cavity. This can be either recycling one that has been abandoned by a woodpecker, or in a naturally rotted out area of a tree trunk. If their nest becomes infested with fleas they will move, or build a new nest. In the winter, they may not leave the nest for several days. Normally they live alone, but in severe cold, they will share a nest to stay warm. Once the temperature rises though, all visitors leave.

Eastern Gray Squirrels breed twice a year, December to February and May to June. Gestation is about 44 days, and the average litter contains about four babies. The young are weaned at 7 weeks and will leave the nest at about 10 weeks. They can live as long as 20 years in captivity, but in the wild about 12 years is the normal lifespan. Mating activities in late winter can be quite entertaining. Males will chase females with some amazing gymnastics. They will race up trees, run out on limbs, jump from tree to tree and run down the trunk head first at a breakneck speed. These squirrels tend to spend their life on a single wooded acre. During the spring, summer and fall, they will be active in the morning hours and just before sunset and wisely avoid moving around much during the heat of the day.

In the fall they will often take tree nuts and bury them beneath the leaf litter. Since they have a very keen sense of smell the Eastern Grey Squirrel can return weeks or months later, sniff out the nuts and eat them. One study showed that they were able to find 85 percent of the nuts that they had buried. In the spring they will also eat the buds and flowers of oaks and maples, which are high-energy foods for them. With many predators, their annual mortality rate is actually about 50 percent.