

The Fox Squirrel in Wisconsin

By: Larissa Sprecher
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Fox squirrel; Courtesy of nature-talk.com

Those of us lucky enough to live in Wisconsin (or unlucky enough, depending on the way one feels about -20°F temperatures) probably associate the “squirrel” with... well, squirrels. After all, squirrels are common enough. There are over eight million of them in the state. One sees them every day driving to and from work (if one passes

any semblance of a yard). They are those chattering little grayish-brown things with the long tails and – but wait, were they grey or brown or even red?

There are actually six or seven varieties of squirrel living in Wisconsin. The two most populous by far are the grey and fox squirrels. While both are somewhat similar in appearance, especially if you just happen to glimpse one scampering up a tree, the fox squirrel is the largest type of squirrel. It weighs from one to three pounds (the size of a very small cat), and is usually a sort of grizzled, rusty brown color with a lighter orange brown belly (Wise). The grey squirrel is smaller and, er, greyer (duh, right?), but also comes in several color morphs, including blond, black, and white. Both squirrels have similar diets, though the fox squirrel is

*Eastern Grey squirrel
courtesy of my
naturephotos.com*



perhaps stricter in his preference of nuts, especially acorns and hickory nuts (Wise). But while the grey squirrel is most common in hardwood forests, and even urban areas, fox squirrels are known to spend much of their time on the ground in open, farmland type areas, just so long as they have trees handy for quick escapes (Wise).

The fox squirrel, *Sciurus niger*, is our main focus here, and specifically the fox squirrel's northern boundary in Wisconsin. This brings us to an interesting conundrum. There is very little information about the fox squirrel in Wisconsin, even though it is the most populous and widespread squirrel in the United States.

There are probably several reasons for this. The grey squirrel is also quite populous in Wisconsin and for some reason seems to be what we (the general public) associate with "squirrel." Likely many people cannot, or simply do not bother to note the difference between the grey and fox squirrels. It is also possible that the fox squirrel is sometimes automatically assumed to be a "red squirrel"



Fox squirrel; courtesy of nps.gov

because of its rusty coloration, although the red squirrel is significantly smaller than both the fox and grey squirrels.

These hypotheses might explain the wildly imbalanced squirrel data entered into the Wisconsin NatureMapping website. From 2003 to 2010, only 46 Eastern Fox Squirrels (the variety available on the NatureMapping website) were sighted. That number only takes on meaning when compared to the number of Eastern Grey Squirrels reported to the website –



Red squirrel Courtesy of saveoursquirrels.org

1,297. In other words, according to these sightings, there are 28 times more grey squirrels in Wisconsin than fox squirrels. Now perhaps the grey squirrels have simply decided to run all the fox squirrels out of state, but this is highly unlikely (at least, it is not a theory commonly advanced by the DNR). There have even been

sightings of a total of 186 red squirrels, which are fairly widespread but not thought to be that much more populous in Wisconsin than the fox squirrel.

This is why we need the help of people like you, NatureMappers. You know something even the “experts” don’t know! Your input, sightings, and data can be valuable in helping us learn more about the fox squirrel in Wisconsin. For instance, we know that fox squirrels generally prefer the southern part of the state (Craven). But where exactly does the squirrel draw the line between preference and “a team of wild horses couldn’t drag me any farther North”? According to the data in the Wisconsin NatureMapping website, the fox squirrel’s range extends all the way up to Bayfield, Ashland, Iron, and Vilas counties (in other words, up to the Upper Peninsula and Lake Superior). This is not exactly the “southern two thirds” of the state (Craven).

But maybe you live in Iron County and you do look out your window one morning and see a big, rusty brown squirrel which you will now be able to identify as a fox squirrel. Hey, that’s exciting! Take a picture and check it out on the internet if you aren’t sure. If you aren’t a NatureMapper already, this would be a good time to start. Just pop into the Wisconsin NatureMapping website and let us know what you saw. This is the kind of observation in which the DNR and other nature people would be very interested. Maybe fox squirrels like the cold more than we think.

Courtesy of sscyper-sibes.blogspot.com



On the other hand, these same NatureMapping range maps appear to show that the red squirrel’s range covers all but a tiny sliver of Wisconsin’s southwest corner, when in fact the red squirrel is not known to live below Sauk County, and certainly not below Madison (Craven). Are these sightings from people who see a “reddish” squirrel and mistakenly identify it? The actual red squirrel is quite easy to identify – barely larger than a chipmunk, a vivid orangy color with tipped ears, and with a withering vocabulary (if they think you are in their space). If you can tell the difference between red, grey, and fox squirrels, your data is very valuable. Squirrels aren’t just squirrels. Next time you go out onto your porch to yell at the squirrel eating your birdseed, take a second look. If it’s hefty and “red” and doesn’t yell its head off at you, maybe it’s a fox squirrel, in which case you can get him back by reporting him to us. Somebody ought to be keeping tabs on them.

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