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Artwork by Jean Gawalt (art not to scale)
Text by Gordon Batcheller & Jean Gawalt
Layout design by Frank Herec

THE Squirrel Family

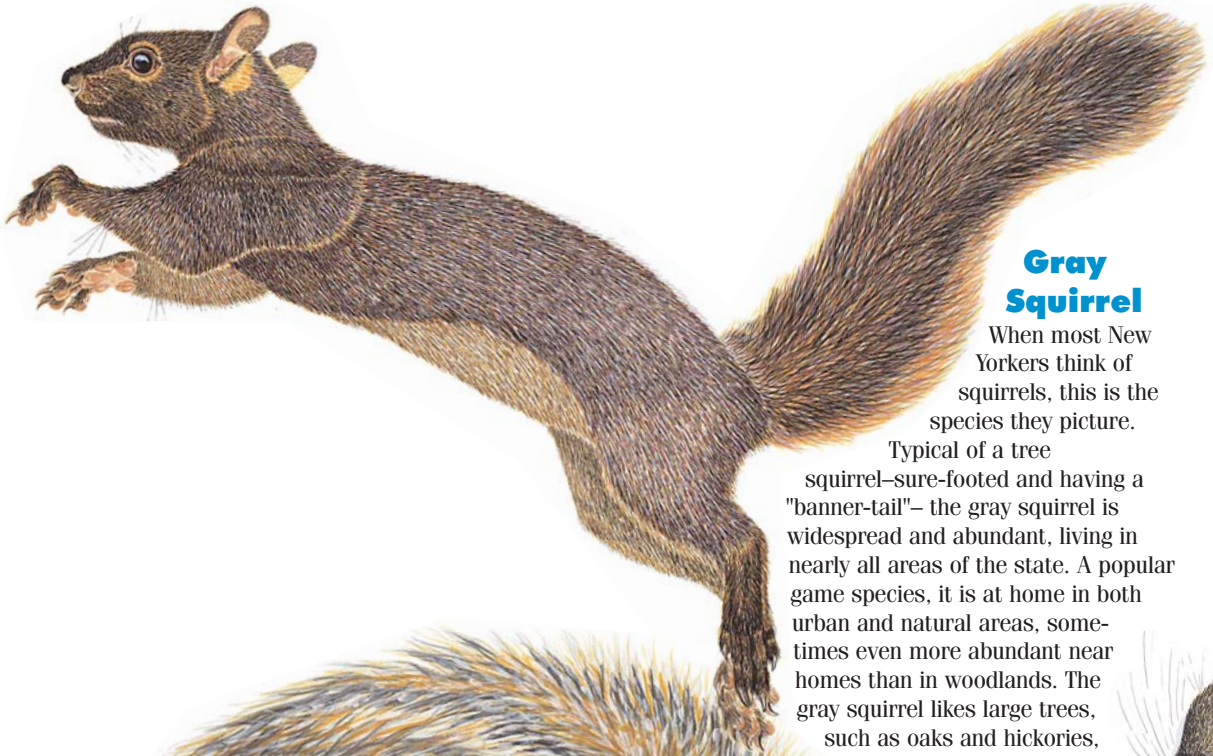
A large group, the squirrel family includes tree squirrels (gray, red, fox), flying squirrels, chipmunks, marmots (woodchuck), antelope squirrels, ground squirrels, and prairie dogs. While not all species occur here, New York State is home to a number of squirrel species which are readily seen by many people year-round.

Squirrels are distinguished from all other rodents by their thickly furred bushy tails. In fact, that "banner tail" is so characteristic of tree squirrels that it serves as the basis for naming these small mammals. The Latin word Sciurus (sk'yooris) means squirrel, and is derived from the Greek skia (shadow) and oura (tail). Anyone who's seen a squirrel run across a street or lawn with its tail undulating and waving can appreciate the concept of shadow tail. And typically, a squirrel sits with its tail curled over its back– "in the shadow."

Squirrels come in a wide variety of colors. In fact, as a whole, this group of animals is prone to producing color variants of the more typical color patterns for that species. For example, in New York, gray squirrels can be black-furred, albino, or many different variations of gray mixed with yellow-to-reddish brown. Many squirrel species have light spots on the back of their ears.

All squirrels have chisel-like front teeth, sharp claws and strong legs. Most have clusters of sensitive whiskers on their faces and front legs to help navigate climbing trees or tunneling in the earth. Most species of squirrels are active during the daytime. Some ground-dwelling squirrels will hibernate in the winter.

Highly territorial, squirrels usually expel intruders from their "home turf." That's why you may see a red squirrel or even a chipmunk chase off a much larger gray squirrel. Long-lived for rodents, squirrels average 3-5 years old, but can live up to 8-10 years in the wild, which is several times longer than the usual year or two for most smaller rodents.

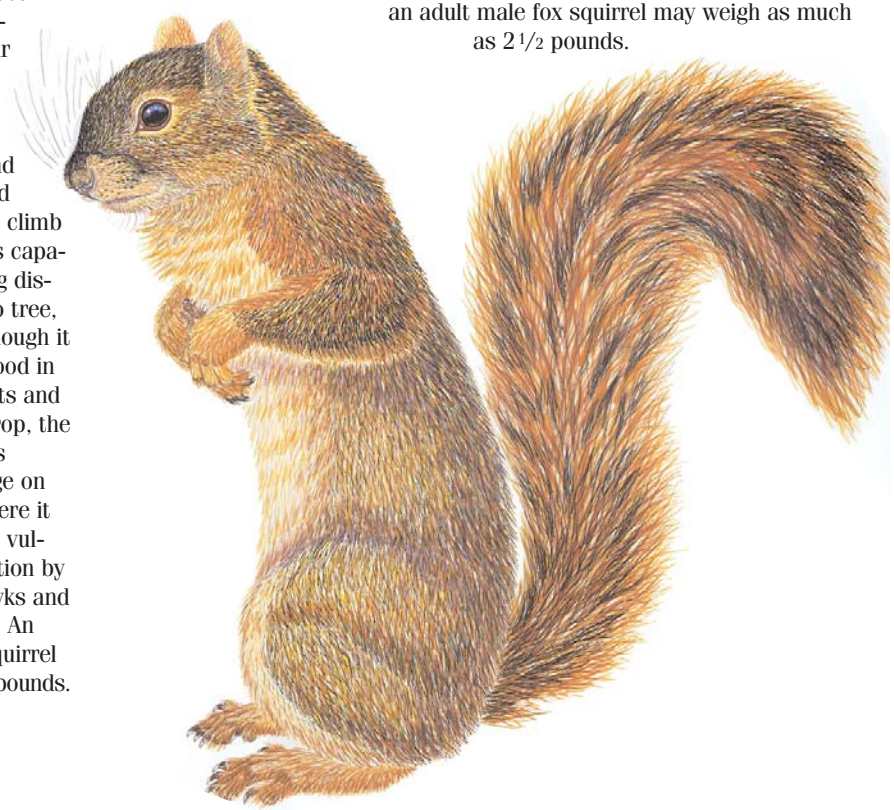


Gray Squirrel

When most New Yorkers think of squirrels, this is the species they picture. Typical of a tree squirrel–sure-footed and having a "banner-tail"– the gray squirrel is widespread and abundant, living in nearly all areas of the state. A popular game species, it is at home in both urban and natural areas, sometimes even more abundant near homes than in woodlands. The gray squirrel likes large trees, such as oaks and hickories, that produce both food and denning sites. A lively and energetic squirrel, it can climb very quickly and is capable of jumping long distances from tree to tree, or limb to limb. Although it prefers to gather food in trees, once nuts and other seeds drop, the gray squirrel is forced to forage on the ground where it becomes more vulnerable to predation by coyotes, foxes, hawks and great horned owls. An adult male gray squirrel weighs about 1½ pounds.

Fox Squirrel

Primarily a Midwestern species, the fox squirrel is at the eastern edge of its range in New York, found primarily in the western part of the state, especially along large rivers (such as the Genesee) and along the Lake Erie shoreline. Distinguished from the gray squirrel by its larger size and deep orange-rust coloring, the fox squirrel lives in trees, but prefers areas that are more open or even "park-like." The fox squirrel spends much of its time on the ground. When moving about, it has a slow, sluggish appearance, not nearly as lively as the gray squirrel. A fox squirrel's diet consists of hard and soft mast, especially acorns, hickories, grapes and cherries. A heavy squirrel, an adult male fox squirrel may weigh as much as 2½ pounds.



Red Squirrel

The red squirrel is a small, aggressive squirrel that primarily lives in areas with abundant evergreens. It gets its name from the rich rusty coloration along its back and tail, which is separated from its whitish belly and chest by a short, black "racing stripe." A red squirrel seems to almost never walk, but rather runs or climbs trees in quick and sudden bursts of energy, sometimes chattering and scolding loudly along the way. Larger than a chipmunk, but smaller than a gray squirrel, an adult red squirrel weighs about one-half of a pound. In areas such as the Adirondacks, the red squirrel is far more abundant than the gray.

Flying Squirrels

New York is home for two species of flying squirrels: the southern and the northern. Although their ranges overlap, southern flying squirrels live primarily south of the Mohawk River Valley, while northern flying squirrels are more often found in the northern part of New York. Occasionally seen during the day, these largely nocturnal squirrels are most active at night. The northern flying squirrel is reddish brown in color; the southern flying squirrel is a more mouse-like gray color. Somewhat misnamed, flying squirrels do not actually fly, but rather glide. By extending their feet, they cause the large flaps of skin found along the sides of their bodies to stretch tight, forming a wing-like structure. Southern flying squirrels eat seeds, nuts, berries, lichens, fresh leaves and flowers. Northern species feed more heavily on lichens and fungi. Both species are also somewhat carnivorous. Flying squirrels can often be regular visitors to bird-feeders, though primarily at night. Averaging only about two ounces, they are the smallest of New York's squirrels.

Eastern Chipmunk

The Eastern chipmunk may be one of New York's most abundant and easily recognized small mammals. Active during the day, it scurries about in an unending search for food–nuts, berries, tender flowers, leaves, and seeds, as well as small invertebrates like snails and insects. Unlike its other squirrel cousins, the chipmunk has several distinct stripes along its body: five dark stripes and two white or buff stripes. Capable of climbing, it prefers to stay on the ground, and often goes underground. An energetic animal, the chipmunk might disappear down one hole, only to reappear seconds later ten feet away. A chipmunk stores food in its large cheek pouches until it can chew and digest it in the relative security of an underground hole. Although not a true hibernator, the Eastern chipmunk is less active in the winter, emerging as soon as soil and air temperatures begin to warm in the spring. A small squirrel, it weighs about four ounces.

Woodchuck

A type of marmot, the woodchuck is New York's largest member of the squirrel family, with an adult woodchuck weighing as much as 12 pounds, though most average about 7 pounds. It has a chunky body, which it keeps low to the ground. Ranging from dark blonde to brown, the woodchuck's coat is long and coarse. Often spotted along roadways, the woodchuck prefers open lands, such as farmlands and fields, but also occurs near homes, sometimes doing great damage to vegetable and flower gardens. The woodchuck lives underground in a sometimes extensive network of tunnels and burrows. It hibernates during the winter. A woodchuck stands up on its hind legs to search its surroundings, and quickly runs for the nearest hole when alarmed. Though it prefers not to, the woodchuck can climb, and occasionally even gets up into the low lying limbs of trees.