

Species Fact Sheet: *Grey Squirrel (Sciurus carolinensis)*



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Silver-grey, agouti (speckled) coat, with a brownish tinge on feet, face and along the back, especially in summer; tail conspicuously fringed white. Much larger than the red squirrel, which has uniform reddish-brown (not agouti) fur.

Size: 24-28.5cm. Tail length: 19.5-24cm

Weight: Females 0.4-0.72kg, males 0.44-0.65kg



Distribution & Habitat

Introduced from the USA between 1876-1929, the Grey squirrel is now widespread in England and Wales, central Scotland and the eastern half of Ireland, while still spreading. Grey squirrels are essentially animals of deciduous woodland.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Squirrels are diurnal, usually with peaks of activity in the early morning and late afternoon. They are not territorial, but share home ranges and temporally abundant food sources. They typically make a nest (drey) of twigs (cut, live from the tree, often with the leaves attached, unlike bird nests). Dreys are usually tucked in a fork against the trunk, though squirrels also use large holes in trees as drey sites. Grey squirrels are essentially animals of deciduous woodland, and are dependent upon the large seeds of such trees as oak, beech, hazel, sweet chestnut and walnut. In autumn, when abundant, these seeds are stored, often underground. Because deciduous fruit falls to the ground in autumn, grey squirrels spend much more time foraging on the ground, and burying fruits there, than red squirrels. Grey squirrels' main predators include stoats, goshawks and foxes.

Diet and Feeding

Large seeds of trees such as oak, beech, hazel, sweet chestnut and walnut. When these supplies run out in early summer grey squirrels turn to a variety of flowers, buds, shoots, pine cones, fungi, peanuts from bird feeders, birds' eggs and young.

Reproduction

The female can have two litters a year, in early spring and summer. Young squirrels are born blind and hairless, in litters of 3-4, after a gestation of 44 days. Lactation lasts up to 10 weeks, though the young start to take solid food after about 8 weeks. They can breed at 10-12 months old.

Conservation status

Grey squirrels are serious pests of forestry, especially stripping the bark of thin-barked species such as beech and sycamore. This behaviour is not fully understood; it seems to peak in early summer, at about the time when the first litter of young become independent, and at the time when tree fruits are least available. It can kill the top of the tree or distort its growth. They can also be serious pests in gardens and among horticultural crops.

It has been illegal to keep grey squirrels (without a licence) since 1937, and it is illegal to release them into the wild.