

# Grey Squirrel

*Sciurus carolinensis*



## Other common names

Eastern grey squirrel

## Introduction

Grey squirrels are members of the rodent family, and are one of the most commonly seen wildlife species seen in both urban and natural settings. They're fairly intelligent, a fact anyone with a birdfeeder can confirm. They can also cause headaches for homeowners by building nests in attics and garages, and forgetting buried nuts that sprout into saplings in the middle of your azalea bush. In fact, squirrels play an important part in reforestation because of their forgetful ways.

## Physical Description and Anatomy

Grey squirrels are easily spotted bounding along the ground or scurrying across tree branches, twitching their thick, bushy tails. Their color varies with season, being yellowish brown in summer, and more grey in winter. The underside is generally a lighter color. There are also

completely black squirrels, but these are not another species, simply a color variation of grey squirrels. Adult grey squirrels are 15 – 20 inches (38.1 – 50.8 cm) long, and about half of that length is tail. They weigh 1 – 1.5 lbs (0.45 – 0.68 kg), but this weight fluctuates according to season.

### Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Grey squirrels may be confused with other species of tree squirrel, like the Eastern fox squirrel or the red squirrel. The main differences are color and size. Greys are bigger than red squirrels and smaller than fox squirrels.

When out hiking, look for signs that squirrels have recently dug up a cache, leaving a hole and chewed bits of husks. They also drop piles of husks under trees they frequent. Look for a nest, called a drey when made by a squirrel, of leaves, twigs, and grasses in the notch of a tree. Don't forget to listen for chirps and chattering too.



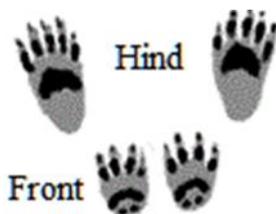
Grey squirrel scat.



At this site, a grey squirrel dug up a cache of nuts and had a meal, discarding the husks.



A grey squirrel drey.



Grey squirrel tracks.

Front: 1 1/4 - 1 7/8 inches long by 3/4 - 1 3/4 inches wide

Hind: 1 1/4 – 2 1/16 inches long by 1 – 1 3/4 inches wide

## Habitat

The grey squirrel's natural habitat is deciduous and mixed forest. They are dependent upon a large mast crop for survival. However, they have adapted to suburban and urban life very well, and can be found living alongside humans throughout the eastern half of the US.

## Behavior and Diet

Known as tree squirrels, grey squirrels are an arboreal species, spending the majority of their time in the tree canopy. They are extremely agile, using their sharp claws to climb tree trunks. Their bushy tail aids them in balancing as they run along tree limbs, and leaping to neighboring branches. They can reach speeds of 10 – 15 mph (16.1 – 24.1 kph) when running along the ground, a necessary skill when escaping predators. Grey squirrels are preyed upon by everything from mink and fox, to bobcats and humans.

Their diet consists of mostly seeds and nuts like acorns, beechnuts, butternuts, and hickory nuts. They also feed on the buds, flowers, and inner bark of many trees. When available during the warmer seasons, they will consume fungi, berries, and fruit. Grey squirrels have also been seen feeding on carrion. An adult grey squirrel needs to eat more than 2 lbs (0.9 kg) of food every week to meet its energy requirements. In preparation for colder winter months when food is less abundant, grey squirrels cache their food, hiding it in holes in the ground or crevices in trees. In suburban areas, they will even store them in barns, garages, and attics. Forgotten caches sprout, and contribute greatly to reforestation.

Grey squirrels will build a nest, called a drey, out of leaves and twigs, or take advantage of a tree cavity to use as a den. During cold winter months, they will hole up for several days at a time. They are generally solitary, but may den in groups in winter to share warmth. During warmer months, they are diurnal, most active at dawn and dusk.

## Human Interactions

Grey squirrels are one of the first wildlife species humans in urban settings observe. They do well living in proximity to humans, and were intentionally introduced to many urban parks in the 1800s, as these parks were isolated from natural areas and fairly devoid of wildlife.

On the other hand, squirrels are often seen as a nuisance. They cause countless headaches for homeowners by building dreys in attics and garages, and chewing holes in drywall and wires. Anyone with a birdfeeder knows what sneaky, determined little critters they can be as well.



This squirrel stopped by on his way out of the attic to say hi.

## Reproduction

Squirrel populations exhibit two breeding periods every year, one in late winter and one in mid-summer. Litters are born in March-April or July-August. Older females may bear young in one or both periods, but yearling females generally produce one litter their first year.

Gestation lasts 40 – 44 days, and females produce litters of 2 – 3 young in her den or drey. The young open their eyes at about 30 days, and begin venturing outside the nest at 42 – 49 days, once they've grown a full coat of fur. The mother nurses them until they are 56 – 70 days old. Litters born in late summer may stay with the female throughout the winter. They are sexually mature at about 1 year. Grey squirrels live an average of 6 years in the wild, but those in captivity may live to 20.

## Fun Facts

January 21 is National Squirrel Appreciation Day.

Squirrels can find food buried beneath 1 foot of snow.

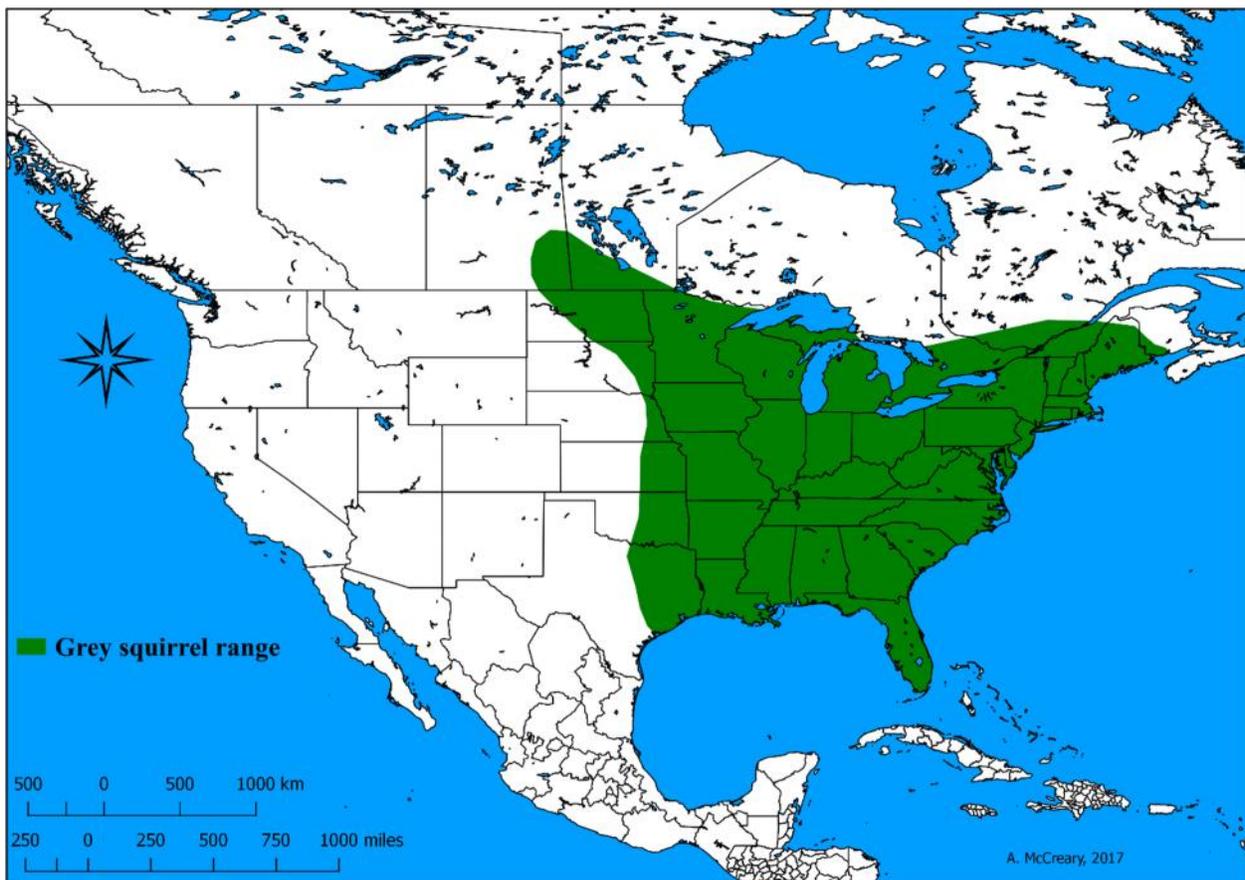
Their front teeth never stop growing.

Squirrels use their tails to communicate.

A squirrel nest is called a drey.

## Range and Status

Grey squirrels inhabit the eastern half of the United States, all the way from Canada to Mexico. They adapt well to living near humans, and their populations are stable.



## Management and Research in New York

Hunting of grey squirrels is permitted in New York. They are managed and protected as a small game species.

## Pictures



This is a well-known image of a grey squirrel getting to the candy inside a Halloween decoration (image source: Daily Mail).

## Links

More information on squirrels can be found at the following links:

Tips for keeping squirrels away from your bird feeder:

<https://www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/National-Wildlife/Birds/Archives/2010/Squirrels.aspx>

An article on the history of squirrels in America

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/12/131206132408.htm>

## Sources

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