

Mystery Squirrel



Glen Savage

On January 12, I sent the following message to some friends hoping they would expand my knowledge of the natural world.

I wrote, "This squirrel looks unlike gray squirrels or red squirrels. This small bodied (same as a gray squirrel) squirrel has a white ventral side. His dorsal side is predominantly gray but there are red highlights here and there. There is a pronounced red stripe down the squirrels' back.

Both red and gray squirrels are common in our habitat. Could this be an intermediate? Can red and gray interbreed? Maybe it is common for gray squirrels to be colored in this fashion. Let me know what you think."

I accompanied the message with some photos of the subject. I inaccurately referred to the big red colored squirrels as red squirrels. They are fox squirrels. I learned:

- there are fox squirrels, red squirrels and - gray squirrels in Illinois
- gray squirrels may have great variation in their fur



Suspected hybrid eating bird food every chance it gets. Also in the summer months they eat the plants like sweet potato vines & other sweet plants on ASO owner's deck.

- hybridization is unlikely

Thank you to everyone for sharing their opinions, observations and comments with me. I will never look at squirrels in the same way again!

Darin Richardson, confirmed squirrel hunter and Hunter Safety Master Instructor from Raymond, sent me the following information regards red squirrels. Red squirrels are not to be confused with fox squirrels, which are bigger (judging from the red squirrel description, fox squirrels are less pestiferous). Darrin assures me that red squirrels are present in our area though very uncommon.

Darrin sent me the following information from Minuteman Pest Control: <http://www.ashedesign.com/minuteman/wildlife.html>



"RED SQUIRREL"
ANIMAL IDENTIFICATION
Appearance: Small reddish squirrel with a white underbelly, bushy tail, and a white eye ring.

Summer- black line along side of body, Winter- tufts on ears noticeable with a brownish coat and a red streak down back.

Vocalization: Ratchet-like call
Habitat: Coniferous or mixed woodlands

Gary Laurent of Donnelson wrote, "Have seen these at my bird feeders and in the woods for years I call them red grays. Don't know if they interbreed or not but sure looks like they do."

Ken Schaal, Hillsboro, Bluestem Nursery owner, Natural Area Guardian Chairman, wrote, "Interesting



squirrel. I think the coloration of the squirrel is similar to the white coloration of the junco I had at my house last winter. It was decided that the color was due to condition opposite of a melanistic condition. I forget the name that Vicki Hedrick gave it--but it started with "leuco-. Your squirrel is probably similar. Not albino but a variation of the normal color."

Dave Rahe, soil and water professional wrote, "Yes, I think they can hybridize. I don't think the offspring are sterile. Some are worried that red squirrels will become extinct."

Stephanie Porter of U of I Extension wrote, "I forwarded this email and pictures on to our University of Illinois Extension "Wildlife Expert", Dave Shiley, who is a Natural Resource Educator in Champaign. He suspects that this squirrel is a

gray squirrel, especially if its underside is white. He said that it is just not possible for a gray and red squirrel to reproduce because they are two different species. He said that he has done a lot of squirrel hunting in his day and has seen some gray squirrels that have some "variation" in the color of their fur. He said that the "Savage" squirrel is very pretty and unique!

William Whitworth of Raymond had the last word on the subject. Boomer, by the way, agrees with Bill.

Bill Whitworth wrote, "Glenn, I can't really say, I'd put him in the pressure cooker before frying him."



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