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Fox Squirrel Trapping at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

By Joella Buffa

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the Delmarva fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger cinereus* (DFS)) as an endangered species in 1967. A goal of the recovery plan was to translocate squirrels from Maryland and Delaware into unoccupied habitat. Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was one of the places in Virginia where the squirrel was translocated. A total of 34 squirrels were released in three sessions during 1968, 1970 and 1971. According to the DFS Recovery Plan translocation are considered a success when "a new reproductive population was established on or near the release site, persisted for at least 5 years, and increased beyond the original group size" (USFWS 1993).

To monitor the squirrel population on the refuge, live trapping is done every two years. The live trapping began on the refuge in 1994 in three major locations: White Hills, Lighthouse Ridge and the Woodland Trail. In each major location 30-40 traps are placed on the ground in a grid pattern, spaced about 100 meters apart. The "trap line" is marked with orange flagging because traps are so small, like a bread container, and hard to see in the underbrush.

Traps are "pre-baited" with pecans for at 5 days prior to a trapping session. Meaning they are left open and the squirrels can enter, take the pecan, and exit the trap without being caught. Once the trapping session begins, the traps are checked twice daily: once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

When a squirrel is captured we take the weight, determine the sex and age, and then with a scanner (Mini Portable Reader, Destron Fearing) check to see if the squirrel already has a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT tag). The PIT tag gives us a 10 digit reference number we associate with a particular squirrel. The scanner sends radio waves that create a response from the microchip in the Pit tag. If the squirrel doesn't have a PIT tag, we proceed to insert a tag under the skin. The PIT tag is about the size of a grain of rice and is similar to "microchips" used for house pets like dogs and cats. Trained refuge staff performs the Pit tagging, but many Refuge Volunteers assisted in recording data and setting trap lines.