

[From Winter 1999]

Gliders on the Refuge

Thump! Rustle, rustle, rustle. Chitter, chitter, chitter. This was the reaction when we recently opened a bluebird box near the office for cleaning. The creature we disturbed was up in the tree scolding us soundly for invading the privacy of its chosen home. Further investigation led to the pleasant discovery of a small, and somewhat miffed, Southern Flying Squirrel. Large dark eyes glistened as the squirrel expressed its displeasure at being awakened in the middle of his night.



Unlike other squirrel species, flying squirrels are strictly nocturnal. They are active throughout the night gliding from tree to tree in search of food. Their eyes, well adapted for night vision, shine ruby red in the glare of a flashlight. Because they're nocturnal, flying squirrels are seldom seen. But there are ways to detect their presence. Listen for their high pitched "tseet" calls from the treetops at night or the softer "thump" made by their bodies when they land. Scurrying sounds on rooftops and tree trunks may also be clues.

The Southern Flying Squirrel's scientific name, *Claucomys volans* translates to "gray mouse flying," and that is exactly how it appears. Somewhat mouse-like in appearance, the flying squirrel has thick, soft gray to brown fur above, with a black stripe along the side and white below. Dark eyes and prominent ears add to the similarity. The squirrel though has flying membranes, loose flaps of skin between the front and back legs on either side. These membranes are pulled taut when the legs are extended turning the squirrel's body into a furry kite.

Contrary to its name, however, the flying squirrel does not truly fly, but rather glides from tree to tree, launching itself from as high as 60 feet in the air. The squirrel gauges the distance to the landing site by swaying its body and head from side to side several times.

When gliding, the squirrel controls the angle, speed and course of the glide by varying the slackness in each of the membranes. The broad, flat tail is used as a rudder for steering during the glide. Most glides are between 20-30 feet in length, but they can extend 150 feet or more if needed.

Gliding ability is necessary because flying squirrels are almost entirely arboreal, living up in the trees and rarely on the ground. They prefer to live in woodlots and forests of deciduous or mixed deciduous coniferous trees. They nest primarily in cavities left behind

by woodpeckers, but will also utilize nest boxes, and may even find their way into an attic. During the winter they congregate in one nest, presumably to keep warm.

Flying squirrels eat a variety of seeds, nuts, insects, bird eggs, and will even eat meat if available. Hickory nuts and acorns are staples of their diets. A hickory nut with a circular or elliptical hole in its side is one that might have been eaten by a flying squirrel. They are also attracted to bird feeders where they like peanut butter, sunflower seeds, and assorted nuts.

Does your bird feeder empty overnight? Do you hear soft thumps outside your house in the evening? Hear chittering in the woods? Do you have an unidentified nest in your birdhouse in the backyard? Watch carefully and you may have the pleasant surprise of discovering a flying squirrel as your neighbor.

Nancy Biegel
Recreation Assistant, ESVNWR

Resource: *The Wild Mammals of Missouri*, Charles W. Schwartz, Elizabeth R. Schwartz, University of Missouri Press and Missouri Conservation Commission, Columbia, Missouri, c. 1959.