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Chicagoans asked to count, report on squirrels

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 By Phil Schwarz

May 5, 2009 (CHICAGO) (WLS) -- The Midwest is a hot spot- according to squirrels.

And, now scientists want to figure out just how many of the furry critters live in the Chicago area.

Steve Sullivan, a biologist with the Nature Museum, is heading up Project Squirrel.

"Project Squirrel is a way that anybody can get involved in looking at the natural world in their neighborhoods and by submitting data about the squirrels in their neighborhoods. That helps us understand about all of the ecological processes going on in our backyards every day," said Sullivan.

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Five hundred people are submitting their squirrel observations to his website, <http://www.projectsquirrel.org/index.shtml>. He'd like the number of contributors-- or so-called citizen scientists-- to reach 5,000.

While some find these critters cute and cuddly, others could easily do without them.

"It's a nice animal. Peaceful. But, you know, I don't really watch them too much," said Marty Pacino.

They kind of creep me out, like rats. They have a cute outfit, but they're just squirrels, I don't know. I don't like them," said Laurie McGranahan.

Contributors to Project Squirrel are asked to complete a checklist that asks for the

date, time and location, as well as other specifics of their squirrel sightings. Also, they're asked to report when there aren't any squirrels around. There are no requirements becoming a scientist for Project Squirrel, but it is helpful if contributors can identify the difference between types of squirrels. The two most common squirrels in the Chicagoland area are gray squirrels and fox squirrels. Fox squirrels have a rusty-colored belly; gray squirrels have a white belly.

According to Sullivan, fox squirrels are better at handling predators while gray squirrels are more adept at dealing with fox squirrels.

By better understanding squirrels, scientists hope to gain insight into the rodents' behavior and the region's ecology.

To help with the squirrel count visit:
<http://www.projectsquirrel.org/index.shtml>

Besides the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, University of Illinois at Chicago and Chicago Academy of Sciences are all involved.

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