



# Citizen scientists asked to track squirrel sightings

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Published: 5/4/2009 2:59 PM | Updated: 5/4/2009 9:27 PM

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See that squirrel crashing through the tree branches and dive-bombing into the yard?

## Related links

Here's another question: Is it a gray squirrel or a fox squirrel?

- [Project Squirrel home page](#)

Got the answer? Congratulations, you've just become a participant in Project Squirrel.

Although it sounds like a "Bullwinkle" episode where Boris and Natasha hatch another scheme to dispatch moose and squirrel, this ambitious science project is a joint effort of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, the University of Illinois at Chicago -- and you.

Scientists are on a quest to ferret out every gray and fox squirrel in the city and suburbs.

They want to capture a comprehensive picture of the status of these frisky rodents to shine a light on the ecology of our neighborhoods. The goal is to obtain squirrel data from every ZIP code in the region.

That's where you come in, citizen scientist.

Researchers are asking the public to record their findings on [projectsquirrel.org](http://projectsquirrel.org).

The Midwest is "a squirrel hot spot," said Steve Sullivan, an urban ecologist with the Notebaert Museum, who's heading up Project Squirrel.

"Everyone has an opinion on squirrels - you may love them, you may hate them. What I hope is that people will make squirrel-watching part of their daily activities, and this will contribute to the scientific understanding of the ecology of the Chicago region."

For starters, researchers are asking people to stop thinking about backyards as backyards and start viewing them as "urban game parks."

"When people think of a game park, they think about the Serengeti and lions killing wildebeests," Sullivan said.

But the neighborhoods of Schaumburg or Naperville can be just as perilous for wildlife with interactions between birds and cats, squirrels and cars providing high drama -- if you just know where to look.

"The suburbs are a very interesting, dynamic ecosystem. It's all just as life and death, as 'nature, red in tooth and claw,' as anything in the Serengeti," said Sullivan, quoting poet Alfred Tennyson.

Thanks to animal shows on television, "I suspect more people in the city and suburbs can identify African and Asian elephants versus the gray squirrel and the fox squirrel," he added. "It's simply because they've not been given the tools to look outside the window and understand these things."

For the record, gray squirrels have gray backs and sides, white or grayish bellies and tails edged with white.

Fox or red squirrels have orange or rust-colored backs and sides, orange bellies and tails fringed with black.

People logging into the Project Squirrel Web site are directed to a checklist that asks for information, such as date and time of your squirrel sighting, location, trees in the area and whether predators like dogs or cats were present.

"Squirrels can tell us about the presence and absence of predators, the presence and absence of food sources, the presence and absence of housing - this tells us what our neighborhoods are like," Sullivan said.

Scientists hope to find patterns explaining squirrel behavior and interactions with humans, such as why they invade attics or dig up bulbs in some areas and not in others.

Project Squirrel scientists began their studies in 1997 and have already discovered numerous furry factoids. These include:

- Gray squirrels are city slickers, preferring urban areas compared to their country cousins, the fox squirrels, which favor the suburbs.
- Fox squirrels hang out in areas with elm and maple trees while gray squirrels lean toward pines and oaks.

But these observations are just the beginning for researchers.

"This is not just a one-shot deal, if we can really drum up participation, we can keep on expanding," Sullivan said.

For example, "if someone's reporting no squirrels in the backyard, but in the adjacent town there are tons of fox squirrels, that could be a place to set up additional studies.

"If you watch squirrels for a month or two, you won't see much fluctuation. If you watch them for multiple years, you will see interesting patterns."

Sullivan also is reaching out to local forest preserve districts and community groups to include them in the project.

But the most important participant is you, he notes.

"This project includes everybody, no matter who you are and where you live," Sullivan said. "You simply look out the window and either see a squirrel or don't see a squirrel. Even if you don't see a squirrel, the absence of squirrels is also data.

"We want to get that guy down the street who plays video games all day and the nice grandma who feeds the birds. These people can make significant observations."

### **A tail of two squirrels**

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#### Gray squirrel

- Illinois native
- Gray back and side, white or gray belly, white-edged tail
- Slightly smaller than fox squirrels
- Tends to live in the middle of forests

#### Fox or red squirrel

- Illinois native

- Orange or rust back and side, rust-colored belly, black fringe on tails
- Larger than gray squirrel
- Tends to live on the edge of forests