THE PEGGY NOTEBAERT
NATURE MUSEUM
The Museum of the Chicago Academy of Sciences

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Nature Museum, UIC Take Project Squirrel to the Next Level
Citizen Science Initiative Tracks Urban Wildlife Across Chicagoland

CHICAGO (March 11, 2009) – All eyes are on a certain rodent in Chicago now that Project Squirrel is underway. The initiative, a collaboration between the Chicago Academy of Sciences' Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), has citizen scientists tracking the presence of fox and gray squirrels in city neighborhoods in hopes of learning more about the local environment and how it is changing.

"Squirrel populations have been documented to respond to changes in the urban nature," said Steve Sullivan, curator of urban ecology at the Nature Museum. "Because they are such important indicators of city environments, a snapshot of their abundance will let us draw conclusions about the ecological processes going on in different neighborhoods that are difficult for humans to see. For example, squirrels can tell us a lot about the effect predators have on the wildlife that live in our yards."

Volunteer citizen scientists are asked to log onto www.projectsquirrel.org to submit their observations on the fox and gray squirrel populations at least four times a year. Sullivan hopes watching squirrels will eventually become part of Chicagoans' daily routine.

"Count the squirrels near your house as you leave for work, count the ones you see on your lunch break," he said. "By reporting their squirrel observations, Chicagoans can help us gather data at a scale and volume that are not otherwise possible. The more data points we get, the more accurate our understanding of our city's ecology."

Project Squirrel originated in 1997 as a citizen scientist study conducted by Dr. Wendy Jackson and UIC Professor of Biological Sciences Joel Brown. This initial study showed that grey and fox squirrels have a very interesting mechanism of coexistence.

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The new phase of Project Squirrel intends to find out which squirrel is more dominant in different neighborhoods, which will eventually help scientists understand how animals view Chicago's natural environment—from food sources to predators, housing to mating sites.

Brown, who has been working closely with Sullivan, said he is pleased the project he initiated more than a decade ago is being re-invigorated.

"I'm delighted to work with the Museum to take Project Squirrel to the next phase," he said. "Squirrels truly are cultural time capsules whose presence tells us what has changed over time."

Within a year, Sullivan hopes to capture squirrel data from every Chicago zip code. Following the conclusions he makes about squirrels, he also plans to examine the human aspect of it, by looking at how being involved in citizen science projects effects people's perceptions of nature. He also intends to compare the modern data to historical data contained in the collections of the Chicago Academy of Sciences.

"By working together, one squirrel observation at a time, we can begin to really understand the ecology happening in our city, on our block; and I think most people will agree, squirrel watching is pretty fun," Sullivan said.

For more information about Project Squirrel, visit www.projectsquirrel.org.

About the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum

Celebrating more than 150 years of science exploration and education, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum is the teaching and learning center of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, founded in 1857 as Chicago's first museum dedicated to educating Chicagoans about nature and science through the preservation and display of native specimens, classroom activities, and dissemination of scientific knowledge.

Today the Nature Museum continues the Academy's tradition of education about nature in greater Chicago, research, and conservation through participatory exhibits and programs, educational outreach, and ongoing scientific activity. Its collections, due to their age and type, are among the most important in the region. The Museum's distinctive experience includes extensive involvement in schools and classrooms, and the opportunities for visitors to learn about nature up close.

Since its opening 10 years ago, the Nature Museum has welcomed more than 1.8 million visitors and provides hands-on exhibitions and programs to 70,000 students annually and trains and provides resources for more than 1,500 Chicago teachers in over 430 schools. The Nature Museum engages visitors, especially urban dwellers, in new ways to connect with and preserve the natural world through a unique indoor/outdoor experience. The Museum is one of the city's best examples of eco-friendly building technology with lush outdoor nature trails and habitat, green roof, rain barrels and solar panels.

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