



# RIVERSIDE/BROOKFIELD LANDMARK

Tuesday, July 14, 2009

## Getting squirrely

*Brookfield biologist believes the critters can tell us a lot about urban biodiversity*

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Very interesting: Steve Sullivan jots down notes on one of his furry friends, the subject of his Project Squirrel.

Frank Pinc/Staff Photographer



Studying up: Steve Sullivan began Project Squirrel in March, building on work done in 1997 by two University of Illinois scientists. He believes studying squirrels can give insight into biodiversity in the Chicago area.

biodiversity increases we're living in a place where we create conditions for us and native plants and animals to live side by side.

"We're creating the foundation of getting snapshots of urban biodiversity," Sullivan said.

Whether they're digging up your crocus bulbs or clutching a tree trunk and tormenting your dog, squirrels are a fact of life in Chicago and its suburbs. But more than being part of the scenery, one Brookfield man believes that observing squirrels can give us greater insight into the health of the ecosystems we humans inhabit.

As a result, Steve Sullivan - who spends his days as an urban ecologist for the Chicago Academy of Sciences' Peggy Notebaert Museum - has started Project Squirrel, which invites "citizen scientists" to gather data on squirrel populations in Chicago and the suburbs.

"I want to see urban biodiversity through squirrels' eyes," Sullivan said. "Much like the census we do every 10 years, I'd like to keep this going as a real-time biodiversity tool."

The centerpiece of Project Squirrel is a Web site ([www.projectsquirrel.org](http://www.projectsquirrel.org)) where anyone can enter their observations about squirrels and their activities. In addition to information about the two main squirrel species in the Chicago area, there's an online form where people can record their personal observations, the types of squirrels they're seeing, in what numbers, their location (as in zip code) and other bits of information.

Sullivan said that since March, when the Web site launched, he's had about 2,000 unique contributors to the site, who have provided between 3,000 and 4,000 responses. He's hoping that participants will contribute at least one observation per season (four per year).

"We hope to be able to see the ebbs and flows of the squirrel population," Sullivan said. "It's necessary to have one year's worth of data to have anything meaningful."

Two species of squirrels predominate in the Chicago area, including Riverside, Brookfield and North Riverside -grey squirrels and fox squirrels. Grey squirrels have gray backs and sides, white bellies and a tail fringed in white. Fox squirrels on the other hand have orange or rust-colored backs and sides, orange bellies and tails fringed in black.

Most areas including those in the Landmark's coverage area include both species. However, some areas for some reason are home to just one species. Initial observations about Chicago area squirrels date from 1997, when two University of Illinois scientists did a study on the coexistence of grey and fox squirrels in the Chicago area.

Sullivan, a graduate of Brigham Young University, is working on his Ph.D. at University of Illinois.

The Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, for example, has been a stronghold of the grey squirrel, while the city of Berwyn is home to only fox squirrels. Oak Park, which used to have lots of fox squirrels, now has mostly grey squirrels. Why? That's what Project Squirrel is set up to find out.

"Brookfield played a role in that," said Sullivan, who has lived in the village with his wife for eight years. "It's unusual in that the village has grey and fox squirrels in the same numbers. It stimulated my imagination as a biologist. Why do these two different species of tree squirrels exist together? How do species determine their ranges? So I set about looking for ways to answer this."

The Web site lets citizen scientists observe their neighborhoods and enter their data.

"As we get more and more data, we'll get a clearer picture of what's going on here," Sullivan said.

One experiment Sullivan is about to launch involves gauging the balance of predators by charting how much food a squirrel leaves behind. For example, does the presence of a dog nearby affect the presence of squirrels?

"Are dogs really important predators to squirrels?" Sullivan asked.

Meanwhile, one feral cat if not fed on a regular basis, can kill 100 birds per year, according to Sullivan.

"Can a squirrel tell us: "Does this neighborhood have a balance of predators? Our hypothesis is yes," Sullivan said. "As