

Nature Notes

The Red Squirrel



The agility of this feisty little mammal (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) is amazing despite its annoying habits of scolding trespassers on its territory and invading our buildings to build nests or store cones.

The red squirrel is found wherever in North America there are coniferous trees. It relies upon a variety of calls and postures to defend a territory vigorously, aggressively chasing interlopers if need be. It is totally omnivorous and will eat conifer seeds, other seeds, berries, insects, birds eggs and nestlings, voles, and amphibians.



Photo by John Plaistow

It is active year round and survives winter by harvesting thousands of coniferous cones in the late summer and fall (as many as 16,000 cones) then storing them in great mounds either above or below ground. Fungi are harvested, dried in trees, and added to this food cache. Squirrels easily dig through the snow in order to get at these caches in the winter. They build winter nests by lining a tree or an underground cavity with soft material, sometimes scavenged from places like the soft lining of your barbeque cover. Often their homes are located amidst the piles of shredded conifer cones called middens. When the winter weather is very cold they may temporarily abandon above ground nests for a nest under the snow, increase their metabolic rate by 3 or 4 times, and become active around mid day when it is warmest. They can be observed all year in the Kimberley Nature Park.

Red squirrels mate in early spring when the female will allow a male into her territory for one day only before banishing him for the rest of the year. They give birth (usually in a tree cavity) to 2 to 7 hairless, blind, helpless babies 35 to 38 days later. The young open their eyes at 5 weeks, and are weaned at 7-8 weeks. They disperse for a life on their own at around 18 weeks of age when they must find their own territory.

Their curved claws and the ability to rotate their hind feet 180 degrees mean they can run down a tree as easily as up while their bushy tails help with balance and along with spread legs enable the squirrels to survive long falls from tree tops unscathed.

Few survive more than two years due to predation by weasels, marten, coyotes, hawks, and owls but those with good territories can survive for 6 years while those in captivity they may live as long as 9 or 10 years. The highest mortality rate is in the first year of life while the young squirrels are still trying to find a territory and are exposed to predation while searching for food.

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