

Nature Notes

The Flying Squirrel



The northern flying squirrel is a common Kimberley Nature Park resident though it is rarely seen because it is strictly nocturnal. It is widely distributed all across forested sections of Canada and parts of the USA.

Northern flying squirrels (*Glaucomys sabrinus*) prefer mature coniferous forests where they can glide from tree to tree while avoiding large clear spaces. Old trees and dead snags provide nesting sites. They can glide as far as 45 meters by stretching a furry membrane called a patagium and utilizing a flattened tail. Most “flights” are between 5 and 25 meters in distance after which the animals will often run around to



In flight (photo peiblog.ca)

the far side of the landing tree to escape any predators which might be in pursuit. Their large eyes and long whiskers are adaptations to their nocturnal activity. They do not hibernate nor go into a state of torpor during the winter and may share nests with 4 to 10 other individuals in order to conserve body heat during cold spells. They usually don't live longer than four years due to predation from owls, hawks, martens, and weasels as well as domestic cats.

Flying squirrels give birth to 2 to 6 hairless babies in late spring or early summer after a gestation period of 40 days. The ears of the babies open at 2-6 days, fur begins to grow at day 7, and the eyes open around day 24-30. During this time the young are fed milk then insects and tender twigs. They leave the nest around day 40, are weaned by day 60, and are fully independent in 4 to 6 months.

A major food source is various fungi which are located by scent as well as by memory of previous locations and by looking near coarse woody debris. They also eat lichens, carrion, birds eggs and nestlings, insects, plant buds and flowers, seeds, and nuts when available. They spend time on the ground digging for fungi and are known to steal from red squirrel caches when they can. Flying squirrels also will cache food such as seeds and lichens in their nests or in other tree cavities for times when food is scarce. Flying squirrels play an important ecological role in forests as they help to distribute the spores of fungi symbiotic with coniferous trees. Hence the animal gets food while the fungi get dispersal. Meanwhile the conifers on which the squirrels live get assistance from the fungi in absorbing water and minerals. The fungi in turn absorb organic compounds from the trees. Forests contain many such complex webs of relationships.



On a suet feeder

(photo wingscapes.com)

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