



Fox Squirrel

Taking a Closer Look at Fox Squirrel!

By Merrill Tawse

Well, we have another new addition or change to our menagerie of educational animals. Maybe it would be better to say we have made an exchange. Ever since the construction banging started our resident Red Squirrel became very quiet and withdrawn. We thought it might return to its normal active self when the construction ended but such was not the case. It became evident that the stress of visitors coming and going was too much for it. So we retired it and plan to release it in the spring.

Since the squirrels have always been a popular and valuable in our programming about native wildlife we set out to locate a replacement. A couple of weeks ago we located a Fox Squirrel. A lady living in Michigan raised the squirrel from an orphan but spent too much time handling and playing with it. When she moved to West Central Ohio she turned it over to Brukner Nature Center. The staff there determined that it could never be successfully released back into the wild so we now have it.

In the past we have had Gray and Red Squirrels, this is our first Fox Squirrel. You will quickly become aware that it gravitates towards people (some times with a loud pounce onto the front of its cage). This strong attraction is what would become a problem if it were put out into the wild. The confusion between the “trained” attraction towards and the instinctive fear of people could result in someone being hurt by the squirrels claws or teeth. **He drew blood from me the other day** and not the way the Red Cross does. Soooo - be careful if you open his cage door, He Leaps!

Fox Squirrels are sometimes confused with Gray Squirrels. The quickest way to distinguish them from a Gray Squirrel is that the Fox Squirrel’s undersides are yellow to orange instead of the white on Grays. Fox Squirrels are the largest tree squirrel 18 to 28 inches in length. In the wild they weigh up to three pounds. Currently ours exceeds that. Before we got it, it was too well fed.

In captivity Fox Squirrels have been known to live for 13 years and Grays have been known to live 20 years. Fox Squirrels prefer a more open habitat of the woods edge; Gray Squirrels prefer the deeper woods. Historically, Ohio did not have many Fox Squirrels, they were found more towards the prairie edges. As the European Settlers arrived and removed the trees, Fox Squirrels expanded their range eastward. (to be cont. next month)

Squirrels are Rodents, which means to gnaw. Like rodents their front four incisors are always growing. The rate of growth should equal the rate that they wear away due to gnawing. The front surface of their incisors is an orange-yellow color. This form of enamel is harder than the back surface. The difference in hardness, causes an uneven wear so that the front surface remains longer and it tapers downward to the back. This wear pattern results in the forming of a sharp chisel shape. Rodents have an advantage over other plant eaters in their ability to cut open hard seeds or nuts. This advantage can lead to their demise. If the animal does not chew on hard material, or the teeth do not line up properly, the front incisors are capable of growing right up into their skull.

The *Sciurides*, or squirrels are divided into the Gliding (Flying Squirrel), the Ground (like the Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel) and the Tree Squirrel. In our area it includes the Red, Gray and Fox Squirrels. Like all of our tree squirrels, Fox Squirrels do not hibernate, instead they gather and stockpile food when it is abundant to meet their needs later. Fox Squirrels are scatter-hoarders, they place one or two nuts in shallow covered scrapes on the ground, located near tree bases within their territories. Red Squirrels are referred to as ladder-hoarders, cutting and collecting seeds and nuts and placing them in a central spot like a tree hollow. Both of these "hiding behaviors" help reduce food losses to visual seed predators. Blue Jays, Woodpeckers, Wild Turkey, and Crows all feed on many of the seeds cached by squirrels.

The Fox like other squirrels feed on acorns, Hickory nuts, Walnuts, Maple and Tulip seeds, as well as fungi, tree buds and berries. Acorns from the White Oaks germinate when they fall to the ground in Autumn, whereas the Red Oaks do not until spring. The Squirrels will bite and remove the seed embryo before caching them.

As Fox Squirrels venture out to gather food they descend down a tree and then stop to do their "head-scan" posture. From here they check before leaving the safety of the tree. During its active periods our captive one assumes this position frequently when on his log. His active periods (early morning and late afternoon) seem to correlate with those of the wild populations.

This time of the year, whether in the woods or your backyard, is a good time to observe the antics of our native squirrels. By December males are establishing a territory and will be chasing each other and giving their "que que que" and sputtering calls. By late January through February, the male's attention is turned towards females and mating takes place. Footprints seen in the snow, beginning at one tree and ending at another, are a sure sign you are in squirrel territory.

In the woodland treetops you can see the remains of the summer leaf nests called drays. These were constructed out of leaves and form a sphere about the size of a basketball. By winter they den inside tree hollows unless there are not enough to go around. Those forced to use a dray in the open will reinforce it but chances of survival are greatly diminished.

One final note: our is a male! You may not want to stand too close to the front of the cage (you may get squirted!)! I am going to be building him a new, larger cage and I'm considering a Plexiglas front shield!