



Flying Squirrel

Taking a Closer Look at Flying Squirrel!

By Merrill Tawse

Glycomys volans the “big eyed glider”, known as the Southern Flying Squirrel. This volant animal is not able to truly fly, (bats are the only mammals that can) but rather only able to glide, always ending up in a place lower than when it first jumped. We try to regularly keep one or two of these unusual, easy to care for squirrels, for display in the visitor center.

The Flying Squirrel is the smallest tree squirrel, about the size of an adult hamster. They are fairly common but not often seen by people because of their nocturnal and arboreal habits. If an area has several mature hickory, beech or oak trees there are probably Flying Squirrels. As a child I kept and bred these animals in my bedroom. At night, with my door closed I opened their cage and gave them full rein of the bedroom. Thus began a night of them bounding from place to place, especially the young ones. Climbing up the curtains and leaping across the room. At times, I was awakened as they landed on my pillow. By morning they would be back in their cage curled up in the nest box for a day of sleep. Empty nutshells turned up in the strangest of places.

If you look closely at our resident ones you will see some of the adaptations for this type of mobility. Firstly, their large eyes provide them with good night vision. The vision is important for detecting potential predators as well as navigating successfully to landing sites. Flying Squirrels have a much more effective means of travel than just jumping branch to branch like other arboreal squirrels. They can travel to more distant trees with their ability to glide distances of over 200 feet.

This gliding is important in that each time a squirrel has to come down to the ground in order to travel there is a much greater risk of being preyed upon. Most squirrels can jump five feet or so from the branch of one tree to another without setting foot on the ground. They have a lateral fold of skin between the front and back leg which, when it extended, forms a surface of five to six inches square. This skin fold is

called a patagium. The squirrel can turn in the air if necessary by moving its legs and changing the shape of this airfoil. To further assist in control of their flight, Flying Squirrels do not have the typical busy tail of most squirrels. Instead their tail is flat and broad. The tail functions as a rudder and a brake for landing.

Just at dusk, sometimes you can observe these animals. Prior to taking flight the squirrel will be in a head down position high on a tree trunk while moving its head back and forth. This movement better enables the squirrel to determine, by triangulation, the distance to the intended landing spot. Jumping out and spreading out its patagium it begins a downward glide that curves back up at the last moment before landing on another tree trunk. At this point the squirrel will disappear as it scurries to the backside of the tree to avoid any pursuing predator. It then begins a rapid climb upward.

Flying Squirrels are quite vocal, especially now at this busy time of the year when they are storing away their winter supply of food. Their bird-like calls can frequently be heard from high in the trees after dark. Some people first become aware that they have Flying Squirrels around their homes when they catch them visiting their bird feeders at night. Especially in fall, the turning on of an outside light can expose them. People also become aware of their presence when the squirrel moves into their house for the winter. Ours in the Visitor Center are ones that were live trapped in people's homes.

In the winter, they are more social, denning together in groups of up to 50 to share body warmth. When the winter ends, they depart somewhat from their diet of seeds and nuts to include fruits, as they appear, fungus, and animal material. Flying Squirrels are much more carnivorous than other rodents. They regularly eat insects, bird eggs as well as baby birds. This has caused them on more than one occasion to switch from the "quite cuddly" to the "villain" in the eyes of some Bluebird Trail Monitors.

Being a relatively short-lived animal, we are often looking for new replacements. Let us know if you get a call about one in someone's house. We might be interested.