



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

GRAY AND RED SQUIRRELS IN MASSACHUSETTS



Gray squirrel



Red squirrel

Both gray and red squirrels are common and abundant in Massachusetts. Gray squirrels are found everywhere, including Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, while red squirrels are absent from both islands. Red squirrels are sometimes called "pine squirrels" or "chickarees"; the gray squirrel is also known as the "eastern gray squirrel." Both are members of the squirrel family, along with flying squirrels, chipmunks, and woodchucks.

DESCRIPTION

Gray squirrels are medium-sized, tree-climbing squirrels. The sexes look similar, with adults averaging 15–20 inches in total length and tails averaging 6–9.5 inches. Typically grizzled or light gray they have white on the chin, throat, and belly. Melanistic (black) individuals are present in many areas. Red squirrels are small- to medium-sized tree-climbing squirrels. The sexes look the same, adults are between 10.5 and 15 inches long with tails averaging 3.5–6 inches. Red squirrels are typically rusty red or reddish brown on the back and white or gray-white on the belly. The tail is rusty, sometimes tinged with yellow.

LIFE HISTORY

Gray squirrels use both leaf nests and natural cavities

for shelter and for rearing the young. Leaf nests are most commonly constructed in hardwoods; cavities in live trees are preferred. Gray squirrels usually breed at 10–14 months of age. Yearlings have only one litter per year but adults may breed twice annually depending on food availability. Winter breeding occurs in January to February and summer breeding from May to July. The 2–3 young are born after a 44–45-day gestation period and are weaned at 8–10 weeks. Red squirrels tend to prefer tree leaf nests over cavities, but sometimes use rock dens and burrows. Age at first breeding is 10–12 months, red squirrels typically have a single litter, with 1–7 young born during March-May after a 31–35 day gestation period. The young are weaned at 7–8 weeks.

FOOD

Gray squirrels have diverse diets, however, nuts such as oak acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts, and walnuts may comprise three quarters of their annual diet. They also eat berries, fruits, seeds, buds, and flowers, as well as cultivated grains. Red squirrels are also opportunistic, but most commonly feed on conifer seeds. They also eat fungi, buds, and the inner bark of trees, and occasionally nuts, seeds, fruits, grains, insect larvae, and bird nestlings.

HABITS AND HABITAT

Gray squirrels are best described as crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) in spring, summer, and fall but are active only during midday in winter. They may be especially active in fall when nuts are abundant. They are not territorial, but may defend the immediate area around a nest site. Red squirrels are active during the day but may rest during periods of intense midday heat. During severe winter weather, they may remain inactive in their nests. Juveniles establish home ranges on, or adjacent to, that of their mother. They are territorial and defend their areas against other red squirrels.

Gray squirrels are tolerant of human presence and often live in urban or suburban areas with large, mature shade trees. They are also typically found in extensive mature hardwood forests, especially oak-hickory forests, often with dense understory vegetation. Red squirrels are found primarily in mature coniferous forests, typically pine, spruce, or balsam fir forests. In suburban areas, they are often found in small pine plantations or woodlots interspersed with some hardwoods. Squirrels live in the habitats that contain their preferred foods.

TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

Gray squirrels are responsible for more damage than are red squirrels especially in urban or suburban areas. When populations are high and food sources are abundant new squirrels will quickly replace any that are removed. To avoid or reduce damage and make your property less attractive to squirrels consider these options:

PROTECT GARDENS: Electrified netting or other small electric fences may be useful in keeping squirrels out of gardens and small orchards. A small dome or cage of chicken wire placed over individual plants or small rows can protect plants until they get large enough to be uninteresting to the squirrels.

CLOSE OFF ENTRANCES: Squirrels can enter attics, crawl spaces, or sheds for nesting or shelter and may damage the structure, pull apart insulation, or chew electrical wires. Close openings with heavy-gauge ½-inch wire mesh or hardware cloth. Be careful not to block squirrels inside as they may do considerable damage trying to get out. Trim branches and trees within 6–8 feet of the building to prevent squirrels from jumping onto your roof. Mothballs may sometimes discourage squirrels from using crawl spaces or other enclosed spaces, but do not use mothballs in human-occupied dwellings. Commercial taste repellents (e.g., Ro-pel® or other similar products) can be applied to seeds, bulbs, flowers, shrubs, fences, and siding to discourage squirrels. Do not use D-Con® or other similar products as these are formulated for and are legal only for use on rats and mice inside buildings. Squirrels may only be sickened and dead squirrels may cause secondary poisoning of raptors, domestic pets, and other scavengers. It is illegal to use poisons to eliminate wildlife, even if the animals are in a dwelling or other building.

KEEP BIRD FEEDER AREAS CLEAN: Bird feeders on poles may be protected with commercial conical squirrel guards that prevent a climbing squirrel from getting past the cone. Spilled seed attracts mice and squirrels to the ground below the feeder; predators may then be attracted to the rodents.

LETHAL REMOVAL: Traps may be effective in removing squirrels within an attic or other confined space. Any trapped animal must either be relocated on the premises (within the property) or destroyed humanely; it is illegal to transport and release wildlife to another location. Shooting is quick, simple, and effective in areas where firearm discharge is safe and legal. A .22 caliber rifle or a shotgun with #6 shot or smaller is suitable. This method may be most effective when targeting a few persistent animals.

Squirrels are an important natural resource in Massachusetts. They are classified as game species, for which regulated hunting seasons and management programs have been established.

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH SQUIRRELS OR HAVE QUESTIONS, VISIT [MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE](https://www.mass.gov/masswildlife) OR CONTACT YOUR NEAREST MASSWILDLIFE OFFICE:

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607
Connecticut Valley Wildlife District, Belchertown: (413) 323-7632
Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145
Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406
Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646
Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

Photos courtesy of MassWildlife/Bill Byrne