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## Natural History Notes

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### THE EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL



Perhaps the squirrel's most noticeable feature is its bushy plume-like tail. In fact, the genetic name, *Sciurus*, means shadetail. It is said that in the Garden of Eden the squirrel had a rat-like tail. Rather than look at the shameful sight, it hid its eyes and was rewarded with a beautiful new tail. The squirrel keeps its tail well groomed because of its extreme importance to this little rodent. The tail is used to balance the squirrel in its aerial leaps and also to turn or change the angle of fall. Muscles control the long hairs on the tail which can be spread to offer the most wind resistance and therefore slow down its speed when coming in for a landing. The tail is used to shade the squirrel from the sun, as a blanket when it sleeps and as an umbrella when it rains. All in all, it is a very important and useful appendage.

The Eastern Gray Squirrel is a medium sized rodent with the characteristic chisel-like incisor teeth used for gnawing. It has large black eyes and short rounded ears. Its relatively long toes have sharp hooked claws that are especially well adapted to climbing. In summer, the gray squirrel is dark rust tinged gray and a lighter silvery gray in winter. Black and white color forms are common. This squirrel is an average 18" long at maturity, half of which is tail. The squirrel weighs about one to one and a half pounds.

Squirrels are found throughout the world except in Australia. The Eastern Gray Squirrel is found from southern Canada to Florida and west to the Great Plains. It is found in forests, suburbs, city parks and bird feeders.

After a 44 day gestation period, a litter of 4 to 5 are born in February, March or April. The young are born naked, blind and helpless. At about 5 or 6 weeks of age the young squirrel's eyes open and they are covered with fur. They then leave the nest and are able to fend pretty much for themselves. The young stay with their mother throughout the summer, fall and probably their first winter. The life expectancy of a gray squirrel in the wild is up to ten years with an average of five years.

Gray squirrels feed on an assortment of nuts, seeds, berries and mushrooms. They also occasionally eat bird eggs, insects and may inadvertently destroy a young tree by stripping the bark. However, they do their share in reforestation by failing to dig up all the nuts they have buried.

The Gray Squirrel's enemies are foxes, bobcats, housecats and dogs. Other predators include hawks, snakes and man. In some regions of the country, the squirrel is the most important game animal. It is hunted as a food source, as sport and for its fur. Bounties were once placed on this squirrel because it was so destructive to crops. For some reason, squirrels are attracted to underground telephone cables and may gnaw through them. This annoying little habit may cause up to one million dollars damage per year. Gray squirrels may also become pests around bird feeders. Although the Gray Squirrel can be a nuisance, they are a part of the balance of nature. Learn to deal with their bad habits and appreciate the nice things about them.