

Tree Squirrel Is Just That



Along the Trail By Ken Legg

On a recent trip to the Cowell State park at Felton, I remember seeing tree squirrels that didn't appear gray enough to be of our native species. The eastern fox squirrel, somewhat orange, red or brownish in color, has been introduced into California, and I am guessing that some may be in the Felton area.

The California tree squirrel, of which there is but one species, is uniformly gray on the back and sides, with distinctly white underparts. It has a very bushy tail and a graceful body.

Possibly the greatest value of the squirrel to mankind in California, is his aesthetic attraction. Gray squirrels inhabit many city and state parks, where they are photographed, fed and watched by a host of admirers. The agile fellow in the picture is a resident of Golden Gate park in San Francisco.

Many relatives of these city dwellers inhabit less urban places. Most heavily wooded areas in the state, which have an ample food source, can boast a squirrel population. They are equally at home in the mountain pine belt or in the valley lowlands.

In the Monterey pine forests near Carmel and Monterey, the gray squirrel subsists largely upon pine nuts extracted from the green cones which they cut from the trees. The graceful, gray rodent sits upon a limb, holding the cone in its forepaws, and proceeds to whittle it down until nothing remains but a core. Somewhere, in the process of all this work, the squirrel finds some seeds. Fungi, the so-called "toadstools," are favorite food items in these pine forests. Even those which are deadly poisonous to us are eaten with immunity by the squirrel.

Gray squirrel populations seem to fluctuate, the cycle running from one of great abundance to a mere remnant in a period of several years.

Over-production and over-population may be factors. At Big Sur, the principal food is the nut of the California laurel. These are harvested in great numbers and are often buried by the squirrel. In certain years, when the population is at the peak, much bark is stripped from the maple trees and eaten. This bark-stripping is harmful to the trees and many die.

The squirrels apparently are seeking a rich, sweet layer of the inner bark. The fact that they seem not to do this every year many indicate they are driven to it by starvation when there is insufficient food for the great numbers of squirrels.

The gray squirrel has definite arboreal habits. He is raised in an old woodpecker hole or in a nest of twigs high above the ground, he dens in trees, and he

The California tree squirrel is known to be only one species, but that species generally is a

finds most of his food above the ground. He is expert at traveling considerable distance over an arboreal route when the trees are thick enough to permit him to do so.

Gray squirrels do not hibernate as do ground squirrels. I recall seeing the gray's tracks in snow, both in the east and in the Sierras. Such tracks show four narrow toes on the front foot and five on the rear foot.

I once watched a bobcat spring from a low perch on a tree limb upon a gray squirrel running about on the ground. Coyotes and foxes, as well as the larger hawks and owls, kill and eat these squirrels. The automobile seems to be as deadly an enemy as anything it encounters in the wild. Squirrels seem to have little fear of autos and often dash across the highway in front of a speeding car. In the Carmel and Big Sur areas we see many that have been run over by automobiles.

Certain sections of California are open to squirrel hunting. This sport has long been a favorite pastime with southern hunters, and one who has eaten fried squirrel has no reason to wonder why.

favorite except where it turns to stripping trees of their bark because of hunger. The little fellow pictured above should not have any of that trouble—he is a resident of Golden Gate park in San Francisco—and presumably gets an ample supply of food from park visitors who like to watch his antics in the trees and on the ground.



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