

Let's Learn About Squirrels

Did you know that squirrels plant a lot of trees and help keep our forests growing? Did you know that some squirrels can even fly?

How do they do that? Keep reading to find out!



Southern Flying Squirrel in New Jersey, USA, courtesy of Patch.com

In this worksheet, you will learn more about the different types of squirrels that appear in the wild.

You will also learn about the habitat, diet, and some other interesting facts about squirrels.

All About Squirrels

Squirrels are **mammals**, which means they are warm-blooded, covered in fur, and give birth to live young. Squirrels live all over the world, except for Antarctica. In Connecticut, the Eastern Gray squirrel is most commonly seen. Red squirrels are less commonly seen in CT. Black squirrels are sometimes seen, but they are uncommon, as they are a rare type of Gray squirrel. Southern Flying squirrels also live in CT, but they are nocturnal (active at night), and are rarely seen.

In 1847, squirrels were re-introduced to Franklin Square in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to make the park more interesting and beautiful for humans. The same was done in New Haven, CT in 1850. By 1870, most city parks in the United States had populations of squirrels for our enjoyment, including Central Park in New York City. Although they were not native to the country, squirrels were brought to Australia by humans in 1880 and again in 1937. The original squirrels did not survive. Indian palm squirrels were brought to Perth Zoo in Australia in 1898, and have managed to survive and thrive, some escaping the zoo. Squirrels are now considered to be a pest in parts of Australia, and in other parts of the world. Do you think squirrels are cute creatures or problematic pests?

Squirrels in the wild may live only one year, while squirrels that live close to humans may live 5-10 years, and some may even live up to 20 years! There are 280 species of squirrels in the world, including Tree squirrels, Flying squirrels, and Ground squirrels. Did you know that chipmunks, prairie dogs, and Groundhogs are also squirrels? The Eastern Gray squirrel is the most common squirrel in the Eastern and Midwestern United States. See below for a photo!



Eastern Gray Squirrel – Photo Credit: Tim Knight

Physical Characteristics

Squirrels vary greatly in size. The size and shape of a squirrel varies depending on the type of squirrel. Squirrels may weigh as little as 5 ounces (as in the case of the chipmunk), but marmots (like groundhogs) can weigh up to 16 ½ pounds. They have short fur, long furry tails, and small, rounded ears, some with tufts of fur on the tip. Their tail helps them with balance and keeps them warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Some squirrels, like the Flying squirrel, can glide through the air because of special features on their body. Connecting their wrists and ankles is a thin layer of fur and skin. Flying squirrels are able to steer while flying with their special wrist bones. Although they are called flying squirrels, they are actually gliding, or riding on the air current.

All squirrels can climb trees, can swim, and have keen senses of sight, smell, and hearing. They have large eyes set high on their head and set apart. Their eyes are adapted to act like natural sunglasses and help them with sun glare. Their eyes also allow them to see above their body, to the side, and to the front - without ever turning their head! This special sight helps them avoid predators. Like other rodents, their front teeth never stop growing. They walk on four legs (but can stand on two), have 4 toes on each of their front feet, and have 5 toes on each of their back feet. They are easily able to grasp objects with their front feet. Their back legs are double jointed, which gives them the amazing ability to climb down trees face first. This is a really unique talent, and not many animals can do this! Squirrels can run up to 20 miles per hour and are acrobatic. They can jump 5 feet straight up into the air, can easily leap 7 feet between buildings or trees, and survive a fall from 100 feet!



Eastern Chipmunk – Photo Credit: Jacob Dingel

Habitat and Diet

Squirrels are **omnivores**, meaning they can eat both plants and animals, although they eat mostly plants. Their diet often includes nuts, seeds, fruits, plants, sap, and fungus. They may also eat insects, eggs, small birds, young snakes, and other small rodents. Squirrels need to eat their body weight in food every week to survive. They may add minerals to their diet by eating timber, deer antlers, and twigs and leaves. Squirrels need a lot of water to survive, so they will live close to water. Tree squirrels and Flying squirrels live in a nest built in a tree. Tree squirrels will build a nest in the fork between branches in a tall tree, and their nest is made of sticks and lined with moss, leaves, bark, and grass. Sometimes, they will build a nest in the attic of a house, or some other location close to a home. Flying squirrels build a nest in a hollowed-out tree and will line the nest with bark and grasses. Ground squirrels are different from Tree squirrels as they live and sleep in burrows, which they dig underground. Ground squirrels will also hibernate in their burrow for up to 4 or 5 months at a time, but they will wake up once a week to forage food and then return to hibernation.

Social Habits

Squirrels are playful, active animals. A group of squirrels is called a scurry. Ground squirrels, like the chipmunk, are the most social of squirrels, and they will live in well-built colonies with tunnel systems underground. Tree squirrels, like the Gray squirrel, protect their territory and are less social than ground squirrels. They often chase each other to show they are dominant, or stronger. Squirrels communicate with each other with chirps, barks, screams, and purrs, and may chatter their teeth as a warning. Squirrels do not mate for life. Tree squirrels can give birth to up to 9 kits (baby squirrels), while ground squirrels can give birth to up to 15! The average amount born for both tree and ground squirrels is 3-4 kits. Tree squirrels do not hibernate, unlike ground squirrels. Squirrel kits are born in late winter and early spring, and again in July or August. Squirrel kits can weigh as little as 10-15 grams when born (a nickel weighs 5 grams). Kits are born blind, and it takes 3 ½ - 5 weeks for them to open their eyes. They will typically leave the nest in 10 to 12 weeks.

Squirrels are known for their habit of storing nuts underground. The incredibly interesting part about this habit is that squirrels are known for sometimes deliberately *pretending* to hide nuts while actually not burying anything. They will do this in the case another squirrel is watching! They will then go further away and bury their nuts in another spot. Squirrels will lose about 25% of their stored nuts to other squirrels and animals, but they also do not return to dig up all the nuts they bury. Because of this, squirrels plant a LOT of trees! Whether squirrels are actually forgetful is not known, but squirrels greatly reduce deforestation, which is the loss of our trees and forests. Without squirrels, we would have a lot less trees in the world!

Did you know that the Red squirrel appears in a very important Iroquois story? It tells of a young member of the Iroquois tribe who watched a red squirrel climb a tree and lick the sap. The youth then decided to try it for himself, and according to the story, that is how Native Americans learned to use sap to make maple sugar!



American Red Squirrel courtesy of emmitsbug.net

Squirrels: Quiz

1. What type of animal is a squirrel?
 - a. Reptile
 - b. Bird
 - c. Mammal
2. What is the most common type of squirrel seen in Connecticut?
 - a. Red Squirrel
 - b. Flying Squirrel
 - c. Gray Squirrel
3. What are squirrel babies called?
 - a. Pups
 - b. Kits
 - c. Hatchlings
4. What are two differences between a Tree squirrel and a Ground squirrel?
 - a. Tree squirrels are more social and hibernate
 - b. Ground squirrels hibernate and are more social
 - c. Ground squirrels can fly and live in tree nests
5. What special characteristic does a squirrel have?
 - a. Pointed ears
 - b. Double jointed back legs to climb down trees face first
 - c. Short tail
6. Why do squirrels sometimes dig a hole and then not bury any nuts in it?
 - a. They think they can find a better spot to hide them
 - b. They are burying something else
 - c. To fool other squirrels and animals into thinking they actually buried them

(See next page for answers)

Answers: 1. c, 2. b, 3. b, 4. b, 5. b, 6. c