

One of the most recognizable and common mammals in neighborhood parks and yards is the squirrel. Squirrels have become accustomed to people and manage quite well in urban areas. They are one of the few mammals that are easily observed.



Aryan I. Roest

Western gray squirrel

### *IN THE WILD*

In California, there are over 11 species of tree and ground squirrels. Tree squirrels are excellent climbers. They use their characteristic long bushy tails for balance, communication, and to keep warm as they sleep. The nest is a large, hollow, ball-shaped mass of twigs and bark, usually lined with moss, dead leaves, and grass. These nests, called **dreys**, are most easily seen in deciduous trees in the fall. Tree squirrels occasionally nest in holes in tree trunks. Some species have one litter per year, others may have two. An average of four young, called pups, are born blind and hairless. These squirrels are adapted to life in the trees and may be more vulnerable on the ground.

Ground squirrels live in large colonies in a network of burrows. There are several species native to California. They all nest underground and have one to three litters per year. Most young are born in March and April, with an average litter of seven pups that stay underground for six weeks. These prolific rodents are prey for many predators: bobcats, coyotes, hawks, owls, eagles, foxes, weasels, and large snakes.

Both tree and ground squirrels have a varied diet consisting of nuts, seeds, fruit, buds, shoots, insects, mushrooms, bird eggs, and nestlings. As with other rodents, their incisors grow continually to compensate for the wear from tough-shelled seeds in their diet.

Ground squirrels should not be confused with tree squirrels. Although both climb trees, the two can be distinguished by their responses to danger: frightened ground squirrels retreat into burrows, tree squirrels climb a tree or high structure.

### *IN YOUR YARD*

Watching squirrels go about their daily activities can be a rewarding experience. Enjoy them at a distance—don't try to make them "wild pets."

In the fall, tree squirrels bury acorns and other nuts to eat later. This often results in new trees being planted when they fail to locate buried nuts. Offering handouts of food disrupts this important planting role, as well as interfering with their natural diet.

One result of a diet of soft food handouts is that the natural wear of their teeth ceases. This can lead to improper diet and overgrown, extruding teeth that inhibit eating and ultimately result in starvation.

For the safety of humans and other animals, it is always best to refrain from feeding any wildlife.

### *IF THEY ARE IN OR UNDER YOUR HOUSE*

Squirrels in your attic or under the house can be real pests. Before plugging any entrance holes make sure the squirrels are out and won't be trapped inside. Do not approach a squirrel that is acting abnormally or looks sick! Squirrels contract and transmit diseases that are harmful to humans, including rabies and the plague, although actual cases are rare. As with any wild animal that might be sick, maintain a safe distance and notify the animal control center in your area.

**DO NOT PICK UP LIVE OR DEAD SQUIRRELS WITH YOUR BARE HANDS.**



Joyce Kilmer

squirrel pups

## *California Ground Squirrel*

The California ground squirrel is common in grasslands and makes its nest underground. They are active during the day and use cheek pouches to carry food to their burrows. During times when food is scarce, they enter a period of inactivity and survive on stored fat during summer (estivation) and winter (hibernation). These social animals have one litter per year of about seven young. Adults aggressively defend helpless pups from rattlesnakes.



Edward S. Ross

California ground squirrel

## Fox Squirrel

The fox squirrel is a non-native tree squirrel from the Eastern U.S. commonly seen in urban parks in California. It spends most of its life in the trees or near them on the ground foraging for nuts, mushrooms, and berries. They live about seven years and rarely hibernate for more than a few weeks at a time during extremely cold spells. They make a nest in a tree and usually have two litters of three or four young in spring and summer.



fox squirrel

Joe DiDonato



### SHARING THE ENVIRONMENT TOGETHER

We can share space safely with squirrels by understanding their specific needs. To encourage a harmonious existence we must allow squirrels to forage for their own food. By not offering handouts, we maintain a safe environment for squirrels and human beings. Learning to live with the wild creatures that visit our gardens and homes is not difficult as long as we understand their ways.



### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Bird feeders offer a source of food not normally in squirrels' diets. Squirrels are very clever and persistent in their endeavors to get these free meals of seed. Keep in mind that they are quick to take advantage of a readily available food source.

There are ways to discourage squirrels while continuing to feed and watch birds without losing the food to squirrels. The feeder should be far away from high structures or the squirrels will jump to it. There are poles available for sale that squirrels aren't able to climb, and some bird feeders are designed to exclude squirrels.

A book that offers tips for protecting bird-feeders is called Outwitting Squirrels by Bill Adler, Chicago Review Press, 1988.

Text by Jessica Sheppard

### Visitor Centers & Recreation Services

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**AQUATICS UNIT**  
510-690-6620, [dmccormick@ebparks.org](mailto:dmccormick@ebparks.org)

**REGIONAL PARKS BOTANIC GARDEN**  
c/o Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley  
510-841-8732  
[bgarden@ebparks.org](mailto:bgarden@ebparks.org), [www.nativeplants.org](http://www.nativeplants.org)

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[recreation@ebparks.org](mailto:recreation@ebparks.org)

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### LIVING WITH

# Squirrels



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