

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

RED SQUIRREL

Tamiasciurus hudsonicus



Habitat: Mixed hardwood/coniferous forests. Evergreen trees, such as spruce, hemlock, pine, or fir, are almost always present within a red squirrel's range.

Weight: About 7 ounces.

Length: 11-14 inches.

Food: A variety of nuts, fruits, and seeds; the green seeds of cone-bearing trees are preferred.

Identification: The red squirrel is a rather small-sized tree squirrel, only about half the size of the more common gray squirrel. Its bushy tail is somewhat slender and almost as long as the length of its head and body combined. The coat of the red squirrel is a rusty, reddish-brown in summer, turning slightly grayer in winter, and the underside is white. In summer, a black stripe is pronounced along its sides, separating the white underside from the reddish, upper body. Both males and females are about equal in size.

Range: Red squirrels occur throughout the northern United States and parts of Canada, south into the Appalachian Mountains. They are also found in the Rocky Mountains south to Arizona and New Mexico.

Reproduction: Red squirrels nest in ground burrows, tree cavities, and leaf nests. Mating takes place in late winter and spring. After a 36- to 40-day gestation period, about three to six young are born blind and helpless. Second litters have been reported in southern parts of the red squirrel's range, but are uncommon in

Connecticut. The young red squirrels develop slowly and may remain with the female throughout the summer.

History in Connecticut: The red squirrel's reliance on hardwood/coniferous forests limits its distribution in Connecticut. However, it is considered a common Connecticut resident and has been through the years. Its population has declined somewhat with the cutting of white pine in the past and the elimination of other conifers (mainly as a result of disease) in some areas of the state.

Interesting Facts: These tree-dwelling rodents are agile climbers and jumpers. They have keen senses of sight, smell, and hearing and are alert, nervous and wary, especially on the ground. When danger is near, they quickly retreat to the safety of the trees.

Red squirrels are active year-round but will take shelter during harsh weather. In the fall, red squirrels will store their food for the winter in large underground caches. Sometimes they will bury their food at random just as the gray squirrel does.

Red squirrels are also known to tap sugar maple trees to harvest the sugar in the sap. They actually bite into the tree trunk to puncture the sap-carrying "vessel" (xylem), leave the tree to allow time for the water in the sap to evaporate, and come back to harvest the syrup remaining on the trunk and branches.

Red squirrels are unsociable, highly territorial, and aggressive. They will not tolerate their own or other squirrel species in their territories. They can also be very noisy and are sometimes nicknamed "chatter boxes."

Management of Problem Squirrels: Most complaints about squirrels are from homeowners with squirrels in their houses. Usually these complaints concern the presence of gray squirrels. Squirrels will readily take up residence in a building if access to sheltered areas such as eaves and attic crawl spaces is available. Gnawing, scratching, and pattering sounds, in early morning or daylight hours, usually signal their presence. Balls of torn insulation, cardboard, and dried leaves and twigs may pinpoint nests, but nests and young may be totally concealed within eaves or wall spaces. Squirrels in house eaves and attics can damage insulation and electrical wiring and should be removed.

When blocking holes to prevent squirrels and other animals from gaining access, be sure that none are trapped inside. Adults can cause severe damage by chewing to regain entrance to reach their young. If

chewing persists, heavy, half-inch wire mesh can be temporarily placed over the problem area. Trimming shrubs and vines and pruning overhanging tree limbs may discourage squirrels from causing problems in the home. In easily accessible areas, squirrels may be evicted by carefully applying an odor repellent like mothballs. Bright lights or noise from radios may also help.

Squirrels are highly excitable and can cause severe damage if trapped inside a building. When frightened, they tend to run around a room with reckless abandon, knocking over anything in their way. By quickly and quietly opening a door or window to the outside and leaving the room, you will give the squirrel its best chance to get out.

To free a squirrel trapped in a chimney, lower a heavy rope down the chimney to provide a means for the animal to climb out. Drop the other end of the rope to the ground to avoid another trip to the roof to retrieve it after the squirrel has left.

The live-trapping of squirrels, using metal box traps, is often the most effective way to remove them. Place traps, baited with apple chunks, peanut butter, or various nuts, in heavily traveled routes or on rooftops, along porch railings, or within the attic. Once trapped, squirrels should be released as soon as possible.



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