

Delmarva Peninsula Fox Squirrel

Sciurus niger cinereus

In the world of North American squirrels, there are tree squirrels, ground squirrels and flying squirrels, plus chipmunks and prairie dogs. Tree squirrels are larger than the others, and fox squirrels are the largest of the native tree squirrels. Among fox squirrels, the largest, and rarest, is the Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel. Historically, it lived from west-central and southern New Jersey to southern Pennsylvania and the entire peninsula east of the Chesapeake Bay that includes Delaware and parts of Maryland and Virginia, known as the Delmarva Peninsula.

However, when Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel was given Endangered Species Act protection in 1967, it occupied only four counties in Maryland, or less than 10 percent of its former range. Habitat loss is the primary cause of this subspecies' endangered status. Harvesting timber and converting forested land to agriculture reduced much of the habitat early in the 20th century; more recent land conversions to residential developments, roads and

commercial property have continued to diminish the amount of wooded land where this fox squirrel can live.

Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels can grow to 30 inches, half of which is tail, and up to three pounds, which makes them twice the size of the common gray squirrel. Although fox squirrels in the Midwest are a tawny brown, Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels are silver to slate gray with a white belly. Their rounded ears and white feet also distinguish them from gray squirrels. Shy and quiet, Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels are only active during the day; they are non-territorial and do not hibernate, although their activity decreases with cold or inclement weather.

Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels live in mature forests of mixed pine and hardwood trees with little understory and ground cover. Unlike their gray squirrel cousins, these fox squirrels spend considerable time foraging on the ground and usually run along the ground from tree to tree rather

than leaping between trees. Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels eat nuts and seeds, and prefer woodlots of oak, hickory, beech, walnut, sweetgum and loblolly pine, which all provide food. These squirrels also feed in open agricultural fields adjacent to woodlots.

Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels nest in cavities in mature trees, but will also make nests of leaves and twigs in the crotches of trees or at the ends of large branches. Mating occurs in late winter; young are born about 44 days later. The litter size is one to six, and females raise their young by themselves. The young are weaned and independent at about eight weeks.

The state of Maryland made the first effort to conserve Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels in 1945, with the purchase of the LeCompte Wildlife Management Area as a refuge. After the squirrel received Endangered Species Act protection in 1967, a recovery team of scientists formed from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the states of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia, and universities to coordinate efforts to protect and restore the species.

Thirty squirrels brought to Chicoteague National Wildlife Refuge between 1969 to 1971 established a population that now numbers in the hundreds, with squirrels dispersing on their own in new populations throughout the refuge. The recovery team began a program to reestablish the species within its former range and reintroduced squirrels at several sites throughout the 1980s. Most of these sites now support reproducing Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels.

Blackwater and Chincoteague national wildlife refuges provide some suitable fox squirrel habitat on public land, but Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels also live on privately owned lands. The squirrel's habitat requirements allow conservation measures to coexist with many agricultural



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by leaving uncut corn or soybeans along hedgerows for the squirrels' winter food. Developers can leave woodlot trees that produce nuts, seeds and berries, and can provide corridors from one woodlot to another. Developers can also help fox squirrels survive by leaving buffers of trees and hedgerows between streams and development.

Cooperation is key in restoring Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels. The efforts of federal, state and local governments, conservation groups and private landowners have helped stop the imminent loss of this species. Continuing our cooperative work can ensure that the Delmarva Peninsula remains home to its fox squirrel namesake for years to come.

and forestry land management practices. Landowners can enjoy the use of their land while providing habitat for this endangered species. Farmers can provide prime habitat

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