

An Old Friend Comes To Town

Though tough on birds and bird feeders, the spread of eastern fox squirrels across Montana gives some of us a glimpse of places we once called home. **By Dave Carty**

ONE DAY in the early 1990s, I came upon an animal I had not seen since I was a boy. A friend and I had stopped at a farmhouse in Carbon County to ask permission to hunt. We found precious few of the Hungarian partridge we'd been hoping to see, but the cottonwoods around the farm were alive with eastern fox squirrels.

Like a lot of Midwestern kids, I grew up hunting fox squirrels, using anything my dad would let me shoot: first a bow, then a shotgun, and finally my own single-shot .22. The wary, keen-eyed squirrels were challenging to hunt and tasted great dredged in seasoned flour and sautéed in butter. When our family moved west when I was 15, I assumed I'd left fox squirrels behind. The only tree squirrels in Montana were the little red (pine) squirrels and northern flying squirrels, neither of which interested me much.

Years later, seeing those fox squirrels along the Yellowstone River Valley transported me back to my boyhood days in southern Iowa. It also made me wonder: What were they doing there?

Fox squirrels are not native to Montana. They originally ranged from states along the Mississippi River east to the Atlantic Ocean. But over the past half century, the energetic rodents have been moving west—some naturally and others with a little human help.

Fox squirrels entered southeastern North

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Dakota from Minnesota in the early 1930s, then slowly moved west along wooded river and stream corridors. From there they migrated into eastern Montana up the Missouri and Yellowstone drainages. The squirrels I saw that day likely had been working their way west along the Yellowstone. But in other areas of Montana—notably Helena, Great Falls, Hamilton, and Missoula—fox squirrels migrated far less naturally.

Kristi DuBois, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife biologist in Missoula, says she's "fairly certain" fox squirrels were imported into Great Falls in the early 1990s by a fellow originally from Wisconsin. Kerry Foresman, professor of wildlife biology at the University of Montana, says fox squirrels probably reached Missoula the same way. "Apparently there was a physician in the 1960s who lived in the Midwest, really enjoyed fox squirrels, and had property here in Missoula," he says. "When he came out one summer, he brought a bunch of squirrels with him and let them outside to run around in his yard." Because fox squirrels produce two litters of two or three young each year, it didn't take long for a thriving population to develop in the Garden City.

Another way fox squirrels may reach Montana towns is by train. "We've seen it with opossums coming into the state," says Foresman. "Small mammals jump onto trains or other vehicles heading across Montana. Squirrels once built a nest under the hood of my truck, and I didn't know it until I got 50 miles down the road and they jumped out."

The eastern fox squirrel is North Amer-

ica's largest tree squirrel. In Montana it weighs 1.5 to 2 pounds (four to six times as much as a red squirrel). It has grayish grizzled body fur, with an orangish tint in the tail and feet and pumpkin-colored belly fur. The reddish-orange coloration inspired the common name fox squirrel and helps differentiate the species from gray squirrels—another non-native animal imported into Great Falls and a few other cities.

Fox squirrels live and nest in old trees such as cottonwoods. The omnivores feed on corn, tubers, plant buds, bird eggs, grasshoppers, and even mushrooms.

Though natural predators such as hawks and owls keep them from overpopulating, fox squirrels can cause problems. They raid bird feeders and eat bird eggs and hatchlings (one reason it's now illegal to release squirrels and other non-native animals into Montana). Foresman says that in Missoula the interlopers have completely displaced native red squirrels, which have moved back into the pine forests where they originated. FWP offices in Missoula, Great Falls, and Bozeman report complaints from homeowners about fox squirrels invading bird feeders, attics, sheds, and garages.

Despite causing occasional problems, fox squirrels are much beloved by many Montanans who enjoy watching the lively animals chase each other up and down trees and across city parks.

A few years ago I watched a fox squirrel tightrope-walk across a telephone wire in the middle of Bozeman, where I now live. I'd seen fox squirrels in Livingston a few years earlier, and had been wondering when they'd make it over the Bozeman Pass. That squirrel was probably a traveler, an animal whose family origins were hundreds of miles away to the east but for whatever reason had decided to make Bozeman home—which, come to think of it, sounds a lot like me. 🐿️

Learn how to live with eastern fox and gray squirrels at fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingWithWildlife/