

# WHAT'S BLACK AND WHITE FOX SQUIRREL

*By John S. Powers, Wildlife Biologist, Divi.*



# WHITE, AND RED ALL OVER? SQUIRRELS, OF COURSE!

Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

**A**t some point in our lives, most of us have been asked the question, “What’s black and white and red all over?” Acceptable responses are known to include “newspapers,” “zebras with sunburn,” and “road-killed skunks.” Have you considered that there might be an equally accurate and somewhat more realistic answer to young riddlers who ask this question?

Fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*) are the most colorful tree squirrels in the Western Hemisphere and are the most variably colored mammals in North America. Fox squirrels are widely distributed across the eastern United States and Canada, and are found on a local basis throughout Alabama. In most of their range, fox squirrels typically have brownish, reddish, orange, or grizzled tan upper parts, a grizzled or black nose, and no white markings on the head or feet. Fox squirrels in the Southeast usually have silver, gray, or grizzled upper parts sometimes with a reddish cast, especially on the legs and tail. Most fox squirrels in this region have black markings on the head, with some white or gray on their noses, ears, and feet.

The color patterns of fox squirrels are produced by a highly variable mix of reddish, black, and white/silver hairs. The upper parts of their bodies and their tails usually are salt and pepper gray, but often have a rusty shading. This reddish cast seems to be more common in northern and western portions of the state, while fox squirrels in the extreme southeastern corner of

Alabama are more commonly light gray or, sometimes, almost silver in appearance. The bellies of fox squirrels in Alabama vary from cream colored to reddish orange.

Differences among individual fox squirrels may be extreme. Many combinations of colors exist, and it seems that no two fox squirrels are exactly alike. One relatively constant characteristic is the presence of the black facial mask with white-tipped nose and ears. Melanistic (all black) fox squirrels occur throughout the species’ range, but are most common in southern regions. True albino individuals occur as well, but are rare in all but a few largely protected urban populations.

Fox squirrels are the largest tree squirrels in the Western Hemisphere. They have a heavy-bodied look and long bushy tails. A fox squirrel’s head is somewhat blocky in appearance, with rounded, stubby-looking ears. Adults may reach 2 1/2 feet in length and sometimes weigh as much as 3 pounds. Typically solitary animals, fox squirrels are rarely found in groups except during breeding chases and in areas providing a concentrated food supply. They are not territorial, but when circumstances bring them together, dominant hierarchies or “pecking orders” are quickly established. Most of the time, they simply avoid or ignore each other.

*(Continued on page 31)*

Photo by Reid Duvall

# WHAT'S BLACK AND WHITE, AND RED ALL OVER? FOX SQUIRRELS, OF COURSE!

(Continued from page 25)

In Alabama, litters of two to five young fox squirrels are born from late January through March, with second litters produced in July and August. Gestation is about 44 days. Yearling females breed at about 10 months of age and generally skip a breeding period before producing a second litter. Older females in good physical condition most often breed twice each year when food supplies are good. Almost all summer litters are raised in leaf nests in the branches of trees, as are many winter/spring young in the southern part of the state. Hollows in trees (when available) are more commonly used for brood rearing and shelter during winter in northern parts of the state.

Throughout their range, fox squirrels eat a variety of wild foods including acorns, nuts, seeds, fleshy fruits, buds, flowers, bird eggs, insects, tubers, roots, and fungi. Pine seeds are a favorite food during the limited time they are available (late summer), while hard mast is of critical importance during fall and winter. At all times fox squirrels are opportunistic feeders. Most water is obtained from eating succulent vegetation and fruits, or by licking dew from leaves. During periods of extreme drought, however, surface water may become necessary for survival. Calcium and other minerals largely lacking in vegetable foods are obtained by gnawing bones and antlers or by eating soil.

Habitat varies considerably both regionally and locally, including a variety of forest types. Throughout western, mid-western, northeastern, and central portions of their range, fox

## **CHANGE OF ADDRESS & NEW SUBSCRIPTION FORM**

Are you receiving *Alabama's TREASURED Forests* at the correct address? If not, please complete this form and return to:

*Alabama's TREASURED Forests*  
P.O. Box 302550 Montgomery, AL 36130-2550

### **New Address**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Old Address as it appears on mailing label**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check here if receiving duplicate copies and enclose both mailing labels.  
E-mail changes of address to: [tfmag@forestry.alabama.gov](mailto:tfmag@forestry.alabama.gov)

squirrels are most often found in relatively small or narrow stands of mature hardwoods having little understory vegetation and incomplete canopy closure. Those living in the Atlantic and Gulf Coast regions, including Alabama, are known to occupy virtually all of the diverse forest habitats, but have been most strongly associated with mature, fire-maintained pine forests. Research done in Alabama and elsewhere in the coastal region indicates that while fox squirrels may spend much of their time in pine stands, hardwood habitats adjacent to or within these areas may be more heavily used than would be expected based on their limited availability. This relatively intense use of hardwood habitats likely points to their importance to fox squirrels for both food and cover.

Life is full of questions, many of which, sadly, go unanswered. Children are among the best at coming up with difficult questions and trying to stump grown-ups. This being the case, odds are that the most recent time you were asked, "What's black and white and red all over?" was not the last. Next time, forget newsprint, sunburn, and road-kill. Answer, "fox squirrels!" 🦫

## **Students Compete at Mathematical Forest Expedition**

(Continued from page 29)

trees. They converted this into the number of cords and tons of pulpwood that could be harvested. Then the groups applied current timber prices to estimate the financial value of the stand.

Consulting forester Sara Baldwin led station #5 dealing with herbicide mixtures. The students calculated the number of ounces of herbicide needed to treat the area, how many gallons of water per acre would be applied, and how much water and herbicide to put in each tank of the 3-gallon sprayer. They also solved problems based on mixing a percent solution spray mix.

The final station was led by Blake Kelly, forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission, at which the participants determined how many tree seedlings were needed to plant a given area. From there the students extrapolated to a larger acreage, determined the cost of site preparation, tree seedlings, and planting. These expenses were then compared to projected income

calculated by applying today's timber prices to growth and yield tables for loblolly pine.

After a lunch sponsored by the Coosa County Farmer's Federation, each instructor went over the problems from their respective stations and answered questions. To conclude the program, the winning teams were announced. Winning team members received a trophy and cash award, sponsored by Bryan Wood and CGS Surveying. Bryan is a former Coosa County 4-H Forestry and Wildlife Team member who enjoyed the success of two state championships and placing second and third in two national 4-H Forestry and Wildlife events. He simply wanted to give something back. Thanks also to Pete Rodgers with Coosa Valley R, C, and D Council and Coosa Forestry Planning Committee members Tom Reichert, Raymond Shaw, Lori Woodfin, and the AFC's Ricky Porch. 🦫