



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Delmarva Peninsula Fox Squirrel

(*Sciurus niger cinereus*)

The Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel is named for the area defining most of its historic range: the peninsula between the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean that includes Delaware, eastern Maryland and eastern Virginia. This subspecies of fox squirrel historically occurred throughout the peninsula and into Pennsylvania.

By 1967, they inhabited only 10% of the Delmarva Peninsula and were placed on the first endangered species list. Forest clearing for agriculture, timber harvest and hunting at the turn of the century were factors that contributed to their decline. Recovery efforts are helping to turn the tide and now the population range is expanding.

### What is the Delmarva Fox Squirrel?

The Delmarva fox squirrel (as it is more commonly called) is a large squirrel that lives in mature hardwood and pine forests throughout the farmlands of the Delmarva Peninsula. It can grow to 30 inches (with half of that being the tail) and can weigh 1 to 3 pounds. The squirrel's coat is typically a frosty silver-gray color but can vary in color to almost black.



The only other tree squirrel on the Delmarva Peninsula is the common gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) which is often seen in backyard bird feeders and suburban settings. The widespread gray squirrel is smaller (16 to 20 inches), has a narrower tail and brownish gray fur.

Although the Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel is a tree squirrel, it spends considerable time on the ground foraging for food in woodlots, and will take food from farm fields. Less agile than the gray squirrel, the Delmarva fox squirrel ambles along the forest floor more than leaping from branch to branch. They are also quieter than the common gray squirrel. The home ranges of fox squirrels vary considerably, but average about 40 acres.

The Delmarva fox squirrel occurs in mature forests of mixed hardwoods and pines, with a closed canopy and open understory. The large trees provide abundant crops of acorns and seeds for food and cavities for den sites. Delmarva fox squirrels generally occur in woodlands associated with farmland areas and do not typically occur in suburban settings.

### What is Being Done to Help Them Recover?

A major focus of the recovery effort has been to increase the population size and distribution of this species by re-establishing populations within the historic range. Following a study of the historic distribution, 16 reintroductions were made in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and Pennsylvania. Twelve of these reintroductions have succeeded 10-15 years after their establishment.

*Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel on left, Eastern Gray squirrel on right. USFWS photo*



In addition, observations of Delmarva fox squirrels have occurred in new areas where they were previously unknown. Thus the distribution is increasing because of new sightings of animals on the edge of the range and re-introductions. Currently the Delmarva fox squirrel occurs in eight counties on Maryland's Eastern Shore (all eastern shore counties except Cecil), Sussex County in Delaware and Accomack County in Virginia (Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge).

### **Monitoring Recovery**

Monitoring changes in the population of this quiet, reclusive animal is challenging. Trapping and marking live animals provides the most information about a population and is the best technique to determine whether Delmarva fox squirrels occur or a particular location. Monitoring the use of artificial nest boxes has also helped to determine their long-term presence on some sites. In addition, recording all sightings of animals across their range using computer mapping programs has allowed better mapping of their distribution and easy updating of any changes.

New monitoring techniques are also being developed. Motion-triggered cameras can be placed in the woods and the resulting pictures provide evidence that Delmarva fox squirrels occur without the time and cost that trapping requires. Another technique under development is "hair-catcher" stations that can be baited and placed in the forest to collect hair. Samples collected can be taken back to a lab for identification. Research has already determined that the DNA in Delmarva fox squirrel hair can be distinguished from the gray squirrel. Development and testing of this monitoring technique is ongoing.

### **The Future for Delmarva Fox Squirrels**

The Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel can have a bright future with a little help. The successful recovery of the Delmarva fox squirrel depends on the willingness of landowners to provide habitat for these squirrels. Fortunately, the Delmarva fox squirrel can thrive in a landscape that is managed for farming and sustainable timber harvest.



*Delmarva fox squirrel caught on a motion-triggered camera. Photo courtesy Delaware Natural Heritage Program.*

Timber harvests should be conducted so that you leave some habitat for the squirrels. Keep clearcuts small and scattered in the landscape and make sure there is ample forest left for squirrels to move into.

Developers can also assist with conservation efforts by minimizing forest clearing, leaving the largest areas of mature forest intact, and maintaining corridors between woodlots. Maintaining and enhancing the forests along streams also maintains habitat corridors that can help populations of Delmarva fox squirrels stay connected. Efforts to recover the Delmarva fox squirrel will help protect not only the squirrel, but also other species that depend on the native forests of the Delmarva Peninsula.

### **Where Might You See a Delmarva Fox Squirrel?**

To see a Delmarva fox squirrel and learn more about this unique resident of the Delmarva Peninsula, visit any of the following National Wildlife Refuges in the area: Chesapeake Marshlands Complex (Dorchester County MD), Chincoteague (Accomack County, Virginia), and Prime Hook (Sussex County DE). Also, be on the look out in the woods and field edges throughout its range.

### **For more information, contact:**

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