

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Getting rare flying squirrels across the Cherohala Skyway road

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Cherohala Skyway is a 36-mile road connecting Robbinsville, North Carolina with Tellico Plains, Tennessee. It's scenic, curvy, and desolate, cutting across Nantahala and Cherokee National Forests with no amenities aside from bathrooms. This lonesome ribbon of road may not seem to impact wildlife, but try looking at it through the eyes of a flying squirrel.

There are two subspecies of flying squirrels in the Southern Appalachians: the more common Southern flying squirrel, which is sometimes a pest in people's homes, and the endangered northern flying squirrel, which lives only at extremely high elevations, including along the Cherohala Skyway. The northern flying squirrel, like all flying squirrels, extends a flap of skin between their front and rear legs to glide from tree to tree.

The problem for the squirrel is the wide highway corridor is too great a distance to glide across –they have to cross on foot, exposing them to threats from hawks to cars. After tracking squirrels with radio transmitters, biologists determined the squirrels weren't crossing the road at all. The road was cutting off habitat and isolating squirrels.

Biologists turned up a novel solution – utility poles. Duke Energy donated poles and the crew to install them, now parts of the Cherohala Skyway are framed with utility poles, not supporting electrical or telephone wires, but serving as launching points for squirrels to glide across the road.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples