

# EASTERN GREY SQUIRREL



The **Eastern Grey Squirrel** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is the most common squirrel in Richmond. It is grey, brown or black with a broad, fluffy tail, and is often seen on trees, wires or lawns in parks and yards. It is not a native animal yet has thrived in urban environments throughout the Lower Mainland. Two native species of squirrel, Douglas' Squirrel and the Northern Flying Squirrel, which formerly were widespread in Greater Vancouver, have diets and habits adapted to living in native coniferous forests, and rarely venture into developed areas. Douglas' Squirrels may still be seen at the Richmond Nature Park.

Eastern Grey Squirrels are prolific, producing one or two litters per year, each of about 6 babies, which leave the den at 8 weeks and are independent at 12 weeks. They nest in hollows in trees, or will construct nests of leaves, moss and twigs known as dreys in the forks of trees, usually near the trunk.

## History and Habitat in Richmond

Eastern Grey Squirrels are native to eastern and central North America. In 1909, six adult grey squirrels were introduced to Stanley Park, Vancouver. They found themselves at home, not in the deep dark forest, but in the open park near Lost Lagoon, where gardens of non-native trees and plants supplied fruit, seeds and buds, and visitors provided food either directly, by hand-feeding, or incidentally through discarded food waste. The Stanley Park population grew steadily over following decades, aided by its high reproductive rate and the scarceness of natural predators. They spread throughout Vancouver in the 1970s, into Richmond in early 1980s, and throughout most of Lower Mainland by 2000.

Aiding in their spread was active transport by people, removing a "pest" from their own property and releasing it elsewhere, often a park or green area in another neighbourhood, where they thrived and continued to spread.

## Conflict with People

### Gardens, Bird Feeders, Garbage and More

To Eastern Grey Squirrels, a backyard garden is a buffet. They consume bulbs, fruits, seeds, and the bark of a wide variety of plants and trees. They enjoy the offerings of bird feeders, both grain and suet, and are acrobatic enough to foil all but the most elaborate and pricey of anti-squirrel devices. They are also occasional predators of songbirds, which, apart from harm to bird populations, is of concern to bird lovers.

Eastern Grey Squirrels are rodents, "gnawing mammals," that can chew their way into garbage and compost containers. They even steal Christmas lightbulbs, which they mistake as exotic acorns, by snipping wires with their incisors. They then bury the bulbs in soil or leaf litter, as they would real acorns in their ancestral habitat.

Once Eastern Grey Squirrels have arrived in your neighbourhood, there is little that can be done to keep them from your garden. Devices intended to block them from accessing certain types of bird feeders are available at hardware and bird-watching specialist stores, but few are completely effective against persistent, acrobatic squirrels. If a squirrel is live-trapped, it is permissible to relocate it within its home range (about 10 Km square), but relocation is only recommended outside the breeding season (not from May through August), to prevent separation of females from dependent young, and also potentially adds to the problem of extending the range of this non-native species. Trapping may not accomplish much in the long term, because individuals caught and transferred elsewhere will soon be replaced by others.



## Dens

Probably the most troublesome conflict results when a female Eastern Grey Squirrel moves into a human dwelling, usually within an attic or space inside an exterior wall, to give birth and raise young. This results in noise, fouling, and physical damage to the nest area. Fleas or other parasites may also be introduced to the home.

It is easier to keep squirrels from entering a home than removing them after the fact. A sound strategy is to make your home the least inviting choice in your neighbourhood for a squirrel to nest. Relatively simple measures include pruning tree branches away from rooflines, checking soffits for gaps or loose panels, testing and reinforcing the soundness of vent covers and internal screens and securing chimney caps.

If a female squirrel has found a way into a home and has given birth, the problem of how to deal with the babies is added. Scaring the mother from the den and sealing off the entry point will result in the death of the young still inside. Depending on the location of the nest, its removal, including live babies, may involve considerable trouble and damage, and by law should only use methods allowed under the [B.C. Wildlife Act](#). In addition, once outside the den, the mother may abandon her young, or fail to find a new nest in time to successfully move and raise them. Raising orphaned baby squirrels by hand is a major task, which should be left to licensed animal care professionals. It is probably easier for everyone involved, human and squirrel, to allow the young to reach the stage where they leave the den with their mother before clearing out the nest and sealing the point of entry. If nesting squirrels must be removed, the BCSPCA recommends using an [AnimalKind Accredited company](#) that uses humane methods.



## Rabies

Rabies is not known in Eastern Grey Squirrels in B.C. Nevertheless, if bitten or scratched by a squirrel it is best to seek medical advice.



## Additional Information

For more information on dealing with problem Eastern Grey Squirrels, see the [BCSPCA's Best Practices](#) for dealing with squirrels page.

Injured or abandoned young Eastern Grey Squirrels may be accepted at wildlife rehabilitation shelters such as the [Wildlife Rescue Association in Burnaby](#). Please visit their website or call 604-526-7275.