

BEST PRACTICES



Mysterious Creatures of the Night

Northern Flying Squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus*)

The northern flying squirrel is Washington's smallest tree squirrel and is rarely seen, as they are strictly nocturnal. Being nocturnal, they are active for about two hours beginning an hour after sunset and an hour and a half to two hours before sunrise. They have large black eyes that help them see in the night and measure about 10–12 inches long from nose to tail. They have soft silky cinnamon brown and gray fur above with creamy white fur below. Their tail is furred, long, and flat. These squirrels have a short life span of about four years in the wild.

Flying squirrels might be more appropriately called gliding squirrels, as they do not possess true flight as a bird or bat. Flying squirrels have a loose fold of skin called a patagium, or fleshy membrane that is furred and extends from the wrist of the foreleg to the ankles of the hind leg. This fold allows the squirrel to glide from branch to branch, acting as a kind of parachute. When gliding, it uses its legs to steer and its flat tail as a rudder to help it change direction and “brake”. Flying squirrels can cover more than 150 feet in a single glide.

The northern flying squirrel lives in dense or mixed conifer and deciduous forests. They are found in the northern United States along the Canadian border and into Canada and Alaska. Flying squirrels are omnivores, eating mostly nuts, lichen, fungi, and supplementing their diet with fruit and insects. These squirrels love to eat truffles and it is believed that they may have an important role in the dispersal of mycorrhizal fungi spores throughout the forest.

Flying squirrels nest above the ground in trees, making their nests out of twigs and bark, lined with fur, feathers, leaves, and conifer needles. Northern flying squirrels are social animals and have been known to share nests with groups of up to eight adults and juveniles. Individuals also join into single-sex groups for warmth during the winter.

Northern flying squirrels are prey to owls, hawks, weasels, martins, coyotes, and domestic cats. They are a primary food source of the endangered spotted owl. They can avoid predation through their nocturnal habits and their agility in trees. Currently it is believed that northern flying squirrels are surviving well, although there are few to no studies being conducted on their presence or population status. It can be predicted with the harvesting of mature forests and urbanization, that the northern flying squirrel faces an increase in habitat loss and possible decline in population.



Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2021