

The Prince of the Ponderosa Pines: Our Evergreen Tassel-Eared Squirrels

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I'm sure many of you have observed our native Abert's Squirrel (*Sciurus aberti*) in your yard, especially if you live in their preferred habitat dominated with ponderosa pines. They are also known as "tassel-eared" squirrels (the name I prefer to use) due to their impressive ear tufts. Many people, including myself, consider them North America's most beautiful tree squirrel. And they are a valuable part of our ponderosa pine ecosystem as well as an entertaining watchable wildlife species. Tassel-eared squirrels are found in isolated portions of Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and the mountains of Mexico. There are six subspecies and our local subspecies in the Front Range is *S. a. ferreus*.



Local black tassel-eared squirrel (c) Chris Pfaff

Tassel-eared squirrels are decorated with a variety of color patterns including mostly black, "salt and pepper," gray with rufous and white trim, and a black/brown mix. The famous "Kaibab" squirrel from the north rim of the Grand Canyon is a distinct race that is all black except for its contrasting, handsome, fluffy white tail. In our area of the southern Front Range there are usually more black squirrels. The gray ones are most numerous up in Rocky Mountain National Park. In my neighborhood above Upper Bear Creek I have seen a variety of color phases.

Unlike ground squirrels and chipmunks that hibernate in winter, all species of tree squirrels do not. For winter, tassel-eared squirrels grow denser longer fur for warmth and their ear tufts become more pronounced. They build large well-insulated spherical nests in the upper third of ponderosa pines, usually in a part of the tree that is most protected from the wind and snow. They prefer denser stands of trees for nesting. Sometimes nests are found in the dense



Local brown and gray tassel-eared squirrel
(Photo by Pete Monson)

aberrant growths called “witches-broom” caused by infestations of dwarf mistletoe. Young are born in their nests in late spring and early summer.

Like many squirrel species, tassel-eared forage on a variety of fungi that are relatively high in protein. They are known to hang mushrooms from trees. When they dig up hypogeous fungi such as false truffles whose spores are dispersed underground, the squirrels provide an important ecological benefit to ponderosa pine forests. Because squirrels disperse fungal spores via their droppings, forest health is maintained since the trees require the underground fungal mycorrhiza that surround their roots to provide nutrients and water.

Tassel-eared squirrels are indicators of forest health and almost entirely dependent on ponderosa pines for shelter and food. During good cone crops they forage on and store pine seeds, sometimes forgetting their stored caches thereby planting new trees. Optimal habitat has large trees since larger trees produce more cones as well as foliage. During years without cones these squirrels have adapted to survive on the inner bark of ponderosa pine terminal twigs. If you see a scattering of shaved twigs underneath a ponderosa tree, you’ll know it’s the work of a hungry tassel-eared squirrel. This rarely affects the growth and vigor the trees. Studies have found that tassel-eared squirrels prefer to forage on twigs from certain trees with lower levels terpenes, chemicals in the flowing resin that give pines a turpentine odor. They also forage on dwarf mistletoe, berries, acorns and mushrooms.

The abundance of these squirrels in our area fluctuates from year to year and in different locations. Certain local populations may suffer from competition from the more aggressive eastern fox squirrels, which are not native to Colorado. They were introduced to Denver Parks in the early 1900’s and have spread into the foothills. The fox squirrels would probably not flourish here without the abundance of bird feeders in our area. If you have feeders, the voracious fox squirrels may have quickly cleaned you out and increased your trips to buy more seed.



Local mixed color tassel-eared squirrel (Photo by Chris Pfaff)



Feeding signs of tassel-eared squirrels (Photo by Larry White)

Unfortunately we see all too many flattened tassel-eared road-kills. These arboreal acrobats seem clumsy and confused when they are on pavement in front of a rapidly approaching vehicle. This is much different from their normal behavior in pine forests, especially during mating season when they spend hours chasing each other on the ground, spiraling up and down tree trunks, and leaping gracefully from branch to branch. As I'm writing this, I have been distracted by frequent peeks out the window at our bird feeders to see up to half dozen of the "invasive fox squirrels." Since I haven't seen any tassel-eared squirrels in our yard for weeks, I'm wondering why? Have they been displaced by the Fox Squirrels? Have they been prey for goshawks, or perhaps neighborhood cats or foxes? Or have the last few years of low ponderosa pine cone crops had an impact? I suspect that it's a result of competition with the expanding population of eastern fox squirrels. But since few studies have documented this, you may be able to help satisfy my curiosity by sending any squirrel observations you have made if your live within the preferred ponderosa pine habitat.

Submit Observations:

- Date and location
- Max # tassel-eared squirrels
- Max # fox squirrels
- Tree species
- Bird feeders present
- Other helpful info
- Send to llarrywhite@msn.com

For more information refer to "*The Natural History of Tassel-Eared Squirrels*"(2010) by Dr. Sylvester Allred; or perhaps you can find Allred's out-of print children book: "*Rascal, the Tassel-eared Squirrel*"