

Green Scene: West Coast Squirrels

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[Title in Tri-City News: About those flying squirrels ...]

We have three species of squirrels on the west coast. They could be roughly described as the ones you see too much of, the ones you never see or the ones you hear before you see them.

The first type of squirrels, the so-called gray squirrels, is not native to BC. They were introduced to Stanley Park in 1909 from eastern Canada. These are the ubiquitous squirrels with which everyone will be familiar. Often, these squirrels are black in colour. When I lived in Montreal, the squirrels I saw there were always gray unlike the mixed population of blacks and grays in Toronto. Thus, I suspect our introduced BC gray squirrels have an Ontario lineage. Interestingly, it was not until the 1970s that viable populations of gray squirrels established themselves outside of Stanley Park. Once they established these strongholds, little appears to have limited their spread throughout much of the lower mainland.

Some people love having gray squirrels in their yard and even purchase special feeders for them. Others install squirrel baffles on their bird feeders to limit the amount of food grays can obtain as free handouts. I belong to the second category. Gray squirrels are thought to supplement their diet of nuts and seeds by preying on bird nests and consuming their eggs.

Douglas squirrels are delightful, energetic creatures. Smaller than the eastern grays, they have a whitish eye ring and reddish fur. They have been called the sentinels of the forest because you are likely to hear a Douglas long before you see it high in a tree scolding you for having intruded into its territory. Douglas squirrels particularly enjoy eating the cones of Douglas firs and sometimes leave a characteristic pile of half-eaten cones in the forest. Specially designed nest boxes can be installed on tree trunks for Douglas squirrels although gray squirrels tend to chew on them to enlarge the holes to make them more to their satisfaction. For several years, such nest boxes in our yard were used on a regular basis by Douglas squirrels. I always knew when a cat was prowling nearby, as the mother squirrel would chatter loudly from her perch until I chased the cat away. Douglas squirrels have more arboreal habits than grays so it is uncommon to see them on the ground. Unfortunately, Douglas squirrels are now only rare visitors to our yard although they can still present in some local neighborhoods.

Some people believe the grays are pushing Douglas squirrels out of their territories although both species have managed to co-exist in Stanley Park for many years. It is my guess that Douglas squirrels lack the road sense that grays appear to have as they make well-timed dashes across the street. Whenever I have seen a dead squirrel on local streets, it has been a Douglas. I suspect it is their inability to handle road crossings and other suburban alterations to the environment as much as competition from the grays that account for their gradual disappearance from some of our neighborhoods.

The most fascinating of our squirrels are the so-called flying squirrels. They don't fly, of course; they glide using flaps of skin between their front and back legs. Their large flat tail serves as a rudder. They

are rarely seen, as they are nocturnal in their habits with large eyes to prove it. Strictly forest dwellers, they play critical roles in forest ecology. First, they are the main prey for endangered spotted owls as well as other owls in BC. Secondly, their preferred foods are truffles they find in decomposing fallen trees. As they dig and eat the truffles, they spread the mycorrhizal fungi which conifers require to absorb soil nutrients. Some of the screech owl nest boxes installed by the Burke Mountain Naturalists in local parks have been taken over by flying squirrels. We have been pleased to discover we are providing habitat for a species so essential to forest health.