

The gregarious and playful fox squirrel  
By: Corine Burgess

Golf is not my game. I'm not good at it and I always have plenty of other things that I consider higher on my priority list than trying to hit a little ball with a club. On the other hand, my husband enjoys the game and has, in the past, asked me to accompany him to the course. But unless there is a windmill or a dinosaur with a mouth that opens and closes in anticipation of my putt putt shot, I generally decline his offer. However, my husband, who knows me very well, will tempt me by saying, "you might get to see some fox squirrels." And then I'm hooked; the opportunity to see these playful, furry creatures is just too good to pass up.

Fox squirrels are often seen on golf courses because they like the wide open spaces. But they do need some trees, so they prefer the greens that have oaks and pines on them. These squirrels are unique because they are the largest squirrel in the western hemisphere. They are about twice the size of a gray squirrel and are highly variable in color. They generally measure from 17 – 28 inches in body length and their tails can be as long as 13 inches. A normal weight for the critter is from about 1 – 2 ½ pounds. Their coats can be anywhere from all black to a white- tan color.

Fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*) are named for their fox-like tail. Sometimes they are referred to as stump-eared squirrel, raccoon squirrel or monkey-faced squirrel. These seemingly happy, playful creatures are often seen chasing each other up and down trees and across clearings. They are big talkers and their vocabulary includes clucking, chucking, whining and screaming. While playing, they often make quite a bit of noise with their clucking and chucking sounds. They will warn other nearby squirrels about danger with a distress scream. And when mating, they produce high-pitched whines.

Although they are good climbers, these squirrels spend more time on the ground than the average squirrel. They are active in the daytime and are not territorial, although they do travel quite a bit. Depending on the season, they construct different types of homes. In the summer they build a platform of sticks high in the branches of a tree. These homes are termed "dreys." In the winter, they will utilize a hole in a hollowed out tree trunk. Fox squirrels are as hospitable as they are cute, and it is not uncommon to find that they share their home with someone else, especially when breeding.

They have two breeding seasons, one in summer and one in winter. When the babies are born, they are completely blind, bald and helpless. They become independent at about three months and mature at one year. Most of the young never reach adulthood in the wild and die before reaching maturity. If they do survive, the average life span is about 12 ½ years for females and 8 ½ years for males.

They depend on seeds from trees for their food, mainly longleaf pine and turkey oak. However, they will munch on whatever is available. They will consume fungi, buds, fruits, grain, insects, bird's eggs, lizards and even small snakes. From May to October, they will cut green longleaf pine cones and strip off the bracts to get at the seeds. As with most squirrels, they are hoarders and they bury their treasures in different locations.

The fox squirrel is equipped with sharp claws, flexible forearms, good abdominal muscles, excellent vision and excellent sense of smell and hearing. They use scent to communicate with other of their species and they are equipped with vibrissae, which are thick hairs that are used as touch receptors to sense the surrounding environment. These devices are located above and below their eyes, on their chin and nose and on each forearm. They are agile jumpers and can easily span 15 feet in horizontal leaps. They have been seen free-falling a distance of 20 feet or more to a soft landing on a limb or tree trunk.

The Sherman's Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger shermanii*), which is the species we see locally, lives in a narrow range from the mid panhandle north of Tampa south to Lake Okeechobee. This animal is currently considered threatened. Unlike the common gray squirrel, the fox squirrel is a bit more picky about its environment. These creatures depend on seeds from the rare longleaf pine and turkey oak trees. These trees are becoming more and more scarce as the forests that they live in are being destroyed. Additionally, the fox squirrel depends on other animals, such as the Ivory Billed Woodpecker, which is very close to extinction, for their homes.

As with all nature, when one species is affected, many others are also challenged by the change in the natural cycle. It is important to look at the big picture and realize that we can't protect a species if we don't protect its home. Fox squirrels are mobile animals and need a lot of space; they depend on longleaf pine and turkey oaks. If the forest goes down, the fox squirrel will follow. In the near future, I hope to be able to tag along with my husband to the golf course and bring my son so that he can enjoy the delightful sight of this playful, furry creature. I hope he will be able to share the same sight with his children some day.