



Red Squirrel

The **red squirrel** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) makes itself quite conspicuous with its lively habits and noisy chatter. Cone cuttings on stumps or rocks are common and tracks in snow are numerous where this squirrel occurs. It can be found in spruce forests over most of Alaska and has a wide range in North America. It occupies a wide variety of forest habitat, occurring in the hardwood forests of eastern North America and the coniferous forests of the west and north.

General description: The active rodent averages 11 to 13 inches in length (28-33 cm), including tail, and is a rusty-olive color on the upper parts of its body with a whitish belly and underparts. In summer, a dark stripe on the side separates the upper rusty color from the white of the belly. The bushy tail is often a lighter orange or red with light tipped hairs.

Life history: Red squirrels are solitary but pair for mating in February and March. Females usually breed when they are 1 year old. Three to seven young are born after a gestation period of 36 to 40 days. The young are born blind and hairless, weighing about ¼ ounce at birth. They are weaned at about 5 weeks but remain with the female until almost adult size.

The young leave the female and are independent during their first winter. This means that they have to be successful at gathering and storing a winter's supply of food.

Behavior: Much of the red squirrel's time in the summer is spent cutting and storing green spruce cones. There may be several bushels of cones stored in a cache. Caches may attain a diameter of 15 to 18 feet and a depth of 3 feet. Red squirrels also cache mushrooms on tree branches. They eat seeds, berries, buds, fungi, and occasionally insects and birds' eggs. They are busy collecting and storing food from early morning until dusk and also on moonlit nights.

Nests may be a hole in a tree trunk or a tightly constructed mass of twigs, leaves, mosses, and lichens in the densest foliage of a tree (making the nest almost completely weatherproof). A loose mass of twigs and leafy debris in a high tree is used as a "fair weather" nest. Their ground burrows, also known as middens, are used mostly for food storage. There is usually one large active midden in each territory with perhaps an inactive or auxiliary midden.

The home range of red squirrels is about ½ to 1 acre, and each squirrel knows its territory well. Each squirrel has several nests in its territory and always seems to know which retreat is nearest. Territorial behavior seems to be most rigid during caching of food and relaxes somewhat in the spring.

The red squirrel is active all year but may remain in its nest during severe cold spells and inclement weather. They are agile climbers and, being extremely curious, will often attempt to enter buildings, upsetting anything they can move and gnawing on woodwork. Once in a house or cabin, they can be very destructive, tearing out insulation and mattress stuffing for use as nesting material and caching food stores in any available niche.

Predators: The main predators of red squirrels are hawks, owls, and marten. Other predators may occasionally take a squirrel but are not serious threats. Around populated areas, one of the predators is the domestic housecat.

Human use: The red squirrel is used to a limited extent by man for food and fur. Squirrels may be small but the meat is good eating. In parts of Canada and Alaska the pelts are sold for their fur. Red squirrels may damage trees, cutting off twigs by the bushel, but they are also helpful because they distribute and plant seeds of spruce and other trees.



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Revised and reprinted 2008