



photo: Steve Patterson/FlyingSquirrels.com

FAST FACTS

Name: Northern and southern flying squirrel

Common name: Flying squirrel

Northern flying squirrel scientific name: *Glaucomys sabrinus*

Southern flying squirrel scientific name: *Glaucomys volans*

Did you know? Depending on the wind and takeoff height, the flying squirrel can glide for 50 metres or more.

PHYSIOLOGY

Contrary to what its name suggests, the flying squirrel cannot fly. Instead, it glides with two furry membranes, called patagia, loosely stretched between its wrists and ankles. The membranes act as a parachute to support the squirrel while jumping from tree to tree. The flying squirrel normally glides diagonally downward from one branch, scurries to the top of the tree and jumps on a downward slant to the next one. The flying squirrel also has a flat, furry tail that it uses as a rudder while gliding. The squirrel uses both its tail and membrane to steer left and right, and even to make 180-degree turns.

The flying squirrel is normally brown on its back, and white on both its belly and the bottom side of its furry membrane. The northern flying squirrel equals in size to a red squirrel, and the southern species is comparable to a chipmunk. Nocturnal mammals, they have large, dark, bulging eyes that are well adapted for night vision. They also has something called “feelers,” which are sensitive whiskers used to make nocturnal travel easier. To mark forest routes, the squirrel uses scent glands in its cheeks.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

The squirrels are most active between dusk and dawn. Omnivorous, it eats nuts, seeds, berries, insects, tree buds and sometimes eggs or nestlings. Although the northern and southern flying squirrels are mainly found in trees, they forage the forest ground for food. They run slowly and clumsily on the ground and, if startled far from a tree, will try to hide.

The northern species lives in mixed or coniferous forests, while its southern counterpart occupies hardwood forests of oak, maple, beech and hickory.

RANGE

The southern flying squirrel is found throughout eastern parts of North America and the southeastern parts of Canada. It is found mostly in the Carolinian deciduous forests of southern Ontario, but can also be seen north to Muskoka and the Ottawa Valley, as well as in parts of Quebec and Nova Scotia. Its range partly overlaps that of the northern flying squirrel, which can generally be found from the U.S.-Canada border north to the tree line. The two species, however, do not interbreed.

The population of the northern species is unknown as there is very little monitoring data available. The southern species, however, is listed as vulnerable in Canada. The southern flying squirrel was once common in Point Pelee National Park in Ontario, but it slowly disappeared as its forest habitat was changed to farms, cottages, and heavily used campgrounds. In the past few decades, however, most of these invasions have been stemmed, making it possible for the squirrel to return.