

January is Mating Month for Our Eastern Gray Squirrels

Despite cold temperatures and limited food, January is a prime month for mating among our abundant Eastern Gray Squirrels. Their winter breeding cycle is timed for birth in mid-March, just as tree buds are nearly bursting at peak nutritious value for nursing mother squirrels to munch on.

Each female squirrel is in estrus for just one day (sometimes for only eight hours), so they and the males must act quickly. You can often see males frantically chasing females across the ground, up and down tree trunks, and from limb to limb. Many females are impregnated by multiple males, so patrimony is often mixed with each litter of two to four young. (These squirrels breed again in June.)



A young Eastern Gray Squirrel looks out from its nest in a tree cavity. Photo from sciuridae.org.

During winter, Gray Squirrels rely heavily on the hundreds of acorns, walnuts, hickory nuts, and pine nuts each has buried in the ground in a practice called scatterhoarding. Most of the stored acorns are from the red oak group, while the white oak group acorns are eaten in the fall. Probably using a combination of memory and smell, a squirrel can find up to eighty percent of the nuts it has buried.

To survive the cold during gestation, females hunker down in crowded nests fashioned out of tree cavities. Residents typically consist of related adult females. Unrelated females are sniffed out at the nest opening and denied entry. (These squirrels also utilize those big leafy nests built high up in mature trees.) Once a female becomes pregnant, however, she becomes hostile to all others.

So, while springtime may be for lovers among humans, it's the deepest winter that brings on an amorous mood for these distant cousins of ours.

(Michael Wilpers, FOSC Newsletter, Jan 2015)