



**The golden one turned out to be a young fox squirrel**



**Its sibling looks more like our typical fox squirrel except for the red tail**

## **Brunswick Wildlife Golden Mystery Squirrel**

March had a several Saturdays where a cold front passed and the rain mostly quit before dawn. Despite drippy leaves and bad lighting, my birding classes still have our field trips. Less than optimal conditions generally do not affect the birds seen or the teaching experience plus my philosophy is “if the birds can deal with the weather then so should we.”

Our class trip to Sunset Beach occurred on one such morning. While trying to find fox squirrels, we found a “golden” squirrel tearing around the wet canopy above us, bouncing from limb to limb, trying to escape.

Given the poor weather conditions, we thought it was an albino Gray Squirrel. I took several photos in the bad light; however, the photos were not conclusive in identifying our golden mystery squirrel.

In April, I returned to Sunset Beach to try for better photos. I thought my chances for success were near zero. A birder friend joined me to help and we quickly found a nest on the edge of the wooded lot.

Two boys on bikes passed by and asked what we were looking for and we told them a “white squirrel”...they said “like that one?” and pointed up to the golden one.

There were also two other unusually marked fox squirrels nearby and at times all three played together. They had the normal markings for the gray morph; however, they had red tails.

With expert help, the golden one was identified as a hypomelanistic Eastern Fox Squirrel and definitely not an albino. Hypomelanistic means it has far less melanin in its coat than normal and appears much lighter because the melanin is the pigment that supplies the dark colors such as black and brown.

The expert, Clyde Sorenson, a professor at NC State University and frequent contributor to the Wildlife in North Carolina magazine, also said the three looked young and might be the current winter's litter.

Eastern Fox Squirrels in our area are of the southeastern variation. They usually come in two models...black with the white-trimmed ears and nose and mostly gray with the same trimming. The color difference is not gender based...just different color morphs of the same species.

The Eastern Fox Squirrel, averaging at 10-15 inches in length, is our largest tree squirrel and they average twice the size of Gray Squirrels

Fox squirrels generally have social contact only during of mating season. They may mate any time of year; however, breeding generally spikes in December and June.

Across their entire range, fox squirrels use cavities for nesting; however, leaf nests are used during warm months and in the southern portions of the squirrels' range. A female may mate with multiple males and she will provide care for her young for about six weeks. Males do not take part in parental care.

In North Carolina, habitats are primarily longleaf pine sandhills characterized by large, well-spaced pines and an understory of scattered or clumped oaks and they may also be found in other open pine savannas, pine-hardwood forests, and in ecotones between forest types.

Broken forest, scattered woods in farmland and other half-wooded situations with nut or cone bearing trees are used. Fox squirrels have adapted to parks, golf courses, and other open suburban areas given the decimation of our Long Leaf Pine forests.

Habitat structure, specifically the size and spacing of pine and oak trees, appears to be more important than the actual species composition of the habitat. Only stands with large mature trees appear to supply adequate supplies of food and nesting sites.

The large size of the eastern fox squirrel appears to adapt it to the openness of the pine-oak forest and the arrangements of habitats within the Coastal Plain. Large size is advantageous in handling the large cones of longleaf pine and in traveling along the ground between trees.

In July I photographed the only remaining squirrel. Its coat has matured to look almost as dark as the usual black morph; however, its tail is still red. Based on its change and other behaviors noted above I believe Dr. Sorenson was correct about them being siblings.

I'll leave you with a great trivia nugget. An eastern fox squirrel group is called a "scurry". How very appropriate.

John Ennis



**The typical black morph of the Southeastern variant are frequently seen on area golf courses**



**One of the red-tailed siblings had matured by early July**