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**North American
Mammals**



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Mexican fox squirrel | *Sciurus nayaritensis*

The Mexican fox squirrel inhabits mixed pine-oak forests in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona and the Sierra Madre Occidental, Mexico, southward as far as southern Jalisco. In the Chiricahua Mountains it occurs at 1,560–2,700 meters elevation, but usually is found at about 1,650–1,950 meters. No fossils are known.

This beautiful tree squirrel is a forager; it does not cache food, and it does not regularly bury nuts. Depending upon its feeding habits and time of year, it may be secretive or readily observed. It may be especially difficult to locate early in the summer, when females are pregnant and nursing young. The Mexican fox squirrel also can be shy and hard to find in winter, when forests are bare and open. It frequently spends time on the ground.

Young-of-the-year often lose their hold on the trunks of trees and fall to the ground. This clumsiness in climbing also is a noticeable characteristic of adults. They often slip and slide on tree trunks or branches. When danger is perceived, the squirrel's usual defense is to remain motionless. Usually the Mexican fox squirrel is silent, except for chucking and barking alarm calls. When it is vocalizing, it invariably is in a tree. Alarm barks vary among individuals, but generally are more raspy and gruff than the "quirk" calls of tassel-eared squirrels, and may be followed by a whirring screech or scream.

This is a large tree squirrel. The tail is bushy, the ears are



Sciurus nayaritensis

thinly haired, the pelage is thick and soft, and the underfur is long. It is vividly colored; the upperparts are brownish with reddish or yellow-orange, and the underparts are reddish or yellow-orange. This color extends onto the sides, legs, and feet.

Young are born in spring and summer. The one litter produced each year usually contains two or three young. A young was observed on 13 July, and on 16 August a female had enlarged mammary glands and probably was still nursing. Nothing is known about developmental stages of young, but they probably are similar to those of other tree squirrels.

The Mexican fox squirrel inhabits partially open Apache pine-oak forest, and is most abundant in the thick growth of canyon bottoms. Apparently it avoids the oak-covered slopes, except possibly when acorns are numerous. The lower canyons are not its exclusive range, however; it has been seen in large oaks at 2,250 meters elevation, in Douglas fir at 2,580 meters, and, in some seasons, at the upper limit of evergreen oaks at 2,400 meters. *S. nayaritensis* is not numerous, but there is some fluctuation in numbers from year to year. It nests in oaks and pines, either in leaf nests out on the branches or in hollows and holes in the trunks.

Size

Males are slightly smaller than females.

Total length: 495–613 (554) mm

Length of tail: 237–298 (270) mm

Weight: 684 g (males); 707 g (females)

Identification

No other tree squirrels occur with *S. nayaritensis* in the United States, but *S. arizonensis* and *S. aberti* occur elsewhere in Arizona. In contrast to *S. aberti*, *S. nayaritensis* never has ear tufts. Compared with *S. arizonensis*, the underparts of *S. nayaritensis* are orangeish rather than whitish, the upperparts are reddish rather than mostly gray with some brown, and the tail is bordered with tan or yellow rather than white.

Recent Synonyms

Sciurus alstoni

Food items include the seeds of pines and Douglas fir, acorns, and walnuts. Roots, bulbs, and buds apparently supply food when acorns or other tree seeds are not available. Other mammals occurring in the same habitat include rock squirrels, pocket gophers, woodrats, deer mice, bobcats, mountain lions, skunks, raccoons, gray foxes, coyotes, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. Ectoparasites include lice and fleas, but no endoparasites are known.

In the Chiricahua Mountains, this squirrel is mostly restricted to the recreational areas of the mountains, which attract a great number of people. It is conspicuous, and even after considerable association with humans, it has not learned wariness. Now legally protected, the Mexican fox squirrel once suffered from the depredations of irresponsible humans.

T. L. Best



Other Common Names

Nayarit squirrel, Apache squirrel, Chiricahua Mountain squirrel, Apache fox squirrel, Chiricahua Nayarit squirrel

Status

Uncommon; *S. n. chiricahuae* is listed as a category two species by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior. This category is for taxa that may become listed as endangered or threatened.

Subspecies

Sciurus nayaritensis apache, Sierra Madre Occidental of northern Mexico

Sciurus nayaritensis chiricahuae, Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona

Sciurus nayaritensis nayaritensis, Sierra Madre Occidental of west-central Mexico

References

Mammalian Species 492; Hoffmeister, 1986