

Tales From Along the Trail...

Squirrels' "Airbnb" - Drey or Den? *Sciurus carolinensis* with Naturalist Cathy Ricks



Southern Flying Squirrel



Leafy Drey



Tree Cavity Den

There is no place like home for Kent's black squirrels. Look up into the bare, deciduous trees for leafy, circular nests or dreys. Bernd Heinrich took a closer look at the engineering of a downed grey squirrel nest and discovered woven twigs with leaves creating the outside, twenty-six layers of overlapping, flattened leaves like shingles for insulation and waterproofing, and a cozy, small interior with shredded bark. Researchers have discovered that the inside temperatures of a drey can be 68-86 degrees warmer than the outside air. There is one entrance facing the trunk. Grey squirrels have been known to cuddle up and share their nests in winter to stay warmer, wrapping themselves up with their tail like a blanket. Grey Squirrels, Red Squirrels and Flying Squirrels all build leafy dreys or dens. Squirrels are active all winter unlike their cousin the groundhog but will den up for a few days when weather is harsh. Not every drey is well constructed; they may be decoys, old summer nests or temporary hideouts from predators. Great Horned Owls breed in winter (listen for their deep hoots echoing at night) using large nests or dreys as their nest's base.

While exploring our parks' trails in winter you will see black squirrels (a color variation of the eastern grey squirrel) out doing what squirrels do best – acting squirrelly. Grey squirrels that are chasing, circling, barking, and running up and down the trees in hot pursuit have begun their winter courtship rituals. Tree cavity dens are in demand and can provide squirrels with added protection from predators and weather. Winter litters are often raised in a tree cavity while the abundant summer litters in a drey. The male squirrel will not be around to help parent when 2-5 baby squirrels are born in February through April.