



BCT Stewardship Journal: January 2026

Species Spotlight: The Colorful World of Squirrels

While snowed in this past week, I found myself admiring the view from my window, overlooking the serene winter landscape blanketing my backyard. As the sun came out, I noticed wildlife coming out of hiding after the storm. Rabbits, mice, crows appeared but most noticeable were the squirrels hopping across the snow from tree to tree. Where I am at in Yarmouth I see mostly grey squirrels, but the occasional black squirrel scurries out of the tree line every now and then to check out the clearing. I recall taking a walk in Mashpee recently and remember seeing mostly black-furred squirrels with the occasional grey. In my home-state of Michigan, we mostly have reddish-brown fox squirrels with the occasional black or grey colored ones.

Why do we see such a plethora of colors among these critters, especially during wintertime?

The primary species of squirrel on Cape Cod is the eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), known for its ability to adapt in a multitude of urban and suburban settings. Despite their name, within this population you may spot fur variations such as black and albino squirrels. The reasons behind these differing colors relate to genetics, environmental adaptations, and overall species survivability.

Squirrels, like many other species, exhibit variations in their genetic makeup. These variations contribute to the color of their fur, which can be influenced by several factors including dominant vs. recessive genes, mutations, and the overall environment they inhabit. The melanistic (black) coloration, for instance, is commonly found in areas that experience harsh winters or are prone to predators. The dark fur provides camouflage against the snow and enhances heat retention, making black squirrels a common sight in densely wooded or colder areas of the Cape.



Two genetic variations of the eastern gray squirrel

Credit: Brenda Charpentier

The color variation in squirrels is more than just a cosmetic trait. A squirrel's fur color can actually have a big influence on their survival. A lighter-colored squirrel may blend seamlessly with lighter tree trunks and sandy soils as well as snow-covered meadows, clearings, and dunes, making it harder for predators like hawks and foxes to spot them. On the contrary, in the dense woods where shadows dominate, darker squirrels have an advantage against predators. These different strategies of camouflage extend the overall survival of the species, which is critical when food sources become scarce during the winter months.

The variety of colors amongst these furry critters is not just a visual delight but a testament to the species' adaptability to the land. They serve as a prime example of the importance of genetic variation within a population and furthermore, the importance of habitat diversity. Next time you see different colored squirrels coexisting in an area, consider it nature's way of signaling biodiversity and resilience!