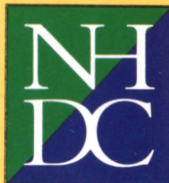


'BLACK' SQUIRRELS



of North Hertfordshire



'Black' Squirrels are frequently to be found in the general area of Letchworth, often in company with Grey Squirrels. Both types are in fact Grey Squirrels *Sciurus carolinensis*. 'Black' individuals are melanic variants in which the overproduction of black or dark brown fur pigments have masked lighter colours, especially white. This process, which is usually hereditary and carried upon dominant genes, is termed melanism. Close examination of the fur of grey individuals will show hairs that are plain or banded black, white or brown, whilst that of 'black' specimens contains black and dark brown coloured hairs only.

Melanism is a relatively uncommon phenomenon and, carried upon dominant genes, can result in a good proportion of melanic individuals being present in certain populations of a certain species. This appears to be the case amongst local squirrel populations. A range of melanism can be seen with individuals ranging from intense black to rufous brown. White pigmentation is completely masked. In certain animals, the levels of dark pigmentation may be lower and they may appear almost two-coloured, black to dark brown above with lighter brown underparts (the normally white areas of Grey Squirrels).

Grey Squirrels are native to eastern North America, where melanism is reasonably frequent and thought possible to be related to damp cold climatic conditions. The species was first brought to Britain about 1830, but present populations result from a number of further introductions between 1876 and 1929. Readily acclimatising, Grey Squirrels rapidly expanded their ranges ultimately to occupy most of the wooded areas of lowland Britain, in the process becoming a considerable pest to timber producers. There is no evidence to confirm that any 'black' individuals were introduced. The earliest sightings of 'Black' Squirrels were, of occasional individuals amongst expanding populations of Grey Squirrels, at Woburn Park in Bedfordshire where they still occur.

The first 'Black' Squirrel in Hertfordshire was noted at Ashwell in 1944. A few were normally present, and sometimes shot, there or at the nearby Odsey estate, just in Cambridgeshire, between 1942 and 1976. No recent observations have been made in that area. At Norton Common in Letchworth, a 'Black' Squirrel was seen in 1951 and over subsequent years many further sightings have been made there. Other parts of Letchworth with good tree cover also frequently produce a few 'black' individuals. There have been recent observations at Baldock, Radwell, Graveley, near Hitchin and the in the grounds of Fairfield Hospital near Arlesey in Bedfordshire. It would appear that, within an approximate four miles radius, Letchworth remains the 'Black' Squirrel stronghold of Britain.



'Black' or melanic Grey Squirrel



Grey Squirrel

As might be expected, being the same species, there are no ecological differences between 'black' or grey variants and pure or mixed pairings occur. Over the course of a few years it is evident that populations of 'Black' Squirrels fluctuate quite markedly. They are never as numerous as Greys and studies, in areas of more stable populations, indicate ratios of about 4:1. Frequent ground feeding may lead to untimely predation, especially of young squirrels and particularly the more conspicuous 'black' individuals. Stoats, fox, owls and birds of prey take their toll but most significant locally are depredations from dogs and cats. However, more important than these and human controls, the major controlling factor of squirrel populations is the availability of food. If the crops of tree fruits and seeds fail, mass mortality may ensue.

For many years the 'Black' Squirrels of the Letchworth area have attracted attention. They have featured in local and national media, including BBC TV's 'Wildtrack' and, in 1982, a long-running, light-hearted saga on the Radio 2 breakfast programme. Such is their attraction that other accolades, like the naming of the 'Black Squirrel' public house, will no doubt follow.

Albinism, the exact opposite to melanism, is the complete or partial suppression of normal coloured pigments. The animal appears white except for its eyes, which appear pink as normally obscured blood capillaries can be seen through colourless retinas. Usually hereditary, albinism is related to recessive genes and true albinos are thus rare in wild populations. An albino Grey Squirrel, now on display in Letchworth Museum, was found dead at Woburn Park in 1976, another was present in the grounds of Bromham Hospital near Bedford in 1985.



'White' or albino Grey Squirrel



Red Squirrel

The native Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* used to occur widely throughout much of Britain but began to decline markedly in much of the south of its range at about the time that introductions of Grey Squirrels were taking place. Reasons for this decline are still unclear but may have resulted from a combination of factors such as, loss of habitat, outbreaks of disease, slow breeding rates, failure of food sources, aggression and competition from Grey Squirrels. The last Red Squirrels in the North Hertfordshire area were noted during the 1930s. As with Grey Squirrels, melanism and albinism has been recorded in Red Squirrel populations. Such has been the continued decline of this attractive species in Britain that it is now regarded as endangered and afforded special protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981.

Fine specimens of normal, melanic and albino Grey Squirrels and Red Squirrel can be seen in the Natural History Gallery of The Letchworth Museum, Broadway, Letchworth. The Natural History Department maintains records and files on sightings of these and other local animals and plants. Further information can be obtained from:-

**Natural History Department,
Museums Resources Centre,
Bury Mead Road,
Hitchin, Herts. SG5 1RT.**

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