



Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

Douglas' Squirrel *Tamiasciurus douglasii*

Range: Douglas' squirrels range from western British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon south to northern California.

Identification: You will probably hear the Douglas' Squirrel before you see him. If you so much as quietly walk into his (or her) territory, you will be subjected to an outcry of aggressive, high-pitched trills, chirps and other indescribable noises, which translate to "this is my tree". You will look up to see a small squirrel that is 6 to 8 inches (15-20 cm) long with a bushy tail, 4 to 6 inches (10-15 cm) long. The back, head, and tail are rusty brown, perhaps with some gray streaks in the fur. The undersides (stomach/chest/throat) are orange. They have a buff colored eye-ring.

Another name for this squirrel is "Chickaree" (perhaps from the raucous threats they make). The Native Americans of Kings River called it the "Pillilooeet", in imitation of its characteristic alarm call.

They are sometimes confused with the very similar red (or pine) squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*. This species lives east of the Cascade Mountains but its range overlaps with Douglas' squirrels in parts of its range. Red squirrels can be identified by their whitish colored undersides and eye-rings.



Douglas' Squirrel in its native habitat.
Photo by Walter Siegmund.

Unique characteristics: The Douglas' Squirrel is vocal, argumentative, and very industrious. It seems that they not only scold you for wandering through the forest, but, in the autumn, bomb you as well. This is probably just because you stopped under his spruce tree while he is very busy with his harvesting for winter. You might be hit on the head when the heavy green spruce cone he has just cut from its branch drops to the forest floor. Look up: you will see the Douglas' Squirrel in the branches (often very high) chopping off cone after cone. After working over an area, he comes down the tree, collects and stores his harvest in old woodpecker holes or other hollows in trees and logs, or under piles of small branches or even under piles of forest debris the squirrels have made. The highly nutritious seeds from these cones are his cold weather food; as they strip the seeds from the cone, they leave trash heaps (called "middens") of the scales and cores; seeds are hidden under these. If there is snow covering the ground, you will see tiny tracks around a tree, down to the middens. They retrieve their stores as they need them, during the winter (they generally do not hibernate). In addition to the spruce cones, the squirrels harvest Douglas-fir and pine cones. Many of the stored seeds are not retrieved but sprout into trees or berry bushes, an example of the incredible symbiotic relationship of life in the forests.



Habitat needs and life history: You will find this squirrel in the conifer, mixed-conifer, and subalpine forests of western North America. In a study in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, Douglas' squirrels were more common in old-growth stands in winter. This may occur due to more food resources being available in those stands. The territory of one squirrel can be as small as a 10-foot (3 m) radius of a particularly rich cone-bearing tree, or much larger if the cone crop is not as abundant. Males and females claim separate territories. They defend their property most vocally in the fall. These lively creatures are like some people: they have summer and winter homes.

Mating begins in late winter through late spring months. In summer, they nest in what looks like a big ball of twigs on a limb. Nests are constructed of bark, twigs, moss and other materials. In winter, they move to a tree hollow. They have an average of 4-6 kits per litter. The young stay with the mothers for the first winter. They sometimes have a second litter in late summer.

Douglas' squirrel store cones and seed in their middens and occasionally store berries and dried mushrooms. They also feed on broad-leafed and vine maples, alder catkins, and new shoots of conifers. This squirrel eats acorns and filbert nuts. They have been observed eating insects and small bird eggs.

People often observe squirrels in their yards. Squirrels feed on bird feeders and some people enjoy feeding them and watching their antics. You can block their access to a feeder with a squirrel guard. You may want to encourage them to live in your neighborhood by building a house for them. Plans for constructing feeder guards and a squirrel house can be obtained from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website.

Status and conservation: Douglas' Squirrel populations are stable and they are not listed as threatened or endangered in any parts of their range.

Predators of this species include forest hawks and owls, bobcats, martens, weasels, foxes, coyotes, and domestic cats and dogs.

Interesting Fact: Their hind legs are double-jointed allowing them to run up and down trees with ease.



Coyotes are one of the species that prey upon Douglas' squirrels. Photo by Siobhan Sullivan ©.

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