

Wildlife Express

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RED SQUIRREL

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RED SQUIRREL

If you have ever been in an Idaho forest, you have heard a red squirrel. This tree squirrel doesn't like to have anything in its home. It will stomp its feet, wave its tail, and scold you with a churring, rolling chatter. It may even growl at you.

Red squirrels are sometimes called pine squirrels or chickarees. The name chickaree refers to the sound the squirrel makes when it is defending its territory. Red squirrels are one of the most territorial animals in the forest. There is a reason why they are so protective of their small part of the forest – food.

Red squirrels do not hibernate. Winter can be cold and harsh in Idaho's forests, so red squirrels need to gather as much food as they can to make it through the winter. They eat the seeds in pine, fir and spruce cones. In the autumn, the cones are perfect for picking only for about four to six weeks. The squirrels need to wait for the seeds to develop in the cones, but they don't want to wait too long. If the squirrels wait too long, the cones will open and the seeds will be gone. For about a month, red squirrels are running around gathering as many cones as they can. They cut the cones from the trees with their teeth and let the cones fall to the ground. They will stay in a tree for about five minutes cutting cones. They then run down the tree and gather the cones in a pile. The seed storage piles are called middens. Middens can be huge. They may be three feet deep and over twenty feet across. Middens are used year after year. They contain cones and the broken apart cones from which the squirrel has eaten. All of the cone parts make the midden cool and damp. The wet, cool midden keeps the cones from opening and keeps them fresh. Red squirrels may eat cones stored in middens for many years.

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Red squirrels not only eat pine nuts.

They also eat flowers, berries, tree buds, bark, tree sap and mushrooms. They will even eat insects, young birds and eggs.

Female red squirrels only allow male squirrels in their territory for one day.

The squirrels mate and then the female chases the male away. In about 35 days, two to five red squirrels are born in a hole in a tree. Red squirrels may also build nests out of leaves and twigs.

Red squirrels weigh about as much as two crayons when born.

They are hairless, their eyes are closed and they depend on their mother for everything. For squirrels, they develop slowly. They will drink their mother's milk until they are nine to 11 weeks old. Before the mother weans her young, she moves them to a nest near the edge of her territory. When it is time for the young red squirrels to find their own home, the males are chased off and out of their mother's territory. Sometimes daughters are allowed to inherit territory on the edge of their mother's home.

The first winter is the most difficult for a young red squirrel. It needs to find its own territory and store enough food to make it through the winter. It also needs to watch out for predators like hawks, owls, red foxes, coyotes and bobcats. If a red squirrel makes it through the first year of life, it may live to be two or three years old.

Look for red squirrels the next time you are in a forest. They are energetic, noisy and great acrobats. Their leaping and running from tree to tree can be very entertaining to watch!



Home Sweet Home

An animal's home is called its habitat. A habitat contains four things: food, water, shelter and space. These four things need to also be arranged fairly close together, so the animal can find them easily. If one part is missing, an animal will not survive.

It is easy to see how important food, water and shelter are to an animal. You must eat. A big glass of ice water sure hits the spot on a hot summer day. You wouldn't want to stand outside during a thunderstorm, but the space part of habitat is just as important as food, water or shelter.

Animals need enough space to find the things they need without having to fight for them.

When animals have to fight over food, they use important energy. Animals gathered together in small spaces can also make each other sick. Think of a student who has a cough. In the small space of a classroom, that student's germs quickly spread to other students who also get sick.

Next time you see an animal, think about its habitat. What is around that the animal might eat? Is there water nearby? Is there a bush, hole or cave for shelter? Does it seem like many other animals are around? Answering these questions will tell you a lot about the life and habitat of the animal you saw.



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Red Squirrel CCBY Christa R on Flickr

What's Your Niche?

Think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers that help you learn and people that make food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a **niche** (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has important jobs and roles. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will be unhealthy. At times, it may be hard to see the special role of an animal. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that cause problems. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae.

Skunks eat insects that like to munch on farmer's crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of soil and plants they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

Can you think of the red squirrel's niche? What's your niche? Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?



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Skunk CCBY Rikki's Refuge on Flickr
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SURVIVING WINTER

The harsh, cold days of winter are upon us.

Freezing temperatures, blowing wind, rain and snow not only affect us; they also affect wildlife. Winter can be a difficult time for wildlife. How do animals deal with the rigors of winter?



Some animals leave. They migrate to warmer climates where food is easier to find. Some animals travel long distances. Birds are the animals you probably think of migrating, but there are other animals that also travel great distances. Can you name an insect that travels to southern California and central Mexico for the winter? It is our state insect, the monarch butterfly!

Other animals sleep through the long, harsh winter. Marmots, bears and bats are just some of the animals that hibernate through the winter. Why do they hibernate? It's not the cold that causes them to hibernate; it's the lack of food. Marmots and bears eat plants. Most trees drop their leaves during the winter. Grass and fruits dry up and turn brown. It can be difficult to find good plants to eat in the winter. It is best for these animals to conserve energy and wait for greener times. Idaho's bats eat insects. They would starve to death looking for insects in the winter. By hibernating and slowing down their body functions, animals are able to survive on their stored fat until food becomes available.

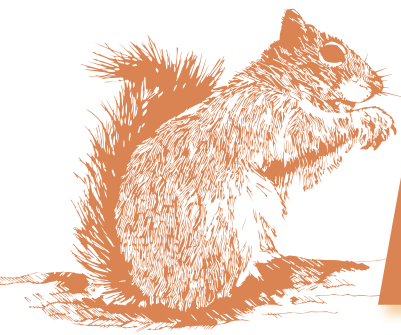


Red squirrels cache (CASH) or stockpile food. Many animals try and store enough food to get through the winter. Beavers are animals that store food. Their pond is their pantry. Beavers cut limbs off of trees and stick them in the mud at the bottom of their pond. The bark on the limbs will help them make it through the winter.

Can you think of other ways animals handle winter's tough weather?



From top to bottom:
Monarch Butterfly CCBY Peter Miller on Flickr
Bear in Den Illustration CCBY NPSGOV
Hoary Marmot CCBY Frank Fujimoto on Flickr



churrrr

Animal Talk

Animals don't talk, of course, but they do "tell" each other things.

They need to communicate. They may need to warn each other that danger is near, or let others know where to find food. They may want to protect their territory, keep their family together or find a mate.

Animals "talk" to each other in many different ways.

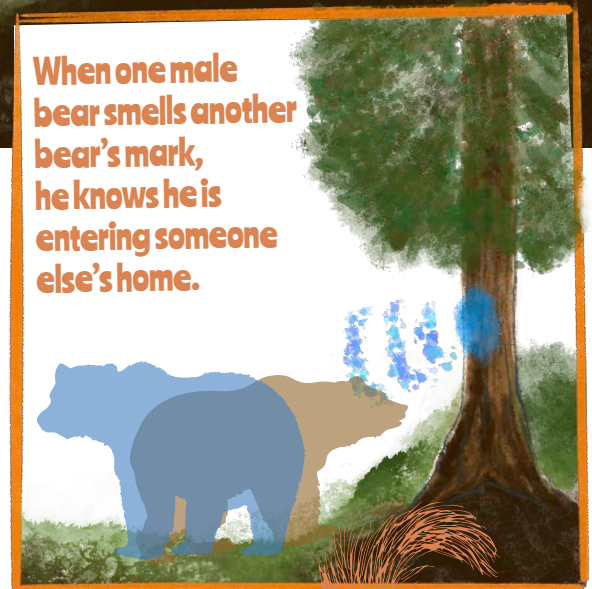
They may see a message. White-tailed deer raise their tails when danger is near. Other deer see the white tail and know to be alert. The signal may be a noise. Wolves howl to communicate with other members of the pack. Chemical signals may also be shared. Many animals have special, stinky glands. The glands make oil that the animal can rub on plants and rocks. We may be able to smell a skunk, but we might not be able to smell the scent mark of a bear. Even though we can't smell the mark, other bears can. When one male bear smells another bear's mark, he knows he is entering someone else's home.

How do red squirrels communicate? They use sound, signals and scent. Most of the sounds that red squirrels make are to protect their territory. There are at least four different sounds that red squirrels make to tell other red squirrels to "go away." They screech, chirp, growl and make a rolling churrrr sound that can last for four to five seconds. They also use signals or body language. Stomping feet and a flicking tail are real threats to other squirrels. When a red squirrel stomps its feet and flips its tail, it means business! Red squirrels also use smells to communicate. When a female is ready to mate and let male squirrels into her territory, she emits a strong odor. Red squirrels may also use scent to help mark their territories.

All animals need to communicate. Can you think of other ways animals "talk" to each other?



When one male bear smells another bear's mark, he knows he is entering someone else's home.



churrrr



LENDING A HAND

Everything in nature is connected. Animals often help the ecosystem or lend a hand to other animals, even if they don't mean to help. Even the activities of red squirrels are beneficial.

Red squirrels and grizzly bears are connected.

Red squirrels that live high in the mountains gather whitebark pine cones and store them in their middens. Whitebark pine seeds are one of the grizzly bear's favorite foods. Grizzly bears like to eat whitebark pine seeds, but they have a difficult time climbing the trees to reach the cones. So they steal cones from the red squirrels. Grizzly bears have a great sense of smell. They sniff out the whitebark pine cones in the squirrels' middens and eat them. Usually red squirrels store more cones than they can eat, so the bear's dining doesn't affect the survival of the red squirrel. There is little the red squirrel can do to protect its stored cones, other than scream its protest. The little squirrel is no match for a grizzly bear!

Even people used to take cones from red squirrel middens. Early foresters would harvest pine, spruce and fir tree seeds from cones in squirrel middens. The foresters would take the seeds back to their tree nurseries to germinate and grow. The saplings would then be planted back in the forest to replenish trees that were harvested. By taking and growing seeds from the middens, the foresters were sure to plant trees that were local to the forest and had the best chance of survival.

The activities of red squirrels also benefit the forest that they call home. Red squirrels not only hide cones in middens. They also place cones in smaller holes and locations around their territories. Red squirrels can't eat every cone and seed that they hide. Some of the seeds will germinate and grow. The young trees are often located away from the parent tree, perhaps in a place where there are no larger trees. By moving the cones around, red squirrels are also moving the seeds around. They help disperse seeds throughout the forest, and this keeps the forest ecosystem growing strong.



From top to bottom:
Red Squirrel CCBY Harlan Kredit via Yellowstone National Park
Grizzly Illustration CCBY Mary K Johnson for IDFG
Cone Midden CCBY J Schmidt via Yellowstone National Park

ONE OF IDAHO'S NEWEST GAME SPECIES, RED SQUIRREL IS A GREAT GATEWAY FOR NEW HUNTERS

By: Brian Pearson

Red squirrel hunting hones skills for larger game (and they are pretty tasty, too).

With a Hunting Passport in his pocket, a .410 shotgun in the crook of his arm (a recent Christmas gift), and mom and dad by his side, Wyatt Creson, then 8 years old, stalked through the woods and scoured tree branches in search of one of Idaho's more diminutive game animals: the American red squirrel.

For the Creson family, this relatively new opportunity was the perfect way to introduce Wyatt to hunting in the fall of 2019.

"We were really looking for opportunities that were available for a kid that young, where he might have a little success," said Jaime Creson, Wyatt's mom. "We learned that red squirrels recently became a game animal, and decided that might be a good place to start."

Red squirrels are native to Idaho, became a game animal in the state in 2018, and are a game species in many neighboring states. They are abundant in the state and can be found all over its forests, providing an opportunity for hunting that people may overlook.

Fall is one of the best times to hunt them because they are typically active throughout the day as they work to stockpile food for the winter. That was convenient for the Cresons, who are avid big game hunters, and meant that Wyatt's squirrel hunting would dovetail nicely with the family's annual deer hunting trip.

In the mornings, Wyatt went hiking with his parents as they worked to fill their deer tags. At around midday, the Cresons returned to camp to pick up Wyatt's shotgun before heading back out. With most deer hunters back in camp for the day, the Cresons had the woods largely to themselves.

"We really enjoyed being out alone with Wyatt and having this opportunity available for him," Jamie Creson said.



Photos CCBY Jaime Creson for IDFG

All told, Wyatt harvested three squirrels under his parents' guidance, learning the same skills he will need to be a successful big game hunter when he is old enough — observation, silent stalking, handling and shooting a firearm, and marksmanship — with an emphasis on safety and ethics. He also learned how to field dress the animals, which was important to his parents.

“Part of the reason we chose for Wyatt to hunt red squirrel is because we knew we could eat them,” Jaime said, noting that larger tree squirrels, like eastern fox and gray squirrels, are popular table fare in parts of the eastern United States. “In our family, we eat everything we harvest, and we weren't interested in something we weren't going to eat.”

When the Cresons got back to deer camp and cooked the squirrels for dinner that evening, they were pleasantly surprised by what they tasted.

“We just put it in the Dutch oven and fried it up, and the meat was very good, with an almost sweet taste,” Jaime said. “With it tasting so yummy, I think it's a really great opportunity for kids to eat a little bit of what they harvested, and to get excited about putting food on the table.”

For new hunters, or anyone interested in trying out an overlooked (and tasty) small game species, red squirrel season runs from Aug. 30 through March 31. For more information on this opportunity, refer to the Idaho Upland Game, Turkey & Furbearer, 2020-21 Seasons & Rules booklet.

Squirrel Recipes

Here are some recipes to try with your harvested squirrel. FYI, these recipes are good with rabbit, too!

BAKED SQUIRREL

4 cut up squirrels (use only hind legs and meaty back pieces)

¼ c. vinegar

4 Tbsp. salt

1 tsp. Adolph's tenderizer

1 tsp. pepper

1 to 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

Crisco and cooking oil

1 chopped onion

1 chopped bell pepper

2 Tbsp. butter

4 Tbsp. red wine or chicken broth

1 can cream of mushroom soup

Mix vinegar and salt with water to cover squirrel. Soak 2 hours in solution. Remove pieces and shake on tenderizer and pepper. Roll in flour. Fry in Crisco until golden brown. Place pieces in baking dish. In another skillet, sauté onion and pepper in butter. Add wine and soup. Mix well. Pour over squirrel. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

Recipe courtesy of Cooks.com.

Country-Style Squirrel

2 squirrels

Salt & pepper to taste

Flour

6 Tbsp. vegetable oil

2 c. water

Cut squirrel into small frying-size pieces, salt and pepper then roll in flour until coated well. Put in skillet of hot oil and fry until golden. Remove squirrel and most of the oil, then add water and bring to boil. Place squirrel back into the skillet, turn to low heat, cover and cook for approximately 1 hour. Serve with some large potatoes that have been baked for a great combination.

Recipe courtesy of Cooks.com.

Belgian Squirrel

3 large squirrels

½ cup butter

2 onions, sliced

3 tablespoons white vinegar

1/8 teaspoon dried thyme

salt and pepper to taste

18 pitted prunes

1 ½ teaspoons all-purpose flour

1 cup cold water

1. Clean squirrels. Rinse the meat though several changes of water and pat dry. Cut squirrels into serving pieces.

2. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F.

3. Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add squirrel pieces and fry until browned on all sides, but do not cook through. Remove the squirrel

pieces to a large Dutch oven or oven safe crock. Add onions to the butter in the skillet; cook and stir until tender and browned. Pour the onions and butter into the pot with the squirrel. Fill with enough water to almost cover the meat. Mix in the vinegar and season with thyme, salt and pepper. Cover and place in the oven.

4. Bake for 45 minutes. Remove the pot from the oven and add the prunes. Return to the oven and reduce the heat to 325 degrees F. Continue baking for another 45 minutes.

5. Remove the pot from the oven. Mix the flour and cold water together in a cup. Use a slotted spoon to remove the meat and prunes to a serving dish. Set the pot on the stove and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Stir in the flour and water and simmer, stirring constantly, until the gravy is thick enough to coat a metal spoon. Serve meat with a lot of gravy.

Recipe Courtesy of All Recipes.

Be Outside!



Wildlife Gifts

During the holiday season, our thoughts are about the things that are closest to us – our family and friends. We think about what gifts we can give them to show we care. If you were to add wildlife to your gift-giving list, what might you give?

Habitat is the most pressing need for wild animals. A good habitat will provide food, water, shelter and space. These four things must be arranged so the animal doesn't have to travel too far to find them. What things could you do to improve habitat in your area?

Some people like to feed birds. Here are some fun ideas for bird feeding and decorating for the holidays. Make a garland of air-popped popcorn, fresh cranberries and orange slices. Hang the garland outside on a tree. Then coat pinecones with peanut butter and roll the pinecones in bird seed. Hang these "ornaments" in the tree. You may want to add some seed baskets. Cut grapefruits in half and scoop out the pulp. Poke holes in each side of the hollowed out grapefruits and string yarn through the holes to make a handle. Fill the baskets with black oil sunflower seeds or cracked corn and hang them on the tree. You now have a festive holiday tree and a treat for your feathered friends.

If you live where red squirrels are found, you might even get a visit from them. They too would like the items on your "giving tree!"

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Pine Cones CCBY S Clark via Pixabay

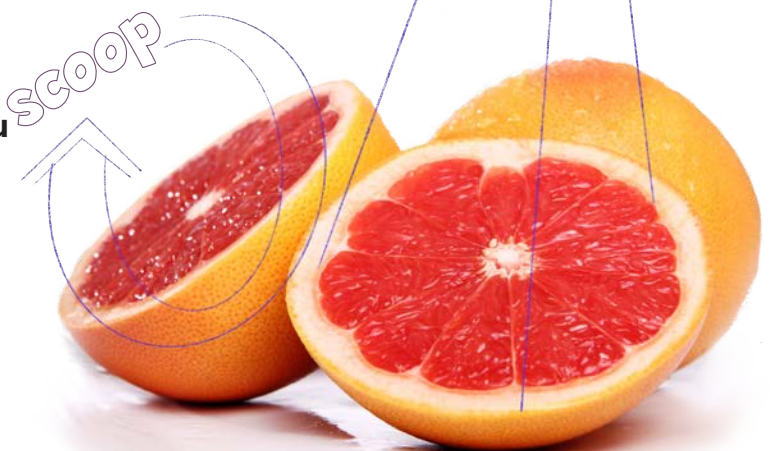
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Yellow Corn and Black Seed CCBY Pikrepo

Cranberry and Pine Cone CCBY via Pixabay

Grapefruit via Freepik, modified by Mary K Johnson for IDFG

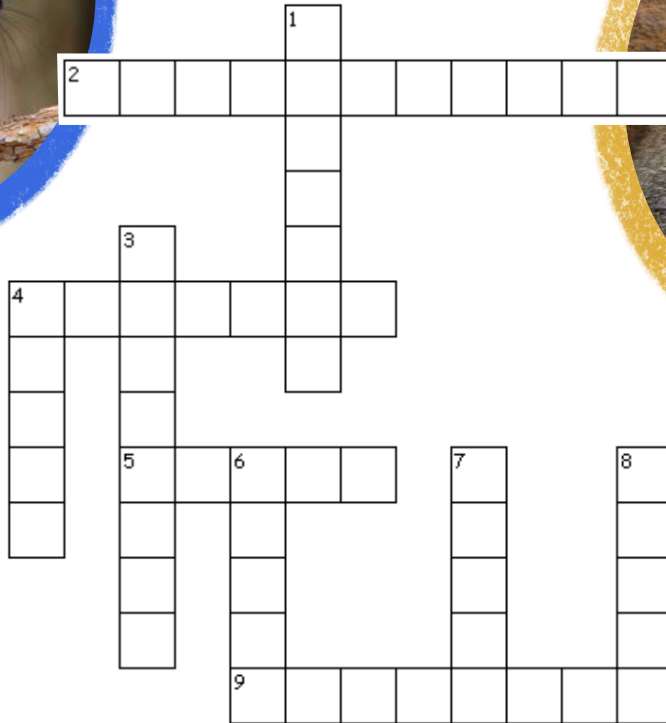


RED SQUIRREL CRISS-CROSS



Words

Cache
Cones
Crayons
Disperse
Habitats
Middens
Niche
Sound
Tasty
Territorial



Across

2. Red squirrels are one of the most _____ animals in the forest.
4. Newborn red squirrels weigh as much as two _____.
5. Red squirrels make for a _____ meal.
9. Red squirrels help to _____ seeds throughout the forest.

Down

1. Red squirrels store pine cones in _____.
3. Animals live in different homes or _____.
4. Pine, fir and spruce _____ contain the food red squirrels love.
6. Red squirrels use _____, signals and scent to communicate.
7. An animal's role in a habitat is called a _____.
8. Red squirrels _____ or stockpile food for winter.

Wildlife Express

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express,
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