

THIS WEEK ON THE LLANO ESTACADO

November 9-13, 2009



Families of fox squirrels were introduced to Midland and other West Texas towns in the early 1990s clinging to large trees dug up with heavy machinery in Central Texas. The branches of the root-balled trees were bound with netting and loaded onto truck trailers. After arrival in West Texas the netting was cut, the trees planted, and the squirrels ran free. Fox squirrels are adaptable to a wide variety of forest habitats.

Attitudes about fox squirrels are polarized among city dwellers: their antics may be entertaining, but they can do a tremendous amount of damage to the electrical wiring of homes.

They are fun to watch – non-stop tail jerking, hindquarters trembling, rear leg stomping, chirping, squealing, and whirring – running, climbing, and jumping. With few dogs and cats able to catch the squirrels and no nesting species of hawk within the city limits, the little rodents have been able to establish themselves quite well. There can be up to two sets of two to four young each year. A local squirrel rehabilitator has had baby squirrels brought to her from March until November. Fox squirrels usually have a favorite feeding perch to which they will carry their food. In the winter an extended family of dozen squirrels sometimes will use the same nest. The young's eyes are closed for a month and then remain in the nest for seven more weeks before learning about the neighborhood.

In a totally unrelated note, I hope Midland teachers have discovered the following website on migration; <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/>

It is a fascinating website, with many activities for school children! It is a wonderful example of how modern technology has enabled scientists and citizens scientists to cooperate and gather data to further our knowledge of the wildlife that shares the planet with us.

Teacher and student challenge; If your school does not have squirrels on campus, try to attract them with a squirrel feeder, and by planting oak trees (live oak, red oak, chinkapin oak, or burr oak.) If you do have squirrels try to determine their favorite trees, locate their nests, record the times when the young are born, observe their techniques of escaping predators, record interactions between individuals, determine how many sounds squirrels make (and what each sound means), figure out how far an individual will range, record how squirrels interact with birds or people, where they like to bury their acorns, determine where they have scent stations or if they use the bathroom only in one place, where they like to eat, or come up with many more questions to which to determine the answers.