

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

American Red Squirrel

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Outside of birds in the winter, there is one species that is seen visiting the bird feeders in good numbers at the Welcome Center. Charismatic troublemakers, photogenic scamps, and somewhat underappreciated our species of the day is one most visitors delight over! Today, let's check out Red Squirrels!

Squirrels, as a group, are quite diverse occupying habitats from barren deserts, to dense woodlands, to tundra habitats around the world. The family Sciuridae includes tree squirrels, ground squirrels, flying squirrels, marmots, and prairie dogs. These are typically small to medium sized mammals, with our largest Minnesota sciurid being the Woodchuck! Fox Squirrels are the largest sciurid named squirrel in Minnesota.

American Red Squirrels are one of three species in the genus *Tamiasciurus*, known as the pine squirrels due to their strong association with conifer species. In our area, Red Squirrels tend to prefer spruce and fir cones as their primary seed sources, but have a fairly diverse diet including mushrooms, leaves and conifer

needles, catkins, berries, and even animal material (like bird eggs and nestlings!). Their loud chittering echoes through woodlands in much of northern North America, with their range extending into the montane west. Strong climbers and jumpers, Red Squirrels use these skills to evade predation from American Martens and Fishers, as well as American Goshawks. They also use their jumping skills to pillage bird feeders far and wide!

During fall, these squirrels spend a lot of time preparing for the winter! One of the coolest behaviors done by Red Squirrels (that most of us don't get to appreciate!) is caching mushrooms! Mushrooms are a great food source and Red Squirrels cache mushrooms for the winter by drying them. They dry these mushrooms along branches of trees. If you have ever been walking along a trail through the Sax-Zim Bog or in your own backyard, you might have noticed mushrooms in trees! That is the handy work of Red Squirrels preparing for the winter. Red Squirrels also leave conspicuous foraging sign along trails as well! Their middens can be seen along the edges of the boardwalks in the Sax-Zim Bog, as well as stumps and downed trees in wooded areas.

Very demonstrative and vocal, the postures and sounds American Red Squirrels make are not just a frustrating part of birdwatching, but can give you a lot of information about what the squirrel is doing! The loud, drawn out churring is the sound of territorial defense. This call is given when another squirrel is trespassing on a territory (which can be as much as 2.5 acres!). If the trespasser doesn't leave, a chase will ensue! American Red Squirrels are not

very social creatures, so there is a lot of territory defense and chasing that happens during the day. Tail twitching and the short chipping vocalizations given are in response to a threat (even just humans walking through their forest!).

More information about this charismatic species included in photos below!

(Photos of squirrels below by Sparky Stensaas; Photo of tracks by Head Naturalist Clinton)



Snow tunnels are one of the preferred means of winter travel for American Red Squirrels!



Their amazing leaping ability makes placing a feeder a tricky task during the season. Sometimes it is easier to just enjoy the athletic feats of these mammals.



Middens are good a good giveaway of American Red Squirrel activity! Their middens and caches are composed primarily of conifer cone pieces.



American Red Squirrels have a habit of clipping off heavily cone laden branches. This makes it easier for the squirrels to cache cones during times of abundance.



Most of the time, American Red Squirrel tracks often show up as a pair of long tracks in front of a pair of short tracks. Not often do you get to see individual toes, like seen above.