

FORGET FLYING REINDEER, WE HAVE FLYING SQUIRRELS

by Robin Klink

Yes, West Virginia, Pennsylvania really does have flying squirrels - both northern and southern species. And as convincing as Rudolph the reindeer is for guiding sleighs at night, the nocturnal flying squirrel doesn't actually fly - it glides.

Although rarely seen, the flying squirrel was recently photographed feeding in Haddington Woods. A local naturalist has been spreading peanut butter on the bark of trees in the hopes of sighting one of these interesting arboreal acrobats.

Here are some interesting facts on the somewhat misleading name of the parachuting creatures in our area:

- Flying squirrels extend a fold of skin that stretches from the wrists to the ankles to help them glide through the trees
- The tail is used to steer as they move it from side to side during their glide
- The resurgence of the northern species in West Virginia gives hope to a restored population in our state – now on our endangered list due to loss of habitat
- Northern squirrels are slightly larger, measuring 11 inches with a reddish tint on its back
- Patagia is the name for the furry flaps of skin on which they glide
- Most glides are 20 to 40 feet, but researchers documented glides up to 300 feet
- Flying squirrels inhabit hardwood forests and are drawn to open water and may be as abundant as gray squirrels
- The common gray squirrel can weigh 2 pounds while the flying species doesn't weigh more than one-fourth of a pound
- Southern flying squirrels carry a parasite that threatens the existence of the northern species
- Their diet consists of nuts, berries, insects and the occasional bird egg or nestling but the Northern variety eats fungi & lichens from coniferous trees and are rare in Pennsylvania since we're losing hemlock and spruce.
- Life span is from 5 to 8 years

Source: *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* 5/6/12



View of the extended patagium on a flying squirrel



Confirmed sighting of a southern flying squirrel at Haddington Woods in the Cobbs Creek area on 11/30/14.



Rocky the Flying Squirrel was the sidekick to a moose made famous in the classic Bullwinkle cartoons.