



MONTEREY NEWS

December 2018
Est. 1970 Vol. XLVIII • Number 12



Silvery Night Flyers

One of our wild neighbors is the Flying Squirrel, *Glaucomys volans*. That first word means silver, and the little squirrel is silvery on top and creamy white below. “Volans” means flying, and these nocturnal squirrels do soar through the air. They do not fly, in the way the birds, butterflies, and bats do. Like the “daring young man on the flying trapeze,” they glide.

Some folks assume the Flying Squirrel is a figment of folklore, or maybe the Saturday morning cartoons with Rocky and Bullwinkle. The kinds of squirrels we know best are the ones abroad by day, like us. These are Grey Squirrels and Red Squirrels. Sometimes driving at night, we may see a small white creature flash across the road overhead, just caught in the gleam of our headlights. We might think it is some night-flying bird, maybe a small owl. Most times it is the lovely pale underside of the nocturnal Flying Squirrel, gliding to its next station.

These animals are about ten inches long, which includes a four-inch tail. The tail is flattened, topside to bottom-side, like the flattened tail of a beaver. It is the flight rudder. The only truly winged, flying mammal in these parts is the bat. The squirrels have a broad cape, a furry membrane of skin that stretches between the front and hind legs. The animal only weighs three to four ounces, but that cape gives it a soaring surface of fifty square inches.

A Flying Squirrel scampers up a tree trunk, as high as sixty feet or so. From there it leans to the left, then leans to the right, taking a bearing by triangulation. Then it curls into a ball and springs out from the trunk. Its trajectory is at first 30°, headed down fast, but it snaps out its legs and cape and levels, soaring as much as one hundred and fifty feet before coming to rest on the lower part of its target tree. Just before landing, it whips down that flat tail and curls its hind legs and cape forward, as it makes vertical contact with the tree. Immediately it zips around to the other side, in case it has been seen by a predator, and climbs quickly up, to prepare for the next soaring flight.

The squirrels can dodge branches, steering by use of the tail rudder, also by altering the shape of the cape. Moving the front and hind leg of the same side closer together creates slack and a cup in the cape. The squirrel turns with perfect



timing and dexterity. On the ground though, the cape makes life awkward. Some folks have seen a mother Flying Squirrel sitting up on her hind legs to let her babies nurse. She holds the cape out of the way with her front paws.

Anyone with a hunting cat may see a Flying Squirrel, and sometimes all that is left after the cat has eaten will be that flat little tail. We see Flying Squirrels here thanks to our cat, also thanks to our bird feeder, which is a platform on a tall post just outside the kitchen window. We also have a cylindrical feeder hanging from the roof. The squirrels sometimes “fly” to that hanging tube and manage to land on its slick surface and hang on there to nibble out the birdseed. They also navigate a glide-path to the platform feeder on the pole, landing easily despite its glass roof.

The cat mostly watches them from the indoor windowsill or kitchen table, but sometimes he meets one outside on the ground, where he is much more agile than the squirrel.

These squirrels don't hibernate. They will store up nuts in a hollow tree, make a nest in there, and sometimes live closely with as many as fifty other Flying Squirrels. In 1849 John James Audubon and John Bachman were out in a grove of nut trees near Philadelphia and this is what they saw (as recounted by Ernest Thompson Seton in his *Life-Histories of Northern Animals*,

1909): “About sunset the Flying-squirrels began to appear, until not less than 200 were in sight, sailing and coasting in air from tree to tree, scores at a time, crossing and recrossing in all directions, apparently for the joy of flight. . . . When it was too dark for further observation, the naturalist left them, but the party was still at its height.”

— Bonner McAllester

Monterey News, December 2018