

GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE - Flying Squirrels - Pixies of the Forest Night



By **Donna DuBreuil**,

President, Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre

Although we no longer do wildlife rehabilitation, the animals we have cared for over the years are never far from our minds. We hope by sharing their stories, you will come to have a new appreciation for local wildlife and the rich biodiversity we enjoy in this region.

The young man who arrived with three infant flying squirrels was very distressed. He had been hired to take down a large spruce tree that was overhanging a house and had no idea that a cavity in the upper part of the tree was home to flying squirrels.

These squirrels, two females and a male, were only 2.5 weeks old, eyes still firmly closed and weighed less than 20 grams each. These were Northern Flying Squirrels where adults weigh between 75-130 grams. Compared to the more typical Eastern Grey Squirrel, weighing up to

700 grams, you can see how really small Flying squirrels are.

Few of us have the privilege of observing Flying squirrels in that they are nocturnal and most active between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. They have huge black luminous eyes – a characteristic of night animals – and exceptionally soft, silky, dense grey-brown fur.

Most interesting is the large fold of skin, called a patagium, that extends from their wrist to their ankle that, once extended, allows them to glide effortlessly up to fifty yards. The tail which is broad and flat serves as a rudder in banking and braking.

These physical characteristics were evident when 'the flyers' were babies. Having taken to their formula immediately, they would cling to the feeding syringe with tiny feet that were attached to this large umbrella-like fold of skin, making them appear like little old ladies wearing a shawl.

Flying squirrels are very sociable. While they would snuggle in a soft warm heap in their nesting box during the day, they would always welcome a visit and rouse themselves to investigate, gently nibbling a proffered finger. Looking up at you, their huge eyes and perfectly round pink mouths, added to their enchanting quizzical expression, leading some to call them 'pixies of the forest night'.

While in care, the 'flyers' would come out around dusk to check out the daily menu offering, chasing each other for the choicest morsels before gearing up for their amazing acrobatic feats. Released on a large wooded property, the homeowner would report seeing these 'imps' on occasion, gliding from a nearby tree to his bird feeder.

Remember, this is the height of the wildlife birthing season. Please check the website below before taking any action that you may regret.