



# Wildlife Notes

## Abert's squirrel (*Sciurus aberti*)

Named after Col. John James Abert, a naturalist and topographical engineer who in the early 1800s was responsible for the exploration and mapping of lands west of the Mississippi River.

### Habitat

Abert's squirrels live, nest, feed and seek refuge from enemies mostly in Ponderosa pine forests, but also can be found in mixed coniferous forests where they are likely to have been introduced by humans.

Located throughout New Mexico, three subspecies are isolated from one another in different mountain ranges. One subspecies lives in the New Mexico Mountains, another in the Chuska Mountains and a third on Mount Taylor and in the Sandia, Manzano, Sangre de Cristo, San Juan, Jemez, and Zuni Mountains.

### Description

All Abert's squirrels have prominent ear tufts and long, bushy tails. During the winter, ear tassels measure about an inch in length (thus the nickname, "tassel eared squirrel") but become shorter in summer.

Adults average two feet from the nose to the tail. The tail — being half of their length — it is often used as an umbrella to shade from overheating.

Coloration of each subspecies is distinct with differing amounts of white, grey and black on the tails and bellies. Molting occurs twice each year, once in spring and again in fall. The fur coat or 'pelage' is brighter in the summer as more white has grown.

### Behavior

Abert's squirrels are active year round from sunrise to sunset, retiring at night and during fowl weather. Quiet and less boisterous than their red squirrel (chickaree) cousins, Abert's will bark if excited. They rarely defend territory with large home ranges that may encompass 20 acres.

Abert's nest in trees between 16–90 feet above the ground. Nests most often face south and are built in the crotch of branches or in a witch's broom (the dense growth of small branches stimulated by mistletoe). Cutting and carrying twigs to their nest site, Abert's use forefeet to arrange materials and line their nest with shredded grass, bark, paper, cloth and other found materials. Diameters usually measure 1-½ feet with inside chambers about 6 inches wide.

Abert's do not hibernate, but will sleep through periods of cold and resume foraging as temperatures warm. Less active on windy days, they often linger in the sun before becoming active in the early morning. After vigorous periods of activity, they sometimes lay in shade to reduce body temperatures. They also lay prostrate atop branches to avoid being seen by predators.



## Predators

Hawks are the primary natural predator of the Abert's squirrel, followed by coyotes, mountain lions and bobcats. Young squirrels especially, are particularly vulnerable to predation by feral and domestic cats. If located in an urban area, automobile traffic also poses a significant threat to squirrels traveling within their territory.

## Diet

Ponderosa pines provide the primary diet — seeds, buds, inner bark and the male cones are all eaten. Clipped ponderosa pine debris on the ground may indicate squirrels feeding above. Moisture in fungi provide an important water source. Mushrooms are eaten all summer and if available year round.

Abert's also eat mistletoe, acorns, insects, carrion and occasionally shrubs and grasses. Bones and shed antlers also are gnawed for the mineral content. Unlike many of other squirrels, Abert's do not store large caches of food. They sometimes bury individual pinecones — which more often disperses seeds than provides food.

Availability of food effects population size more than any other factor. Numbers fluctuate widely depending on the amount of pinecones from year to year.

## Reproduction

Abert's squirrels mate from early spring until early summer. Small groups of males may pursue single females for hours through the trees. Females may breed twice during

abundant years. After a gestation of approximately 40 days, young are born from June through early July. Litters consist of two to five hairless and blind young, about 2-½ inches in length and weighing under a half an ounce. At approximately seven weeks when young have opened their eyes and grown hair, they begin to venture short distances from the nest.

## Hunting

In New Mexico, the Abert's squirrel is listed as a game species. For further information, please visit online: [www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us) to view the *New Mexico Hunting Rules and Information for Big and Upland Game*.



Abert's squirrel, NMDGF photo by D. Williams



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