

NATURAL HISTORY

Four species of squirrels can be found in the Bay Area: the Western Grey Squirrel, the Eastern Grey Squirrel, the Eastern Fox Squirrel, and the California Ground Squirrel.

- **Eastern Grey Squirrels**, a tree squirrel, are the smallest of our 3 arboreal species. They are typically grey with a white belly and brownish-orange on face, paws, tail and along the sides of the belly. They can also come in different color morphs such as can be black or blonde. They live well among humans in heavily populated area.
- **Eastern Fox Squirrels**, another species of tree squirrel, are very orange all over with whitish bellies. They are larger than Eastern Grey Squirrels and typically have more pronounced ear tufts. They live well among humans in heavily populated areas.
- **Western Grey Squirrels** are the largest of the three tree squirrel species and are also the only true native tree squirrel in the area. (The other two species were introduced.) They are always grey with white bellies. Sometimes they will have just a little brownish on their ears. They require large expanses of oak forest and do not do well in a city setting so they are threatened by habitat loss and competition with introduced squirrel species.
- **California Ground Squirrels** are brown with white bellies and white spots on their backs. They have a very blocky head and shorter sparser tail compared to our tree squirrels. True to their name, they spend much of their time on and underground in shared, complex burrow systems. These burrow systems are also sometimes utilized by Burrowing Owls, one of our only diurnal owls and a species of special concern.

All three tree squirrels are diurnal (active during the day) and spend much of their time in the trees, though they may be seen feeding or storing nuts and acorns in the ground. Their diet mainly consists of nuts, acorns, seeds, flowers, and other plant material, but they may also feed on the occasional insect or small bird. Tree squirrels can often be heard barking and chattering with one another and may be seen communicating via visual signals with their tails. They are also known to have two or more nests made of leaves and twigs in tree branches, cavities, or dens. Tree squirrels can breed up to four times a year, depending widely on habitat availability, food and water supply, and the presence of parasites. Average litter size is 2-4 but may be as high as 6. Baby season usually goes from spring to summer but may last until early fall.

Please Note: Species will vary in different counties, states and countries.



Photo by Steve Shaw

Image Source: benjamin sTone via Creative Commons

Left: Juvenile Western Grey Squirrel (left) alongside a juvenile Eastern Grey Squirrel (right).

Right: Squirrel drey (nest) in the branches of a tree.

ALWAYS call our hotline BEFORE attempting to reunite and NEVER feed any babies

GUIDELINES FOR REUNITING TREE SQUIRREL IN MARIN COUNTY, CA

Reuniting babies with their mother gives them the best chance of survival – we are very good at what we do but wild moms make the best parents! When we can get babies back with their mom it also helps WildCare save resources and manpower for those animals that do need to stay in our hospital. In a typical baby season WildCare will treat around 200 squirrels! Thank you so much for helping with this vital task!

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Every situation is different and we can help you determine if a reunite is the best option and if so, how and when. The chances of success include many variables, such as the weather, age of babies, whether or not they are injured or warm enough, local predators, length of time since nest disturbance and more.

1. **Very important: DO NOT feed the babies any food or liquid!** They will be fine if the separation time has been less than 48 hours. We want them hungry so they cry out for mom. Feeding them will cause life-threatening problems such as diarrhea, bloat and aspiration pneumonia. The babies were given subcutaneous fluids by med staff so they will be properly hydrated for at least 24-48 hours! If the reunite is unsuccessful the first day and you are keeping them overnight, consult med staff.
2. **Prepare a shallow (approximately 5" x 7") sturdy box for the babies.**
(Note: If you have the entire intact nest, this is best to place babies in it and place it at the base of the tree without a box.) If you do not have the nest, your box needs to be deep enough that they cannot climb out but not so deep that mom will be afraid to go in it. Line the box with fleece or flannel. Do not use towels with terrycloth/holes/loose strings as claws will become entangled. If you have some of the original nesting material, place some in and around the box to help make mom more likely to explore it. The difficult task here is you don't want the babies to be cold or completely vulnerable to predators but you also don't want them so buried in towels that mom will not see or find them. They will burrow under everything. With a heat source under half the box, fewer towels are better.
3. **Secondary heat sources are required.** The heat source can be a Snuggle Safe disk in it's case in the box, or heating pad with extension cord on medium outside of the box under half the box (so they can move if they begin to overheat). Homemade heat sources can be created by taking an old sock, filling it with dry rice or beans, tie in knot and microwave until hot. These only hold heat for an hour or so, so need to be re-warmed frequently. Never allow babies to have direct contact with heat pad or Snuggle Safe as they can burn themselves.
4. **Place the box at the base of the tree where the nest fell from and make sure it's stable.** The box should be on even ground so it won't wobble or tip when mom investigates. In the case of predators in the area the box can be nailed to tree or hung by bungee cords and rope if needed but it must be stable or mom will not go into it. Make sure an adult squirrel could stand on the edge and go in without it wobbling or tipping. If this happens the babies will spill onto the ground mom will be scared off and likely not return. An adult squirrel will not know to look in a strange cardboard box so it must be placed in mom's path up and down her nest tree. You cannot relocate the box/babies and expect mom to know to go looking. It must be placed at/against the nest tree. If the entire tree has been removed, place box directly on the stump.
5. **Make the babies call for mom.** It is likely mom has run off to prepare a new nest and since her babies have been gone for some time, might not be in the immediate area when you return. In order for her to know that her babies are there (and that they are in a strange box), it helps to get her attention. Once you have everything set up, pull up video of baby squirrels calling for mom on YouTube on your phone and play as loud as possible a few times before leaving the area. If you do not have a smartphone or cell reception, you can hold a baby up by the armpits so that they are uncomfortable

and squirmy. This should cause them to call for mom. If mom comes running, put the baby in the box and run away as fast as you can! Even if no mom appears, place the baby in the box and proceed with the following...

6. **Keep people, pets, and machines away from the area all day!** Do not check the nest multiple times a day, it is important to leave them alone so you don't interrupt mom. If pets or humans are close to the babies, mom won't come. She won't want to draw the attention of predators (humans!) to her babies. If the nest came down due to tree work, then you must wait for the tree trimmers to complete their job and be gone for the day before attempting the reunite. Call WildCare to determine if you should bring the babies to WildCare for care until the tree work is done and you can pick up again for reuniting, or if you should keep at home and keep warm until then.
7. **Remember: be aware of the lifetime of your heat source**, but don't otherwise visit or disturb them as you may discourage or interrupt the mother.
8. **If the mother doesn't retrieve the babies by dark**, they need to be brought inside. Adult squirrels are not active at night so mom will not come in the dark. Babies will not survive outside at night, even with heat. Predators will eat them. You will likely have made plans with med staff for this situation. If you are bringing the babies back to WildCare that evening, be sure to do so before closing. If you have spoken with WildCare and it is determined that you are equipped to keep the babies overnight – **DO NOT FEED THE BABIES!** - Keep warm and begin the process again at sun up the next morning.
9. **If reuniting attempts are unsuccessful after 48 hours**, babies will be admitted to WildCare.
10. **Monitoring the baby's health:** Once WildCare medical staff has given the babies a clean bill of health in order for you to attempt this reunite, there are still some basic things you should know to keep an eye on that would require you to abort the reunite mission and bring the babies back to WildCare:
 - a. **Is the baby warm? *A mother squirrel will not retrieve a cool or cold squirrel!*** They should be warm to your touch, not cooler than your skin and not hotter. Even when it is hot outside, young without fur ("pinkies") and those with fur but eyes still closed will always require a secondary heat source as they are too young to thermo regulate. Older juveniles who can climb and jump may not require secondary heat depending on the weather. Consult med staff.
 - b. **Are there bugs on the baby?** If insects such as ants, wasps or flies are on the baby then something is wrong that we cannot detect. They are not warm or healthy enough and mom will not take them back. These insects will eat flesh; the babies cannot survive.
 - c. **Is there a predator in the immediate area?** All neighborhoods have cats, crows and the like which is a calculated risk we weigh. However, if there is a predator such as a cat immediately in your yard investigating the squirrels in their reunite box/nest you must intervene. Bring the squirrels inside immediately and call WildCare's Hotline to determine the next steps.

WILDCARE HOTLINE 9am-9pm: (415) 456-SAVE (7283) THE MARIN HUMANE SOCIETY 24 HRS: (415) 883-4621
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