

## Douglas Squirrel

(*Sciuridae tamiasciurus*)



Photo credit: Darren Colello

By Nancy MacLean

The Douglas squirrel, like all squirrels, belongs to the order *Rodentia*. A common characteristic of these mammals is that they have orange front teeth which grow continuously throughout their lives and have to be kept at an adequate length. Douglas squirrels are the native squirrel species in British Columbia, unlike the introduced eastern grey squirrel that it has to compete with.

### Characteristics

The Douglas squirrel, also known as the pine squirrel and chickaree, is mostly olive brown in colour on top, although it can also be reddish. The fur on its belly is an orange-white colour. They have white rings around their eyes. They have five toes on their hind feet and four toes on their front feet each equipped with claws. These long curved claws allow the squirrel to climb trees where it nests in the summer. The Douglas squirrel has very good hearing and keen eyesight. They are active during the day all year long, except during especially cold spells.

Douglas squirrels measure about 33 cm long and weigh only around 200-250 grams.

### Life Cycle

The fast, noisy, frantic courtship begins in late March for the Douglas Squirrels. You can often spot the courtship as they can be seen chasing each other around trees. After about a month their offspring are born. Their offspring are usually born in litters of four to six. At

birth, the young are blind and furless. Within a month they can see and their hair begins to grow. After about three months they are on their own. Because the mother spends such a short time with her litter each spring, she is able to have another before the cold weather comes. The male does not participate in raising the young. Douglas squirrels have a short lifespan of around 5-6 years.

### **Habitat & Behaviour**

The Douglas squirrel prefers coniferous forests of the Pacific Northwest. Here it makes nests of bark, lichens and mosses. During the winter months, it prefers the shelter of ground burrows, nests in holes of trees, and abandoned bird's nests. Like many squirrels, the Douglas squirrel has its own territory (2 to 5 acres) which it defends chasing other squirrels out of it. From their perches in the trees, the social Douglas squirrel scolds and chatters to predators and humans alike. Interestingly these squirrels share their territories during the mating season.

Douglas squirrels eat berries, green vegetation, shoots and cones of conifers, mushrooms and even birds eggs. In the trees, the squirrels establish feeding stations. They strip the cones found in the trees and on the forest floor for seeds by gnawing on the cone. Under each feeding station, the shells they have stripped off the cones pile up on the ground. Sometimes these piles of shells are several metres in diameter and almost a metre high. These piles are called middens. Humans will collect seeds from the middens and plant them to grow into nursery trees.

### **Threats**

Douglas squirrels have many natural predators including, owls, hawks, martens, weasels, mink, raccoon, bobcat, fox, and coyote. However their most pressing threats come from human activities. Habitat destruction, especially of the critically endangered temperate rainforests, can ultimately effect squirrel populations. In addition, toxins introduced into their environment can seriously effect squirrel health, as with all other species.