

# Records for Fox Squirrels in the Oklahoma Panhandle

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**Abstract:** In recent years, fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*) have been documented from several locations in the Oklahoma panhandle, far west of their normal range. Interviews with local residents revealed that these small populations were introduced and are dwindling. ©2014 Oklahoma Academy of Science

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According to Caire *et al.* (1989, Mammals of Oklahoma, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 189) introduced fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*) “are occasionally seen in towns and tree-lined areas of the Panhandle” despite the decided lack of suitable habitat in that open, virtually treeless region of shortgrasses and high plains. Although no panhandle county records are indicated on their state map, records are shown for nearby Harper and Woodward counties.

On 3 July, 2014, I questioned Jimmy Woodard, veteran bird finder from Oklahoma City, about possible fox squirrel sightings in Guymon, Texas County, which lies at the center of the panhandle just south of the Beaver (North Canadian) River. During the past 20-odd years, Woodard has annually searched for birds in the well-wooded Guymon City Park. However, he could not recall having ever seen squirrels there.

During the past few years, I have interviewed several panhandle residents concerning fox squirrels. On 28 September, 2008, I spoke with Esther Israel in Keyes, a small town in northwest Cimarron County at the west end of the panhandle, about the provenance of three squirrels that John S. Shackford and I were watching in trees in her well-shaded back yard. Here, the constant availability of food and water, as well as protection from predators and the elements, had rendered this spot a well-known haven for birds. Esther informed me that these squirrels had been brought in from Elkhart, Kansas, 20 miles to the northeast, four years earlier (2004). The greatest number she had counted here was 18, but these had dwindled to three.

Later that day, I talked with Mike Johnson, who lives seven miles south and 2 ½ west of Elkhart, Kansas, but in Texas County, Oklahoma. When I mentioned the squirrels in Keyes, he told me that the year he gave up his job in Elkhart, a hunter had introduced fox squirrels there. This was in 1986, but he could confirm no other details.

In Boise City, central Cimarron County, Shackford and I discovered two fox squirrels among trees in the city park on 24 May, 2013. On 10 May of the following year, we returned. An interview with groundskeeper Mark Shannon revealed that a local man, Gunther Brant, had released squirrels here in 1991 or 1992, but Shannon knew neither how many nor their provenance. Now only three or four remain.

The question then becomes: just how far does this species range westward naturally? Judging from the above, it would appear that fox squirrels introduced to inhospitable regions to which they are only marginally adapted will eventually succumb to environmental rigors such as the lack of dependable food plants (e. g., pecans, walnuts, oaks), nest sites, adequate vegetative cover in winter, the intense heat and drought of summer, or some combination of these. A fact worth noting is that house cats thrive in urban settings.

## Reference

Caire, W., et al. Mammals of Oklahoma. Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman (1989) 567 pp.

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