

# Red Squirrels

STORY AND ILLUSTRATION BY JENNIFER OSBORN

It may be one of the smaller animals in the Ontario forest, but that doesn't stop the Red Squirrel from being the boom box of the woods. Anyone who steps one foot into the red squirrel's territory is told very clearly that they are not welcome.

The Red Squirrel or *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* is native to Canada and is found over a large part of the North American continent. On the west coast it can be found as far south as New Mexico and on the east coast as far south as South Carolina. It is much smaller than its cousin the grey squirrel (the commonly seen squirrel) and only weighs between 5-11 ounces (250g) or the same size as a cup of flour. *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* is approximately as long as a standard 12 inch ruler (30 cm) including its tail. As its name suggests, the red squirrel is actually a shade of red. Both the male and female have a rusty red back and a whitish underbelly. During the summer a black stripe is present along the side of its body between the front and back leg. In winter the stripe disappears and its entire coat becomes paler. The squirrel's bushy tail is red and black with creamy-beige highlights, and it has a distinctive cream ring around the eyes. Often the ears are tufted with either red or black. It is most active during the day.

Red squirrels generally prefer coniferous forests of spruce and pine trees but they are not too fussy about where they call home. Marshes, deciduous forest, near swamps, and even well treed neighbourhoods in suburbia are red squirrel territory. Trees are generally thought of as the common house for squirrels, but not the red squirrel. A nice cozy spot just about anywhere is good enough as far as the little squirrel is concerned; tree trunks, old woodpecker holes or a stone wall, will do just as well. The red squirrel will fight for its house and does not like other creatures, especially other squirrels hanging around. It is quite a solitary creature and doesn't like to share its house or its winter store.

Similar to most animals, food is a main preoccupation for the red squirrel. It doesn't bury its edible treasures in the ground like the grey squirrel does. It has a much smarter winter storage system; making very large piles of food called middens for over the

winter. The red squirrel does not hibernate during winter, but will create an elaborate tunnel system in the snow and ground between its middens and living areas. The red squirrel will eat almost anything - berries, fungus, insects, eggs, sugar-maple sap, shed antlers, and of course pine cones. Actually a squirrel can eat up to 100 cones a day. For such a little critter it has a very large appetite. It spends a large amount of the summer and fall collecting food for their winter middens and it maintains the middens regularly.

Next to food, territory is the second most important thing that preoccupies the red squirrel. During the mating season male squirrels will chase each other sometimes making fur fly. Females are able to breed at around one year of age. The first breeding occurs late in February into March, and often another one in June and July. Just over a month later at around 36 to 40 days anywhere from one to seven squirrel babies (called kittens or pups) are born. Males are kept away from the squirrel kits as they are still quite territorial. For the first month of their life the kits are blind but over the next month they begin to explore the outside world. Late



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in summer and early into fall the kits begin to leave to find their own homes. Sometimes they will travel great distances to find a new home with enough food to feed them. Often the young squirrels will have to swim to a new home. Red squirrels are very good swimmers.

The red squirrel could be considered the official alarm clock of the forest, its ratchet-like call, barks and chirps can be heard for quite a long distance, including through walls, windows, and tents. If an unwanted

squirrel or other animal enters the red squirrels territory, it gives off the alarm bell.

This is somewhat unusual as the red squirrel does have predators. Owls, foxes, pine marten, wolves, fishers, hawks, and domestic cats all hunt the red squirrel. The red squirrel has also been hunted for its fur.

Chances are you will hear a red squirrel before you see it. If you do happen to see it you will know why the Ojibway called the little squirrel "Adjidaumo" or roughly translated "tail in the air". The little furry alarm will keep yelling at you until you leave, or it decides that you aren't dangerous. Hopefully this doesn't happen outside your bedroom window at six o'clock every morning.

## Fall Colours Heritage Tour

The beauty of autumn at Country Heritage Park

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Beautiful heavy horses, wagon brides, walking tours, a wonderful display of fall colours around the Niagara Escarpment — combine these

things and you have an event that should entice people to Country Heritage Park, according to general manager, Reg Cressman.

Mr. Cressman says park organizers decided to hold their first Fall Colours Heritage Tour at the park this year as a way to showcase the beauty of autumn. The event, which takes place on October 17 from 12 noon until 5 pm, features wagon rides around the park as well as walking tours to view many of the park's heritage buildings. And there will also be a display of Spotted Draft fillies that people can look for while visiting the park.

But the main show of this event will be the beauty of the season, and that's something that park organiz-

ers hope to capitalize on, says Mr. Cressman. "There is no better place for families to experience autumn in Halton Region. The scenery is absolutely spectacular. You stand among 30 heritage buildings depicting 170 years of agriculture and rural life in Ontario and as you look to the horizon you are submerged in a sea of colour: red, yellow, green, brown, bronze, and orange."

Mr. Cressman says the event is a "nice, fun family afternoon" that should appeal to all age groups.

Autumn pies as well as beverages will be available at the park during the Fall Colours Heritage Tour. Admission is \$5 for adults. No admission is required for children 12 and under.

For more information on

Country Heritage Park, call 1-888-307-3276 or 905-878-8151. The park is located at 8560 Tremaine Road west of Milton.



Heavy horses, such as these Belgians, will provide all the power that's needed to take wagonloads of people around Country Heritage Park. Wagon rides as well as walking tours will be part of the day's activities during the park's first annual Fall Colours Heritage Tour.



The Clark-McCleary House, circa 1830, is shown here along with a display of fall colours. The pioneer home is one of 30 heritage buildings located at Country Heritage Park (CHP) that people can tour during the Fall Colours Heritage Tour.