

# Managing Tree Squirrel Problems in Kentucky

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## Identification

Kentucky has three species of tree squirrels: eastern gray (*Sciurus carolinensis*, Figure 1), northern fox (*Sciurus niger*, Figure 2), and southern flying (*Glaucomys volans*). Gray and fox squirrels are game species, whereas flying squirrels are a non-game species. Because flying squirrels seldom cause problems for homeowners, they are not discussed in this publication.

The eastern gray squirrel is the most common tree squirrel found in Kentucky. These medium-sized rodents have bushy tails. They are 16 to 20 inches long and weigh one to two pounds. Gray squirrels vary in color from gray to brownish gray with a white belly. Completely black (melanistic) and white (leucistic) forms are also encountered occasionally.

The northern fox squirrel is Kentucky's largest tree squirrel. Fox squirrels measure 18 to 27 inches, including their bushy tails, and weigh 1¾ to 2¼ pounds. Fox squirrels are typically grizzled gray with a touch of yellow or orange upper parts and pale yellow to bright orange underparts. The fox squirrel's tail usually has numerous yellow-tipped hairs, while gray squirrels have white-tipped tail hairs.

## Damage

Fox and gray squirrels often come into conflict with humans when they take up residence in an attic, eaves, or walls of a house. Squirrels sometimes cause damage by gnawing and removing bark or fruits from valuable fruit- and nut-producing trees, ornamental trees, and shrubbery or by feeding on corn, tomatoes, strawberries, and other seeds or mature fruits in the garden (Figure 3).

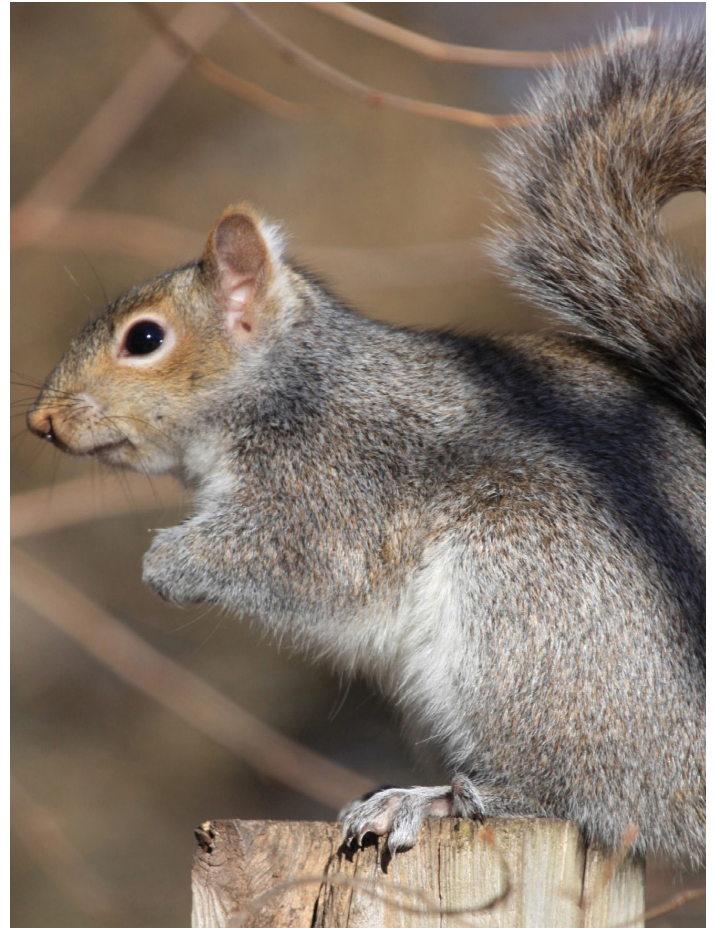
## Legal Status

Tree squirrels are popular game animals pursued by Kentucky hunters, but they are protected by Kentucky law. If you are a property owner within Kentucky, squirrels fall under K.R.S. 150.170, which allows you to protect yourself or your property from damage from wildlife (excluding federally protected species) at any point in the year.

## Preventing and Controlling Tree Squirrel Damage

The best long-term solution to managing squirrel problems in the home is to exclude or "build them out" of a building or attic. Because squirrels are rodents and have large front teeth, you must use quarter-inch or half-inch hardware cloth or 26-gauge metal when excluding squirrels from buildings. Do not use steel wool or window screening; the squirrels can chew through it.

The best way to eliminate squirrels that have entered a building is to find all their entrances and travel routes. Be sure to look for eave openings, attic vents, loose flashing around chimneys and pipes, and openings around cables. Plug all entrances except one and set a trap at the open entrance (see section on trapping below).



**Figure 1.** Common color phase of the eastern gray squirrel in Kentucky. Photo by Steve Katovich, Bugwood.org



**Figure 2.** Common color phase of the northern fox squirrel in Kentucky. Photo by Whitney Cranshaw, Bugwood.org



**Figure 3.** Damage to tree branches by squirrels. Photo by Whitney Cranshaw, Bugwood.org

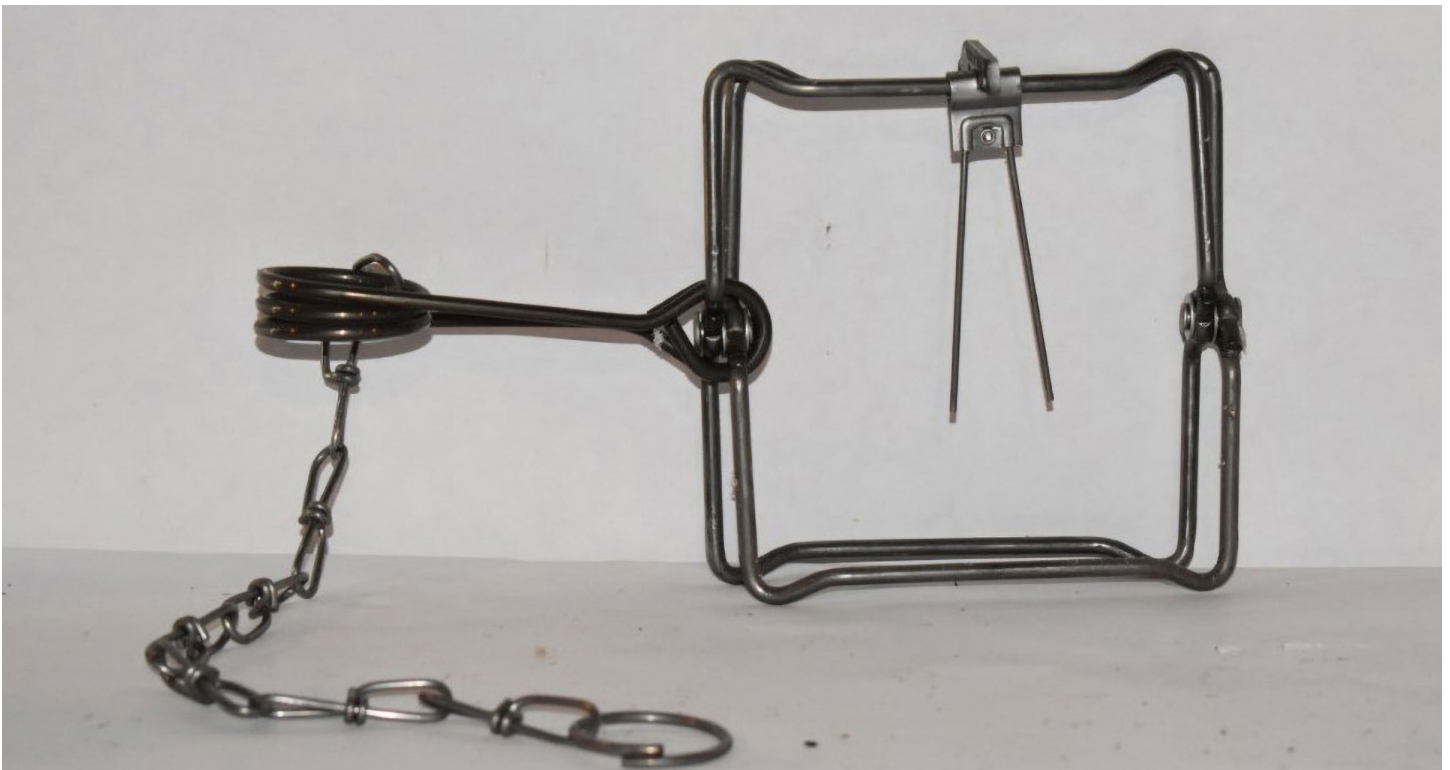
Mothballs had been recommended for use to cause squirrels to vacate buildings, however they are no longer labeled for use on anything other than moths and caterpillars. This is due to their toxic nature and potential harm to humans and other wildlife.

If you can chase squirrels from your residence, you may then take actions to limit them from returning. Once the squirrels have been eliminated from the building, be sure to repair any damage they caused and block any potential openings. To prevent further damage, trim all trees that have limbs within eight feet of the building.

One method of controlling and preventing squirrel damage is to reduce the population through shooting or trapping. In rural areas squirrel populations can be reduced effectively by hunting. Because squirrels are most active during the mornings and evenings, concentrate your hunting activities during these periods. Many types of firearms are capable of taking squirrels, but a shotgun loaded with No. 6 shot shells, a .17-caliber rifle, or a .22-caliber rifle is most effective.

A variety of traps can be used to catch squirrels. If you know the squirrels' entry point and you can easily reach it without endangering yourself, place a No. 110 conibear trap (Figure 4) directly over the open entrance. As the animal passes through the opening, it will be killed instantly.

Another method of lethally trapping gray squirrels is to use rat snap traps nailed to a tree or house and positioned 15 to 20 feet above ground. The traps should be baited with peanut butter or sweet corn. Another trap option is similar to the conibear trap but encased within a metal tube, helping to limit access of non-target animals (Figure 5). The trap is versatile for placement in a variety of positions, including on a tree branch or trunk. Ensure it is secured in place, or its effectiveness will decrease. It can be placed with or without bait.



**Figure 4.** Conibear trap available to be used for squirrels. Photo by Stacy White, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service

Squirrels can also be captured with live cage traps (Figure 6). To be effective, these traps must be pre-baited and wired open for several days before trapping. A variety of baits can work well, including peanut butter, walnuts, pecans, apple or orange slices, corn, and sunflower seeds. To prevent squirrels from returning, take trapped squirrels at least five to 10 miles from the capture site before releasing them. If squirrels are entering an attic where there is space to set a live trap, place the trap immediately behind the opening and catch the squirrel as it enters the building. Do not remove squirrels when young are present.

One method of keeping squirrels from browsing on trees and gnawing on wood is to use a chemical repellent. Repellents do not stop gnawing damage, but they do reduce the severity of damage.



**Figure 5.** Body-gripping trap available to be used for squirrels. Photo by Matthew Springer, University of Kentucky

The best repellent is one containing Thiram. Always follow label instructions when using any chemical substance. Old reports suggest repellents containing polybutenes can be used to repel squirrels. The substance burns the squirrels' feet. The following substances can be sprayed on wood to repel squirrels:

1. One pound of copper naphthenate mixed in 2½ quarts of mineral spirits.
2. Three pounds of asphalt emulsion and two pounds of copper carbonate mixed in two quarts of water.
3. One teaspoon of disinfectant (such as Lysol) or three ounces of Epsom salts mixed in one gallon of water.

Several of these solutions may discolor wood; treat a small area hidden from view first to determine the amount of discoloration.



**Figure 6.** Live trap used for squirrel control. Photo by Stacy White, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service