

## YES, BREVARD'S WHITE SQUIRRELS ARE REAL!

It may sound like science fiction, but white squirrels are real. In fact, Brevard, NC, is host to one of the most notable of these white squirrel colonies. “Many people who come to the Visitor Center think Brevard’s white squirrels are a myth and don’t really exist,” says Sally Burnett, Brevard/Transylvania Visitor Center Coordinator. “We have to convince them that we didn’t make it up.”



So how did the white squirrels of Brevard come to be? Well, that story is a little more fantastical. According to Barbara Mull Lang, they arrived by way of a carnival accident. Two white squirrels were caught by a Mr. Black of Madison, Fla. in 1949 when a carnival truck carrying these unique creatures overturned near his home. Black then passed the squirrels along to H.H. Mull, Lang’s uncle, who later gave the squirrels to Ms. Lang. She attempted to breed them, but wasn’t successful. After she left home in 1951, one of the squirrels escaped, and so the other was let go to join its mate. Once in the wild, the squirrels began breeding, and the rest is history.

Bob Glesener, research director of the White Squirrel Research Institute at Brevard College, spent his tenure in Brevard studying these fascinating animals before he passed away in 2013. His findings make up the bulk of what is known today about the squirrels. According to his research, Brevard’s white squirrels all have similar markings—a white body with a pigmented head patch, shoulder saddle and dorsal stripe, and dark eyes.

Though a breed of white squirrel does exist, the white squirrels in Brevard are thought to be a color variation of the Eastern Gray Squirrel. “As evidence that Brevard’s white squirrels are simply a color variant of the Eastern Gray Squirrel, I like to point out that when a white squirrel is foraging on the ground and is threatened by a predator or human, it darts

to the nearest tree trunk and does a ‘spread eagle,’” said Glesener. “This is appropriate for a squirrel with a dark coat color, but a white squirrel sticks out like a ‘sore squirrel’ against the dark tree bark.” These white squirrels shouldn’t be confused with albino squirrels. An albino squirrel will have no pigmentation at all, and will have pink or blue eyes.

Because these squirrels are such an oddity, they attract a considerable tourist base to the area. People from all over the country come to see the natural beauty of the area and have hopes of spotting one of the critters. In fact, Brevard takes such pride in its white squirrel population that a protective ordinance was approved in 1986, which makes it “unlawful for any person to hunt, kill, trap or otherwise take any protected squirrels within the city.”

To see how well white squirrels were thriving in this area and to see how well they were doing compared to other populations, the White Squirrel Research Institute conducted white squirrel counts, the most recent of which was held in 2011. According to Glesener’s study, the population appears to be maintaining its numbers or possibly growing by a small percentage. For the city of Brevard, white squirrels comprise over 30% of the total squirrel population.

Each year, Brevard honors this critter by hosting the Annual White Squirrel Festival during Memorial Day weekend. The festival is complete with free live music, the Squirrel Box Derby, the White Squirrel 5K and 10K race, guided tours, exhibits and squirrel feeder and photo contests.

White squirrels thrive in the Brevard area for three reasons—the density of trees, which they need for food and mating; the city-wide ordinance protecting the squirrels; and the fact that town residents will actually put out feeders to encourage the squirrels.



Residents of Brevard have strong civic pride for their white squirrels.