

**The 2015 Squirrel Count Results Show:  
An Increase in Albino and Gray Squirrels.  
Ratio of Gray to Albino Slight Increase to 10.73 to 1 from Last Year**

This was the 37th year counting the gray and albino squirrels in Olney. The count was coordinated by Kelsie Sterchi. During the three weeks of the count, there were approximately 56 different volunteers who canvassed the 34 areas to count the squirrels and cats. Volunteers consisted of students from Olney Central College, students from University of Illinois, FFA members, volunteers from the community, and visitors to Olney. Dr. John Stencel of Iowa was also able to participate in the count again this year. First year tourists included the Mills party from the Chicagoland area. Other out-of-towners included those from Sullivan, Indiana, Bloomington, Illinois, and the Champaign/Urbana, Illinois area. There were also out-of-towners who were more local that also participated in the count. Many of these volunteers were commuters from Olney Central College. Each Saturday provided about 11 out-of-towner groups who helped participate in the count. The annual squirrel count was scheduled for three Saturdays beginning at 7:30 a.m. on October 3, October 10 and October 17.

The weather this year was very cool. On October 3, the temperature at 7:30 a.m. was 48° and partly cloudy with some misting. The temperature on October 10 was slightly cooler at 43°, but beautifully clear. October 17 was a frigid morning of 34° and sunny. Interestingly enough, it seemed the most activity took place on the cloudy, misty morning of October 3. The almost-freezing temperatures on October 17 produced the lowest count day for squirrels with a few route volunteers commenting that they saw no activity at all! Based on the temperature not working in our favor that day, Dr. Stencel recommended not using the numbers from October 17 as part of the 2015 count average.

Per Dr. Stencel's recommendations, we are reporting an average of 944 gray squirrels counted, and 88 albino white squirrels counted. These numbers were higher from the 784 grays and 75 albinos from 2014. The fox squirrel count from 2014 was uncharacteristically high for the area. It was determined that the increase in red-tinted grays potentially caused confusion amongst the counters that year. For 2015, volunteers were e-mailed a photo of a fox squirrel so they would have a clear idea of what a fox squirrel really looked like. Compared to 2014's fox squirrel count of 26, 2015's fox squirrel count came in at a much less alarming number of eight. Based on gathered numbers, the gray to albino ratio in 2014 was 10.10 to 1 compared to the gray to albino ratio in 2015 of 10.73 to 1.

The cat count was down 12% for 2015 at a reported average of 91.5 cats compared to 2014's average number of 104. Cat activity was much higher on the very cold morning of October 17.

Again this year, a large number of complaints have been received about cats running at large. In 2002 the City of Olney passed an ordinance making it illegal to allow cats to run at large, the same as dogs. Residents with cats need to be mindful that cats running at large are in danger of being trapped. The City of Olney continues to work with the Richland County Animal Control for enforcement of this ordinance.

The Olney City Council passed Ordinance 2014-37 on October 27, 2014. The ordinance restricts the number of non-spayed and non-neutered owned cats per property to four. We were interested to see if future counts reflected a lower amount of stray cats counted. We were pleased to see the 12% decrease in the cat count for this year.

Based on research and scientific models, Dr. Stencil believes extanction of the albinos could take place by 2034 if no efforts are made to help preserve the population. With this in mind, Dr. Stencil has proposed two pilot programs. The first program would be a supplemental nutritional study and the second would be a gray squirrel capture and release program. Dr. Stencil will be working with Kelsie Sterchi and Belinda Henton on implementation of such programs.

Some suggestions on ways to encourage the squirrel population are:

- Feed and water the squirrels generously. Additional food offered by residents is essential to maintain the squirrel population. Appropriate supplemental food would be corn, beans, nuts, seeds, berries and fruits. Greasy, fried and salty foods are not appropriate. In the spring the squirrels eat buds and sprouts of trees which are their primary foods, but more volunteers are needed to feed the squirrels their appropriate diet, especially in the crucial winter months. Water is also crucial in the dry summer months. The feeding sites that were noted on the maps were frequently near squirrel nests. It seemed as if the squirrels make their homes near where residents are feeding them.
- While driving be watchful of squirrels near the roadway, and slow down in areas of large concentrations of squirrels. Many of these areas are marked with “Squirrel Crossing” signs. Traffic fatalities continue to account for the loss of many healthy squirrels.
- Predators such as cats need to be controlled. Chapter 6 of the City of Olney Municipal Code restricts dogs and cats from running at large. The Richland County Animal Control Officer should be contacted for nuisance cats and dogs. This chapter also protects the squirrels from being taken from Olney. The word “take” as defined in the code has many meaning such as capturing, trapping or harassing.
- More nut and fruit trees need to be planted to help with a natural food source. Residents with mature nut bearing trees should be reminded these trees do the squirrels no good if their nuts are raked up in the fall and thrown away with the leaves. Fallen nuts can be a nuisance or even unsafe at times, but if the nuts must be picked up, residents are asked to place them in a nearby location that may be less objectionable such as a fence row or given to someone who is willing to feed the squirrels. The mature nut trees act as a grocery store for the squirrels which is only open for a short period of time during the year. Olney needs more nut trees to support the needs of future generations of squirrels. Studies have shown when there are fewer trees there are also few squirrels.
- Additional squirrel houses would help shelter squirrels in severe weather and while raising their young. There are several places in town to purchase squirrel houses. Information on specific places to purchase a squirrel house can be obtained at City Hall. City Hall also has squirrel house plans if residents prefer to make their own.

- Avoid cutting down trees during the times which babies are in their nests. Squirrels are usually born in February or March and do not leave their nests until May. The second litter of the year is usually born in July or August and do not leave until October. If at all possible, avoid cutting trees in February, March April, July, August and September.
- If a baby squirrel appears to be abandoned by its mother, residents are asked to leave it for a period of time because it might be possible to reunite the baby with its mother. During this waiting period, the area should be free from children, pets and other predators. The period of time the baby should be left to wait for its mother will depend greatly on weather conditions. Also, during this time a wildlife rehabilitator should be called for assistance. Belinda Henton continues to hold a wildlife rehabilitation permit through the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and can be contacted concerning orphaned white squirrels.

A conscious effort needs to be made by residents to observe these suggestions if Olney's white squirrel population is to survive. We, as a community, need to decide if we are going to continue to support our white squirrel population before they become non-existent.

A great number of residents do not understand how important the white squirrels are to Olney. Many visitors come to Olney just for the purpose of seeing and photographing a white squirrel. These visitors stay in our motels, eat at our restaurants, buy our gas and shop in our stores. Without a white squirrel population, these tourists will not have a reason to visit Olney and discover our other qualities. Few people would have a desire to visit Olney to see a gray squirrel or a cat.

Kelsie Sterchi would like to extend a special thanks to all the volunteers who helped with this year's count. Without them, the count would not be possible. The annual count is a very important part to monitoring the squirrel population. The 38<sup>th</sup> count will be conducted on October 1, 8 and 15, 2016. It's never too early to volunteer for the next count!