

**The 2018 Squirrel Count Results Show:
An Increase in Albino and Gray Squirrels.
Ratio of Gray to Albino Decreases to 15.19 to 1 from Last Year**

This was the 40th 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 90 different volunteers who canvassed the 34 areas to count the squirrels and cats. Volunteers consisted of students from Olney Central College, FFA members, the St. Joe CRE, 4-H members, volunteers from the community, and visitors to Olney. First year tourists included the Mirowski party from Richmond, Illinois. Other out-of-towners included those from Newton, Claremont, Noble, West Salem, Dundas, Flora, and Alton, Illinois areas. The annual squirrel count was scheduled for three Saturdays beginning at 7:30 a.m. on October 6, October 13 and October 20.

On October 6, the temperature at 7:30 a.m. was 78° and sunny. The temperature on October 13 was cooler at 40° and sunny, but became increasingly cloudy with wind. October 20 was 47° and sunny. In 2017, leaves held on to leaves a bit longer than usual, but started to fall by the last day of the count. This year, the leaves were still fully leafed out by October 20, making any activity in the trees almost impossible to see, and is believed to be a large factor in this year's record-breaking low numbers (albinos).

We are reporting an average 881 gray squirrels counted, and 58 albino white squirrels counted. The 2017 numbers were reported as averages of 875 grays and 71 albinos. The 2018 count showed an average of 7 fox squirrels in the area, which is alarming. Based on gathered numbers, the gray to albino ratio in 2017 was 12.32 to 1 compared to the gray to albino ratio in 2018 of 15.19 to 1.

The cat count for 2018 was at a reported average of 91 cats compared to 2017's number of 119. This is extremely encouraging as Richland County Board Member Bill Clow stated that Richland County Animal Control has increased their retrieval of stray cats in the City.

During conversation, counters informed that hawks have been spotted in the area, though none were out on the mornings of this year's count. Licensed squirrel rehabilitator, Belinda Henton, noted that this year's nut production from trees seemed to be lacking quality. She recommended a mast study. Mrs. Sterchi will be in touch with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to see if such a study to be conducted, and how that might also reflect on this year's numbers.

However, 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 also 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.

Based on research and scientific models, Dr. Stencel believes extinction of the albinos could take place by 2034 if no efforts are made to help preserve the population. With this in mind, Dr. Stencel proposed two pilot programs in 2015. The first program was a supplemental nutritional study and the second was a gray squirrel capture and release program. The supplemental nutrition program is in place at two locations in the City, but the catch and release program is still being thought through. The supplemental nutrition program sites are located in routes H32 and G28-29. The effectiveness of the program is unknown at this time as increases and/or decreases in gray and albinos in these routes is not consistent.

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 meanings 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 41st count will be conducted on October 5, 12 and 19, 2019. It's never too early to volunteer for the next count!