

**The 2020 Squirrel Count Results Show:
A Decrease in Albino and Gray Squirrels.
Ratio of Gray to Albino Increases to 14.62 to 1 from Last Year**

This was the 42nd year counting the gray and albino squirrels in Olney. The count was coordinated by Kelsie Sterchi. During the three weeks of this count, there was a spike in interest with approximately 131 different volunteers who canvassed the 35 areas to count the squirrels and cats. Volunteers consisted of FFA members, volunteers from the community, and visitors to Olney. First year tourists included the Nettles party from Louisville, Kentucky, the Harris party from Oak Forest, Illinois, the Rucker Party from Boston, Massachusetts, the Winter party from Chicago, Illinois, and a very special visit this year from the television show “Small Town Big Deal” from Atlanta, Georgia. Other out-of-towners included those from Flora, Sumner, Noble, Claremont, Alton, and Crystal Lake, Illinois, areas. Dr. John Stencel of Iowa was also able to make his annual visit to Olney on October 3rd. The annual squirrel count was scheduled for three Saturdays beginning at 7:30 a.m. on October 3, October 10 and October 17.

On October 3, the temperature at 7:30 a.m. was 42° and sunny. The temperature on October 10 was 63° and cloudy. October 17 was much cooler at 39° and sunny.

We are reporting an average 1360 gray squirrels counted, and 93 albino white squirrels counted. The 2019 numbers were reported as averages of 782 grays and an abysmal 40 albinos. The 2020 count showed an average of 7 fox squirrels in the area. Based on gathered numbers, the gray to albino ratio in 2019 was 19.55 to 1 compared to the gray to albino ratio in 2020 of 14.62 to 1. The City of Olney is thrilled to see the increases in the overall ratio of gray to albino, and in the albino numbers alone!

The cat count for 2020 was at a reported average of 132 cats compared to 2019's number of 82. This is discouraging since the number of stray cats had been slowly decreasing over the past few years.

Again this year, a large number of complaints have still 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 extanction (no longer existing in a certain area) of the albinos could take place by 2034 if no efforts are made to help preserve the population. The medical research department at Southern Illinois University in Springfield, Illinois, believes extanction could likely occur in the year 2059, rather. With this in mind, Dr. Stencel suggests that interested citizens band together and do their best figuring out solutions to help increase the albino population. He also encourages more people to feed and water the squirrels, especially during the winter months. Additionally, Dr. Stencel would like the gray population thinned out by trapping and releasing them to farm woods approximately 10

miles away from the City of Olney. Because at least half of the grays have albino genes, it would be foolish to kill them, but having more albinos mate with albinos will increase the number of albino offspring.

A unique factor to consider during this year's Squirrel Count is the arrival and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Could the pandemic have been a factor in this year's increased number of albino white squirrels? This author recalls that during the strict Stay at Home Orders in the Spring of this year, she spotted the albino white squirrels much more frequently. Perhaps the lessened traffic from the winter months into the Stay at Home Order boded well for the albinos. As shown above, the third weekend of this year's Squirrel Count showed lower numbers than the first two weekends. On this October 17th date, squirrel counters observed much higher vehicle traffic due to large ball tournaments taking place at Musgrove Park and a large auction being set up and beginning. It seems very likely that vehicle traffic could be a main cause in the decline in the amount of albino white squirrels over the years.

Some other 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 the same reasons 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 43rd count will be conducted on October 2, 9 and 16, 2021. It's never too early to volunteer for the next count!