

Ever hear the legend about migrating squirrels?  
Who knew squirrels can swim?

# A Squirrel Tale Revisited



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Photo By Jim Nachel

One of the technical problems with campfire stories is the fact sometimes the stories actually are true. In other words, just because somebody around the campfire claims something happened doesn't mean it didn't.

Example: For years I'd hear stories about squirrels "migrating" by swimming from southern Illinois into Kentucky or Missouri, or vice versa. The incredible stories always were told in the safely distant second person—as in, "Grandpappy said he saw thousands of squirrels migrating across the Ohio River in the fall of 1901."

Of course, nobody claimed to have personally witnessed these "migrations." And, in terms of science, hand-me-down stories aren't particularly credible evidence.

Consequently, I'd accept these anecdotal reports with a proverbial grain of salt. Until one afternoon I was reading a

1935 publication from the assistant curator of the American Museum of Natural History, in which George Gilbert Goodwin quoted a New York Times article of a few years earlier:

"Stamford, Conn., Feb. 13, 1929. Lack of suitable food is causing a migration of squirrels from Connecticut, according to reports from various parts of the state."

My eyes nearly fell out. But the real story was just ahead.

"Many squirrels have been drowned seeking to swim lakes and rivers in their quest of new and more bountiful feeding ground," Goodwin went on to quote the Times.

Goodwin subsequently described a "squirrel move" in the fall and winter of 1933, in which thousands of gray squirrels marched out of the forests of New England to swim across the Connecticut and Hudson River.

"Judging from the numbers of large rivers crossed during the migration, gray squirrels are strong swimmers," Goodwin wrote. "When entering the water, according to most eye-witnesses, they swam

**Why would a small, tree-dwelling mammal swim across a river?  
Lack of food could be one reason.**

with their tails in the air, suspended high out of the water. In a long swim or in rough water they gradually relaxed and the tails slowly drooped until submerged."

Records of squirrels migrating or emigrating to or from Illinois are hard to find. An unpublished account of duck hunters on the Mississippi River witnessing the water turned black with migrating squirrels during the 1920s probably isn't absurd. And it would appear today's anecdotal recollections are based in some original fact.

Mass movements of squirrels have been documented in Missouri, Kentucky and Wisconsin as recently as the 1940s. Yet such migrations haven't been recorded in Illinois within recent memory. Nonetheless, campfire stories suggesting thousands of squirrels go swimming can be true.

It has happened.

