

Species Profile — Abert's Squirrel (*Sciurus aberti*)

by Andrew Mackie

We are fortunate to have many large mammals that inhabit Central Colorado. Residents and visitors enjoy watching herds of elk and deer, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats. Often we overlook some of the smaller residents, such as the three species of arboreal squirrels found in the Valley. One of these tree-loving mammals is the Abert's Squirrel. The species was named for John James Abert, an United States military officer who headed the Corps of Topographical Engineers for twenty-three years starting in 1838. The Abert's is also known as the tasselled, tuft-eared, and, in parts of Arizona, the Kaibab squirrel. There are nine recognized subspecies, with *Sciurus aberti ferreus* occupying Central Colorado. Overall, this species ranges from southern Wyoming to the Colorado Plateau and Southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, reaching its southern extent in the Sierra Madres in Chihuahua and Durango, Mexico.

Abert's can be identified easily by the prominent ear tufts that are most noticeable in winter. Their fur color can be grayish, reddish, or black. Average weight is one-and-a-half to two pounds, with an overall length, including the tail, of up to twenty-one inches. One important natural history association is the reliance of Abert's squirrels on ponderosa pine forests. They only occur in either pure stands of ponderosa, typically mature trees, or with

ponderosa pine mixed with Gambel oak, pinyon, juniper, quaking aspen, or Douglas fir. This association with ponderosa limits the squirrels' range and possible dispersion to new habitat. In Central Colorado, mature ponderosa forest has declined for various reasons, including a reduction of fire in the ecosystem, disease, drought, and residential development. Ponderosa pine is dependent on frequent, low intensity fire to remove understory brush for successful tree reproduction. Because Abert's squirrels are so closely aligned with this type of habitat, any reduction in overall forest cover has the potential to impact squirrel populations.

Ponderosa pine comprises the majority of the diet for Abert's squirrel. In the summer months the squirrels eat the needles, seeds, buds, and cones from the trees. During the winter they add the inner bark of the tree to their diet. Abert's also eat mushrooms and other fungi, insects, carrion, antlers, and bones. Squirrel nests are built in ponderosas, typically twenty or more feet above the ground. The nests are constructed out of twigs, bark, lichens, leaves, and moss. Squirrels will also use witches brooms as nest sites: thick balls of twigs created in the trees by dwarf mistletoe.

For small mammals, Abert's requires large home ranges. Several studies in Arizona and Colorado found summer home ranges from eighteen to sixty acres per male squirrel. Females tend to have smaller ranges. There is also some evidence that Abert's squirrels are not as wary of automobiles as other squirrels and are often killed on roads. The Land Trust of the Upper Arkansas is working on protecting ponderosa forest for the benefit of Abert's squirrel and other species found in this habitat. We protect this forest type in our Raspberry Gulch, North Cottonwood Creek, and Mount Princeton area conservation easements. In addition, we work with these landowners to manage this habitat, leading to uneven-aged stands of ponderosa trees with a healthy grass understory.



Abert's Squirrel