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Southern Flying Squirrel – *Glaucomys volans*

Natural History

Flying squirrels are nocturnal rodents of the family Sciuidae. There are many species found throughout the world, ranging in size from several ounces to six pounds. They glide from tree to tree with the use of a cape of sorts, called a patagium. The patagium is a furry skin covered membrane that stretches from the forelimbs to the back hind limbs. The species best suited, and most readily available for the pet trade is the Southern Flying Squirrel, *Glaucomys volans*. This is the smaller of the two North American species, with extremely large individuals reaching only five ounces. The top coat can range in color from a cinnamon brown, to a deep dark brown, or even a steel gray color. They have the normal squirrel proportions, except quite smaller, and even exhibit the trademark curling of their feather shaped tail (which is used as a rudder when gliding) into a question mark. They come from the east and south of the United States, yet due to their nocturnal behavior, and shyness of humans they may live in your tree or attic without you even knowing it!

Pet Potential

This species has been kept captive by American youths for many years. In fact, there are records of them being kept since colonial days. Many reasons exist as to why these animals make great pets, they are long lived, up to 15 years, tiny, adorable, soft, sweet-tempered, but by far the most important reason as to why these animals making such wonderful companions is their willingness to bond to their caretakers. A bonded flying squirrel radiates at the sight of their human, be it as they walk into the room the cage is housed in, or view their owner after a time of romping with another person. At the sight of you, they will come gliding, scrambling, and hopping to see you. Once your flyer reaches you he will alight on you and begin to frolic about your person. Crawling down your shirt and about your body making loops about your torso, licking your stomach and back. If you decide to eat something as you play with him, be careful, for the squirrel may decide that he needs a bite. Even if the morsel has already reached your mouth it will not

stop him, he'll put his tiny hands at his very best to try and pry your lips apart. Once that fails he may try to clean out your ear (with tongue and paw), or possibly make a nice little day bed of your hair, if it is long enough. It is never dull with a flyer around!

Bonding Process

This exciting willingness to interact comes from the bonding that happens at an early age. It is critical that you get a flyer at a young age, 6 to eight weeks is the prime time. It is also helpful if the flyer was bottle raised from a young age, but this is not necessary as long as they had frequent human contact from an early on. If you get your squirrel young enough (less than eight weeks, normally) you can wean him off the bottle yourself. Once you get him you need to allow him to spend several hours each day sleeping in your breast pocket or inside your shirt. This is where the magic happens, the warmth, smell, and heartbeat allows your squirrel to know you as his bonded person, or safe tree, and once bonded he will seek you out above all other people. To ensure you have a flyer that enjoys being petted in his adult years, make sure you pet him often while he is sleeping in your shirt or pocket. During breeding season unaltered animals can become much more independent, not aggressive, just less willing to interact with you. After several months, once breeding season is over, this behavior usually ceases and your squirrel returns to its loving self. This can be curbed by neutering/spaying, but is generally not necessary.

Housing And Care

The care for flying squirrels is quite easy, especially when compared to the more traditional pet dog. They, however, do need a relatively large cage for them to practice their acrobatic capabilities. Some "authorities" will recommend a 10 gallon aquarium, this is NOT adequate housing. These are active, arboreal creatures, who really need their space. Also remember they are nocturnal, so they will use a lot of their energy up while you are sleeping, therefore you will not be able to supervise out side play. The minimum sized cage I would recommend is 1.5'x1.5'x2 foot tall, but bigger is definitely better when it comes to housing. They need a substrate to absorb waste smell, and to allow them to bury little bits of food. Flying squirrels usually potty train themselves, returning to their cage to relieve themselves in one designated corner, but the occasional accident is know, in and out of the cage. The substrate needs to be made of a hard wood (aspen), or one of the paper products. (carefresh). Soft woods (pine, and especially cedar) contain harmful chemicals that will shorten your flyers lifespan. The cage usually needs to have the bedding changed once a week. It is also good practice to clean the entire cage once a month with a bleach solution.

The staple diet most keepers use is a normal rodent block or hamster/gerbil food mix. In addition to this you can add table scraps of fruits and vegetables. Also the occasional insect (from clean sources, i.e.. a pet store cricket) will be enjoyed, and will add protein to the diet. The occasional human food may be given, but only in extreme moderation. My own squirrel has a particular fondness for nacho cheesier Doritos. They also love pecans, but as these are fattening, please only use these as treats, they work great for training them to come when called. Flying squirrels also need additional calcium added to their diet. Some people will recommend repcal, but I have learned from a rehabber acquaintance that there is a problem associated with this. Flying squirrel bones are mostly made up of Calcium Phosphate. The most abundant calcium agent in Repcal is made of Calcium Carbonate, so they absorb very little of the supplement. Many people use Repcal (and other Calcium Carbonate products) without any problems, but I prefer to use a supplement that is made of Calcium Phosphate, to be absolutely safe. I have heard that a product called petcal works well for this; I personally use a product from fluker's farms. It is made as a supplement for omnivorous/herbivorous reptiles. They also require vitamin D to absorb the calcium, so check that your supplement contains this also. The best way to apply calcium is a two step process. First include a cuttlebone, found in the bird section of pet stores. They will gnaw on this and absorb some calcium. Also sprinkle a small amount of calcium supplement on your squirrels food, a couple of times a week.

Breeding

The breeding of flying squirrels, even in our modern times, is considered difficult. The blame however cannot be placed on the squirrels, but lack of education on the breeder. Some people have mentioned the possibility of environmental factors (temperature and/or light pattern) causing them to go into breeding readiness, perhaps inspired by a mock spring feeling. Others have mentioned the need to have multiple males and females, because males and females are only ready to breed at certain times, and this readiness must be in sync, or no babies will be produced. As I have never bred southern flying squirrels, please read the following breeding instructions quoted from one of the most prominent flying squirrel breeders in the United States, the late Curt Howard:

"If you have a large number of Southern flying squirrels, colony breeding is probably your best bet. A caged room measuring 10 by 10 by 6 feet is adequate for 125 squirrels. You can keep a ratio of three females to every two males very nicely in this sized cage. For small numbers of squirrels, an individual cage measuring a minimum of 2 by 2 by 1 1/2 feet is adequate for one or two females and one male. Cages must be set up with high

nestboxes and low nestboxes. When a female is pregnant and about a week from having her litter, she will remove herself and become isolated in a low box. When you find one so isolated, she should be removed immediately and placed in a brood cage to rear her young. If left in a cage with one or more males, there is a risk that a male will kill one of the babies. The young wean between 7 1/2 and 8 weeks. After weaning, the female should be placed in a holding facility for two weeks before returning to the colony to avoid fighting. Females generally experience two heat cycles during the year. Timing of these cycles depends on the photo period for the particular time zone where they are being kept. duration of the estrus cycle is 41 days. Males have to be scrotal (testes descended) to impregnate female squirrels. Males may not be scrotal at the same time females are in estrus. If they are not, conception will not occur. Thus, one can see the advantage of colony breeding.

Wild-Caught vs. Captive-Bred

You may sometimes see wild-caught adults available for sale. These will not tame well, and are also often plagued by parasites. These animals are only suitable as breeder animals, and if you are looking for a pet, do not even give these a second thought, even if they are significantly cheaper. You may also find wild-caught babies available, these however should also be avoided, although they may tame into suitable companions, this will promote depletion of these animals in the wild. Also I would never buy a flying squirrel from a pet store. Often times pet stores do not know about there animals, so they may make things up, or even lie just to make the particular animal more appealing. The pet store's flyer may not be young enough to bond as a good pet, it may be a wild caught animal, or even may have not been hand-raised, despite what they may tell you. Always purchase your flyers from a reputable breeder.

Other Considerations

Flying squirrels make wonderful, easy to care for pets. As long as you meet their few, but necessary needs, you will have a loving, long-lived, and unique companion. Remember all animals are individuals, some flyers will be very dependent of you, being very clingy, and not wanting to leave your body, others will be more independent; enjoying a good supervised romp.

Written By Kevin Brooks

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