

**The 2024 Squirrel Count Results Show:
An Increase in Albino and An Increase in Gray Squirrels.
Ratio of Gray to Albino Decreases to 12.43 to 1 from Last Year**

This was the 46th year counting the gray and albino squirrels in Olney. The count was coordinated by Kelsie Sterchi. During the three weeks of this count, we had about 125 different volunteers who canvassed the 35 areas to count the squirrels and cats. Volunteers consisted of FFA members, 4-H members, the Richland County Fair Queen, Pride Richland County Members, WalMart, Spero Family Services, volunteers from the community, and visitors to Olney. First-year tourists which included the Fitzpatrick/Rademacher party from Florissant, MO, the English/Chandler party from Ft. Wayne, IN, the Schwager party from Alton, IL, the Austin party from Highland, IL, the Wilson party from O'Fallon, IL, the Villegas party from Aurora, IL, the Bunting party from Fairfield, IL, and the Hoewig party from Bloomington, IL. Other out-of-towners included those from Alton, West Salem, and Noble, Illinois, areas. Dr. John Stencil of Iowa was also able to make his annual visit to Olney on October 12th. The annual squirrel count was scheduled for three Saturdays beginning at 7:30 a.m. on October 5, October 12 and October 19.

The temperature on October 5 was 57° and sunny. The weather on October 12 was similar at 53° and sunny. The last day of the count on October 19 was much cooler 37° and sunny.

Some counters noted that trees were still fully leafed-out and hindered view for each weekend this year. There was also an increase in traffic and noise on October 5 due to several events taking place including city-wide garage sales, a pickleball tournament, the Downtown Market in Bower Park, soccer games, and the CRMH Healthfest. Traffic and noise on October 12 was also increased due to a large softball tournament.

We are reporting an average 1,007 gray squirrels counted, and 81 albino white squirrels counted. The 2023 numbers were reported as averages of 858 grays and 73 albinos. The 2024 count showed an average of 6 fox squirrels in the area. Based on gathered numbers, the gray to albino ratio in 2023 was 11.75 to 1 compared to the gray to albino ratio in 2024 of 12.43 to 1.

The cat count for 2024 was at a reported average of 130 cats compared to 2023's number of 85. If accurate, this increase is concerning.

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. Enforcement is currently an issue.

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. Stencil 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. Stencil 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.

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. 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. Squirrel houses may be found locally and also online. 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 47th count will be conducted on October 4, 11 and 18, 2025. It's never too early to volunteer for the next count!