

Reports Of Squirrel Starvation Are Not Substantial

RALEIGH, N. C. — The findings of biologists of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and other scientists indicate that earlier reports of mass starvation of gray squirrels are not substantiated by laboratory examination.

In response to reports of mass starvation and mass migration of gray squirrels, a study was initiated by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. Of particular concern were the reports that squirrels were starving to death and arrangements were made for examination of specimens collected at random in the woods and salvageable road-kills. Biologists conducting the study reported that all of the squirrels examined to date were in good flesh and all but two had their stomachs stuffed full of food.

Of about 50 letters received by the Wildlife Commission, only one indicated that dead squirrels had been seen in the woods. Upon being contacted, however, this person said that the dead

squirrels he had seen were actually road-kills. Wildlife management area personnel who made a search for dead squirrels in the woods reported they have found none.

Another interesting aspect of this study revealed that a large number of the squirrels examined were young of the year. A random collection of 24 animals in the forest north and west of Asheville consisted of one adult and 17 juveniles. Of another 17 animals collected north and west of Morganton, five were small juveniles and several of the others which were near adult size were also juveniles.

This high proportion of juveniles confirms earlier speculation of an unusually high reproduction rate last spring; this presumably as a result of the generally good mast crop last fall. The age of the young squirrels examined indicates that most of them were born in early spring. Whenever there is a heavy crop of young, it is normal for them to move into new territory in

the early fall and this year the movement was somewhat more pronounced than usual.

Examination of road-kills by a representative of the Smithsonian Institution confirms Commission findings as to age and condition of the squirrels. "We can find no evidence of starvation," said Dr. V. Flyger of the University of Maryland.

Contact with officials from neighboring states revealed similar conditions in Georgia and Tennessee. In Georgia, the "migration" was confined to the northern mountain counties, but in Tennessee, squirrels were on the move over most of the state. Virginia reported some movement and an unusually high ratio of juveniles in the population. Many road kills were reported in Tennessee and Georgia, but only the usual number for this time of year in Virginia and South Carolina.

Road-kills in North Carolina appear to be concentrated in sections of normally heavy traffic such as I-40, I-26, U. S. 19, 23 and 70, at low elevations, and in localities where food is present. On one 179-mile route, 289 dead squirrels were counted, and it was estimated that this represented a two-weeks accumulation. This is a very small percentage of the total population.

In most sections, field observations indicated that squirrel

movement is starting to subside and this was also indicated by telephone reports from neighboring states. The report from Georgia indicated that the normal post-summer movement started "soon after September 7" and that it's now about over.

What we have apparently observed is a movement of squirrels away from areas where food is less abundant and a concentration of animals in areas where food is more abundant. This includes city parks and residential areas, corn fields and orchards, as well as areas of abundant mast in more remote localities.

There has not been any squirrel food famine in North Carolina. The squirrel's diet consists of a wide variety of fruits and vegetable materials including even bark and buds, all of which are in abundant supply at this season of the year. But bonus foods such as corn and scratch grain put out by sympathetic citizens are always a welcome addition.

Bill To Eliminate Freeze On Highway Funds

WASHINGTON — U. S. Rep. Roy A. Taylor (D-N. C.) Thursday introduced a bill to eliminate the present freeze on federal highway funds.

The President announced the 60-day cutback earlier this month. Congressman Taylor immediately protested, urging that budgetary reductions be made elsewhere.

His bill, if enacted, would eliminate the highway trust fund as a place where budget cuts could be made under the law. Congress passed earlier this year calling for a \$6 billion roll-back in spending.

"Of all places, the highway trust fund is the last where spending cuts should be made. Certainly, it was not the intent of Congress to reduce the highway program when it called for budget reductions. This freeze of highway funds does not save any money, it just postpones badly needed highway construction," Taylor declared.

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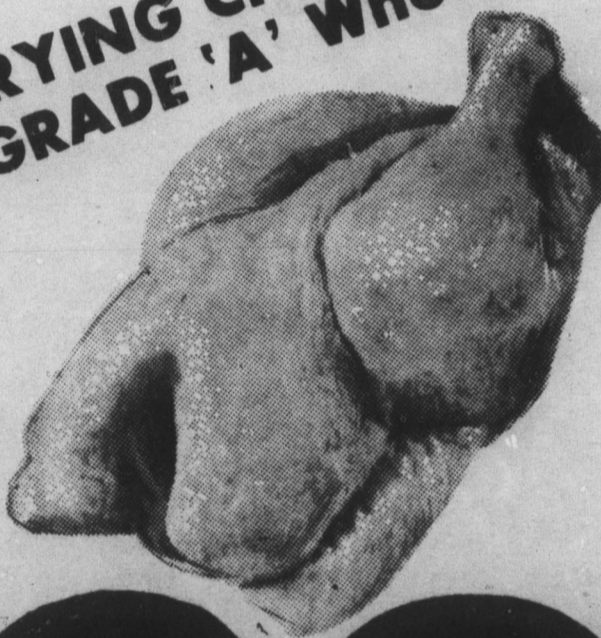
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