

# FACT SHEET

## *Squirrel Pox (Fibromatosis) in Tree Squirrels*



Photo Credit: Don Harmon



Photo Credit: Kent Hanauer, INDNR

### What is it?

Squirrel pox, or squirrel fibroma is a viral disease which produces multiple tumors on the skin of tree squirrels. It belongs to the pox group of viruses which produce rabbit fibromatosis and some deer fibromas. Maryland first reported multiple skin tumors on gray squirrels in 1953. Since then, reports of squirrels with skin tumors have come from Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ontario. In Indiana, they have been found on gray, fox, and red squirrels, mostly in northern Indiana.

### How does it effect Squirrels?

Juvenile squirrels are primarily infected by the virus. The tumors may be scattered across the body and vary in size up to 25mm in diameter. Spreading of tumors to the lungs, liver, kidney, and lymph nodes has been reported, but rarely. Typically, there are no obvious signs of illness in naturally infected squirrels except for the presence of the tumors over the skin. In severe cases, when vision is obstructed or the skin becomes secondarily infected, the animal may be less active, weak, and eventually die. In States where squirrel pox is common, there apparently have been no noticeable effects on squirrel populations.

### How does it occur?

These tumors are presumably all caused by a virus. Although the natural history of the virus is not known, transmission by insects, mosquitoes and squirrel fleas, is likely in nature, and the tumors most likely develop at the site where the insects feed on the squirrels. The virus is also easily transmitted from mothers to suckling squirrels.

### What should we do?

Presumably, the virus only infects squirrels. There is no known treatment; though some claim recovery occurred with various remedies, these are scientifically unsubstantiated. In cases where the disease is not severe, the lesions probably regress and the squirrel recovers naturally. The disease is of no public health significance. The carcasses of infected squirrels are safe for human consumption, since current knowledge indicates the virus is not transmissible to man. Furthermore, the tumors are usually confined to the skin and are removed when the squirrel is skinned. If tumors/lesions have metastasized to the internal organs, even though not of public health significance, the carcass should be discarded for aesthetic reasons. If you find squirrels that possibly have the pox virus, please contact your local District Wildlife Biologist or the Bloomington Field Office.