

Information on Squirrel No. 1: The Abert's Squirrel

The information here was prepared for us by Tom Waller, part time Cuchara resident.

We are lucky, at least I think we are, as we have six members of the squirrel family Sciuridae living in Cuchara. Over the next several months I'm going to introduce you to these members of the squirrel family. I'll show you a photo and then explain some of the life history of these fascinating animals. The first member of the family I'm going to discuss is commonly called Abert's squirrel or Tassel Eared squirrel. The photo below shows a member of this family.



This is one of two color phases of this squirrel we see in our backyard. The other color phase is shown in the photo below.



The name Tassel Eared comes from the hairs that stick up on the tops of their ears. These hairs disappear in the summer. I've never read an explanation for these hairs but I will suggest that since this squirrel does not hibernate and is active all winter the hairs protect the tips of their ears from the extreme cold. The other common name is Abert's Squirrel. The scientific name of this squirrel is *Sciurus aberti*. Abert's squirrel is named after Colonel [John James Abert](#), an American naturalist and military officer who headed the [Corps of Topographical Engineers](#) and organized the effort to map the [American West](#) in the 19th century.

Obviously, the two squirrels coats are dramatically different. However, these squirrels came from the same litter i.e. they are brother and sister. In other parts of Colorado the coats of these squirrels can be differently colored but their body shape and behaviour will be the same.

The life cycle of this squirrel is closely tied to the Ponderosa Pine. The squirrel uses the Ponderosa pines for their homes, and food. The squirrel will build its nest in a Ponderosa pine by gathering sticks, grass, etc. to make a nest that may be three feet in diameter. In our yard they use the dwarf mistletoe for their homes. They hollow out the mistletoe and then line it with grasses. A pregnant female will have her young inside one of the nests. The squirrel also uses all parts of the pine for their food. When the pine cones form on the Ponderosa Pines the squirrel chews off a cone, removes the outside covering to get to the seeds inside. The photo below shows the cone before and after the squirrel has removed the seeds.



If there are several Ponderosa Pines in the area occupied by Abert's Squirrels you are likely to find a single pine tree with a mound of cones like that shown to the right of the photo above. This pine tree is a feeding tree and the Abert's squirrels will collect cones from several trees and then take them to the feeding tree to dismantle them.

If you don't have Ponderosa Pine on your property (they are mostly on the west side of the Cuchara river) then take a hike up Black Bear Road and keep your eyes open. If you don't see an Abert's squirrel on that road then try to go on one of the summer hikes that Bruce calls the Haunted House Meadow hike. If you keep your eyes peeled you will see both the squirrels and feeding trees.