

Search on for invasive squirrels

Okanagan residents are being asked to report sightings of the eastern grey squirrel, an invasive species.

magnificentfrigatebird photo

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The North Okanagan is being invaded.

There is growing concern the eastern grey squirrel is gaining a presence in the Okanagan, displacing indigenous animals and posing a threat to crops and property.

“The eastern grey squirrel is one of the most notorious alien species in the world and ranked by a branch of the World Conservation Union as one of the top one 100 invasive species on the planet,” said Karl Larsen, a wildlife ecology and management professor at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops.

“This is a serious issue facing everyone.”

Eastern grey squirrels are native to the eastern part of North America, and they were introduced to Vancouver’s Stanley Park a century ago.

In recent decades, their population has increased in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island.

Now, they have been found in the Interior and particularly Kelowna.

“How they got here is unknown, but they’re here,” said Larsen.

“The problem is that we probably won’t fully appreciate the impact these animals will have on the local environment until it is too late to stop it.”

Some people may question the impact of a new squirrel when there is already a species of squirrel native to the Okanagan.

“Our native red squirrel doesn’t do all that well in residential or agricultural landscapes, because it’s really tailored to living in conifer forests. Also, they are incredibly territorial, so the density of these animals never gets very high,” said Larsen.



“However, grey squirrels are a different beast. They do well in human-dominated landscapes, and they tolerate one another much more so. If they get fully established, there will be a lot more squirrels living with us in our cities and rural areas. If given a chance, they will spread like wildfire.”

In other regions, like England and Italy, where eastern grey squirrels have established populations, native species have been decimated, crops have been affected, and buildings have been damaged by nesting. In California, they are known to damage fruit.

A group of local wildlife professionals, including Larsen, have created an initiative to get a grasp on the situation in the Okanagan.

Their goal is to raise awareness and to get the public involved in the first ever squirrel count.

“It is essential that we find out how many animals are living in the Okanagan already if we stand a chance to deal with the potential problem,” said Larsen.

“We ask that everyone visit the website, www.introsquirrel.ca, to learn how to identify these squirrels and tell them apart from our native red squirrels, and to report any eastern grey squirrels that they’ve seen.”

To report a grey squirrel sighting, go to www.introsquirrel.ca or call 1-855-468-7077.

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