

PEST CONTROL BULLETIN NO. 5

CALIFORNIA GROUND SQUIRRELS

(Residential areas only)



GENERAL INFORMATION

The California ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) is widely distributed throughout California in valley and foothill environments. In Orange County, this squirrel is typically encountered in parks, vacant lots, and hillsides where they excavate extensive burrows in soft loam and sandy soils. The size of an adult ground squirrel can reach an overall length of 18-20 inches with the body slightly longer than the tail. California ground squirrels are colored in grays with flecks of darker fur distributed over the surface of the back and sides. The nape of the neck has a pair of dark triangular patches that extend just beyond the shoulders. A noticeable white fringe adorns the sides and tip of the tail.

When prevailing climatic conditions are mild, California ground squirrels may remain active until late in the fall and hibernate from November through February. Occasionally, during hot periods in the summer, they are not active. The diet of most ground squirrels consists of seeds between spring and fall, and vegetation when the rains come in the winter. Adult ground squirrels mate in late winter and the young are born sometime during the spring. A typical litter contains from 4 to 13 offspring.

Favorable years produce an abundance of squirrels that are capable of causing a considerable nuisance in inhabited areas. New housing developments in grassland and canyon settings are particularly vulnerable to squirrel infestations from adjoining vacant areas. Ground squirrels invariably invade perimeter residences when

existing "field" supplies of seeds are consumed and the animals are forced to seek alternative food sources elsewhere. Rural yards can provide an abundant supply of well irrigated greenery and alternative vegetative food reserves.

The California ground squirrel is an important reservoir for the plague bacterium (*Yersenia pestis*) and host to a variety of flea species that are capable of transmitting plague by bite. The occurrence of plague in Orange County is extremely rare. Most plague activity has been confined to the northeastern part of the county. Occurrence of plague in wild rodents, including ground squirrels, is much higher in the upland areas of adjoining Los Angeles and Riverside counties.

EXCLUSION AND CONTROL OPTIONS

If the conditions are right, squirrels will abandon their field burrows to construct new burrows along masonry walls, under utility sheds, decks, and porches. Their excavations can lead to substantial property damage if left unabated. At this stage, control and exclusion become a difficult task that often involves either poisoning, trapping, exclusion, or removal of the live animals. Residents of squirrel prone properties can take a number of preventive measures to discourage ground squirrels from infesting their property. Begin squirrel proofing by removing all rubbish, debris, and trash that squirrels may use as shelter (harborage). Stack all lumber and firewood at least 18" above the ground and 6" away from walls, fences, and other structures. It is equally important to

keep perimeter areas weed free and make sure that all refuse, including garbage, is secured in metal garbage cans with tight fitting lids.

A well established squirrel infestation, at some point in time, may require aggressive measures to exclude and remove the animals from an affected property. Additional information regarding ground squirrel control can also be obtained from local farm supply establishments.

REMEMBER - When handling poison baits and traps, residents should (1) exercise caution, (2) read the instructions carefully, and (3) follow all label recommendations provided by the manufacturer!



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