The Texas Gray Squirrel Migration of 1857

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Even for Texas, a land of climatic extremes, the year 1857 was one for the record books. It began with typical winter weather, but in early February an unseasonable warming encouraged farmers to plant their spring crops several weeks earlier than usual.\(^1\) By April the grass was green, gardens and orchards were thriving, and shrubs and trees were covered with leaves and blooms. Then, in a sudden and dramatic reversal, winter again returned to Texas. On April 5, an Arctic cold mass entered the state and over the next three days killed much of the emerging spring vegetation. Complete destruction of crops and oak mast was reported around Marshall in Harrison County,\(^2\) while in Smith County bushes three to six feet high were killed and even larger trees were damaged.\(^3\) This first cold wave was followed by a second “norther” on April 10 that produced hail and snow as far south as Austin.\(^4\) A third episode of freezing temperatures\(^5\) from about April 21 to 24 left the timber in Montgomery County and other parts of eastern Texas looking as though it had been “killed by a fire.”\(^6\) The successive frosts were so injurious to oak trees that it was predicted the production of acorns (mast) within the state would amount to “absolutely nothing.”\(^7\)

Temperatures moderated during the first week of May, and the rains that fell throughout much of the state allowed farmers to replant crops.\(^8\) But as the season progressed, the rain fell only in scattered regions and, in some areas, the vegetation suffered from drought.\(^9\) Springs and creeks began to go dry\(^10\) and late in September, buffalo were seen only forty to fifty miles from Fort Worth moving down the West Fork of the Trinity River in search of water.\(^11\) The failure of the acorn crop in northeastern Texas pushed a number of black bears into Liberty County.\(^12\)

Gray, or cat squirrels (Sciurus carolinensis) as they are sometimes called, were also on the move. By all indications, 1856 had been a good year for squirrels. The fall acorn and pecan crop had been heavy,\(^13\) allowing for the birth of large numbers of young late in 1856 and early in 1857. Under normal conditions, the habitat could have accommodated this increase in population. However, destruction of the spring mast as well as the tender buds and leaves by the freezes of April 1857 greatly reduced the available food, a situation compounded by the drought during late spring and summer.

Henry Garrison Askew (1845-1918) remembered the migration of the squirrels well.\(^14\) During June 1857, Askew and his parents and younger siblings had visited Harrison County. On the way back to their home in Sulphur Springs, as they entered the prairie near Saltillo in eastern Hopkins County, the horses pulling the carriage were “spooked” by something in the grass. Looking in the direction of the disturbance, the family members saw a number of squirrels coming directly toward them and leaping frantically to gain distance over the grass which was a foot or more in height. They soon discovered that these

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first squirrels were but the advance members of a column that was "both widely extended and deep, all traveling in one direction from northwest to southeast." Askew and his father immediately dismounted to calm the horses. As the column of squirrels neared, most of the animals went to the right or the left or under the carriage, but some went over the horses and through the carriage while Henry's mother and siblings crouched on the back seat, protected by curtains. The passage of squirrels continued for about an hour and their number was estimated to be in the "thousands." Askew believed that instinct was leading the squirrels to cornfields in the more densely settled country to the southeast of Hopkins County.

In later years, Henry Askew's "squirrel story" was greeted with disbelief. However, other sources also mention the unusually large numbers of squirrels during the summer and fall of 1857. At Palestine in Anderson County, the cornfields were reported "literally alive" with squirrels, and although desperate efforts were made to kill them, no diminution of their numbers was evident. The citizens of Anderson County believed that the squirrels had entered their region due to a shortage of food in the western portions of the state. By late October, squirrels were devastating the corn around Dallas to an extent never before known and, in addition, were seriously injuring the cotton crop by cutting up the bolls. Squirrels were also "very numerous" and causing "much injury" around Quitman in Wood County. On the Red River near Jefferson in Marion County, squirrels were producing "havoc" in the cornfields.

Gray squirrel migrations have been frequently reported in the northeastern United States. Overpopulation and food shortages, acting separately or in combination, are believed to stimulate migratory behavior. Moving en masse, the squirrels seem oblivious to geographical barriers and will readily swim across rivers and move through treeless prairies. Great damage is often done to cultivated crops as the immense numbers of squirrels travel across the country.

The migration that occurred in Texas during 1857 seems to have been a unique event in the history of the state, not having been seen before or recorded since. Unfortunately, because the habitat of the gray squirrel has been altered and populations have declined, a migration of this magnitude will never again be observed in Texas.

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NOTES

2"Letter From Smith County," Galveston News (Tri-weekly), April 21, 1857.
3"News Clips," Galveston News (Tri-weekly), April 21, 1857.
4"Galveston News" (Tri-weekly), April 22, 1857.
5"Galveston News" (Tri-weekly), April 25, 1857.
6Washington American, April 28, 1857.

"Galveston News (Tri-weekly), July 28, 1857.


"Galveston News (Tri-weekly), October 22, 1857.

"Dallas Herald, September 6, 1856; Washington American, November 5, 1856; Southern Intelligencer (Austin), November 19, 1856.

"H.G. Askew became a member of the Texas State Historical Association in 1897. His recollection of the squirrel migration was published originally in The Fort Worth Record, March 24, 1912, and later reprinted as "Rare and Wonderful Tales of Early Texas," Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 42 (1939), pp. 268-273.


"Galveston News (Tri-weekly), October 27, 1857.

"Galveston News (Tri-weekly), October 22, 1857.

"Jefferson Eastern Texas Gazette, November 7, 1857.


"P.D. Goodrum, "The Gray Squirrel in Texas," Texas Parks and Wildlife Bulletin, 42 (1967), p. 16. Although gray squirrels are migratory in the northern part of their range, Goodrum stated that he had "never witnessed nor heard of such a movement in Texas."