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Now and then, we have an amusing pair of visitors drop in to our family cottage. They always show up after dark and cavort around the trunk of an old oak tree. One evening, I failed to feed our impertinent guests fast enough to suit them, and one jumped on my shoulder. “Orville and Wilbur” are **southern flying squirrels** -- exclusively nocturnal creatures that are small in stature but big on personality.

Comparable in size to chipmunks, southern flying squirrels are one of two species of flying squirrels found in North America (the other is the larger northern flying squirrel). They have dense, silky fur that is grey-brown above and white underneath, and their eyes are large and prominent. Flying squirrels do not actually fly – they glide. Two loose folds of skin called the ‘*patagia*’ stretch between their wrists and ankles. As they leap from tree to tree with limbs outstretched, the folds spread out and function like a parachute, allowing the squirrels to cover long distances in a single, silent glide. A typical glide covers around 10 metres/30 feet; but if the launch site is especially lofty, is directed downhill, and the wind is right, it could span as much as 80 metres/270 feet! While airborne, the upturned tips on both “wings” help to reduce drag while increasing stability, which is why many airplanes have upturned tips on their wings. The glides are controlled. Light movements of special wrist joints enable the squirrels to steer from side to side and even make 90-degree turns; and the flat, furry tail serves as both rudder and brakes. Copying the flight mechanics of flying squirrels, humans developed a suit that slows the descent of base jumpers and sky divers while allowing them to maneuver through the air.

Southern flying squirrels live in woodlands with nut or acorn-bearing trees and in coniferous forests. They communicate via a high-pitched “*cheeep*,” as well as by ultrasonic vocalisations too high for people to hear. Males are less territorial than females and often have overlapping territories. These squirrels are believed to mate twice a year – once in early spring and again in mid-summer – so some females raise two litters annually. Nesting sites are usually within cavities like old woodpecker holes inside dead trees, but they accept man-made nesting boxes, too. During summer, they might simply fashion a nest from leaves. Nest sites may house a single female or a colony of females and their collective young. More than one nest is prepared, so the offspring can be moved if the original one gets dirty or compromised. Flying squirrel moms are attentive to their young and will fiercely defend them, even when out-sized or outnumbered. Offspring are weaned at around 6-8 weeks.

Southern flying squirrels mainly eat seeds, acorns, nuts, lichen and fungi but also consume berries, blossoms, insects, birds’ eggs and nestlings, mice, and even carrion. They do not hibernate, but cache surplus food throughout their territories to help them survive the winter. Additionally, they can reduce their body temperature and metabolic rate and often form communal nests to benefit from one another’s radiant heat.

Despite using elusive survival behaviours – like dashing to the opposite side of a tree trunk immediately upon landing in case something was in pursuit – southern flying squirrels have many predators, including owls, rat snakes, hawks, raccoons, foxes and weasels. They are most vulnerable while on the ground, and young flying squirrels in particular suffer from high predation mortality. Their life expectancy in the wild is only around 5 years.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She’s summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.