



Farmnote

Indian Palm squirrel

Farmnote 113/2000

by staff of the Vertebrate Pest Section, Forrestfield

The Indian Palm squirrel (*Funambulus pennanti*), also known as the five-striped palm squirrel, is a native of northern India. Palm squirrels are frequently seen in and around houses in villages and small towns and may cause damage to fruit and vegetable crops.

These squirrels were released in the grounds of the South Perth Zoo in 1898 and have gradually colonized an area of about 30 square km. Some animals have turned up away from South Perth, but all are thought to have been recaptured and destroyed.

Identification

Palm squirrels are about the size of rats with a bushy tail which is slightly shorter than their body. Their back is a grizzled grey-brown colour with five conspicuous white stripes, three of which run from head to tail. The two outer stripes run from the forelegs to the hind legs only. They have a creamy white belly and a tail covered with interspersed long black and white hairs. Their ears are small and triangular.

Behaviour, Habitat and Food

Palm squirrels nest in trees, usually pine trees or exotic palms. Unlike other squirrels they do not hibernate, but in winter only emerge in the late afternoon of sunny days. They move with rapid darting movements and climb with great agility. Palm squirrels have no enemies in Western Australia with the possible exception of domestic cats. However, numbers may be limited by infestation of a biting mite observed on some animals.

Reproduction

Breeding takes place in grass nests during autumn. Litters of two or three are common. The young are weaned after about ten weeks and are sexually mature at nine months. Because of their potential to damage houses, market gardens, orchards and to attack birds' nests, Indian palm squirrels are declared animals throughout the whole of Western Australia.

Damage

Palm squirrels live in and close to houses and gardens. They often damage introduced gardens plants and trees by eating the fruits and buds. They also scavenge for waste food and have been seen to steal school children's sandwiches. They may damage electrical wiring in houses creating a fire risk. In India their diet includes seeds, fruit, nuts, insects and birds' eggs. Palm squirrels could threaten vine and fruit crops and possibly market gardens close to the city. They could also reduce the numbers of native birds nesting in city parks and gardens.

Further Information

If you see an animal which might be a squirrel, please contact the Department of Agriculture, 3 Baron-Hay Court, South Perth, Ph (08) 9368 3333 or any country office of the Department of Agriculture. Freecall 1800 084 881, email info@agric.wa.gov.au or visit www.agric.wa.gov.au

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