

A gray squirrel on a branch of a dead tree was staring straight at me and using his front claws to scrape out a rhythm on the branch. Then a squirrel behind me “replied” with squawks. Do squirrels communicate through making sounds with their claws on the trees?

I do like a good question, especially one that makes me learn something new. I am not an expert on squirrel communication. I spent a bit of time on the internet and found out quite a bit about squirrel communication.

Squirrels are very vocal and make a wide variety of sounds. Their vocalizations range in frequency from .01 to 10 kilohertz and can be anything from single chirps to long series of chattering sounds to barks, screams and purrs. Squirrel alarm calls are sometimes ultrasonic beyond the hearing range of humans and most of their common predators (ultrasonic alarm calls are only to occur in the squirrel family – bats use ultrasonic calls to locate things)! This wide range of sounds combined with tail waving, foot stomping and body postures makes up the squirrel “language.”

Ground squirrels are heavily preyed on by rattlesnakes. They have a particular method of communicating when dealing with a rattlesnake: they make alarm calls and wave their tail from side to side while increasing blood flow through it. This not only lets other squirrels know that something is wrong, but the waving, warmed up tail is a very tempting target for a rattlesnake to strike at, making it less likely that the squirrel will get a lethal bite (ground squirrels are also resistant to rattlesnake venom).

Some sounds that you may hear a squirrel make:

Barking – when a squirrel wants to show excitement or alarm they usually bark. They also use barking for communication purposes or to claim their territory.

Screaming – this type of sound denotes distress. Just like humans, squirrels come out to see an accident or a similar unfortunate event. Squirrels usually bark and/or scream at what they hear or see.

Cutting – as you might have guessed, this sound is made when squirrels are eating (squeaking their teeth against the nuts’ shell). This cutting sound is an all-clear call squirrels make. When danger is present, squirrels don’t eat but the moment the danger is over, they return to their feeding activity.

One way many tree squirrels communicate to other squirrels is by leaving their very own scent marks on branches. The sweat glands of a tree squirrel are located on their feet, between the foot pads and on their paws between their toes. Scent marks can sometimes strategically be placed on the underside of large branches so the rain won’t wash away.

An interesting tidbit that I turned up: squirrels have the largest brain to body ratio of any living animal.

Ranger Richard E. Bicknell 650 617 3100 ext 1696