

Why are the squirrels here black but in New Jersey they are gray?

Let's start out by mentioning the various species of squirrels found in this area: California Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*), Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), and Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus griseus*). I have never seen a ground squirrel in Foothills park (they are plentiful in the Baylands); therefore, I will talk about Gray Squirrels and Fox Squirrels.

Gray squirrels tend to be dark, silvery gray on their backs and pale white on their bellies with some black flecks especially on the tails. Fox squirrels are usually brownish gray above and light buff to cinnamon colored on their bellies, often with lighter buff coloring showing through on the back.

There are common color variations in both species that result in all black squirrels. All black fox squirrels tend to occur in their southern ranges, all black Gray squirrels tend to occur in the northern parts of their ranges. In this part of California we have many different, often small, climate zones and may have areas that match either black color range. Since the gray squirrel is much more common in this area (southern California has more Fox Squirrels) my best guess is that the black squirrels you have seen are the black variation of the gray squirrel.

I have spent time in several large cities and have heard a modern/urban myth in several. If you spend time around large University campuses you will notice a much higher percentage of black squirrels. Most universities have large biology departments; most biology departments have genetics laboratories. Genetics labs experiment trying to change living things from one form to another form. The black squirrels common around large universities (like Stanford) are escaped genetic mutations of the common squirrel caused by experiments performed by scientists on campus!