

The mysterious black squirrels of Lincoln County

BY ABIGAIL ADAMS
LINCOLN COUNTY NEWS

Although more or less a typical rodent, black squirrels are a source of myth, legend, and local pride among some of the communities they overrun.

Entrepreneurs from communities with a large black squirrel population have merchandized the black squirrel image, with black squirrel mugs, t-shirts, and sweatshirts available for sale.

They are a popular topic for bloggers and have been mentioned more than once by columnists for The Lincoln County News.

Some scientists have devoted their careers to studying the proliferation of the small fuzzy creatures. There is dissension in the scientific community, however, as to where the black squirrel, which is now present throughout the United States and Europe, originated.

In Lincoln County, black squirrel sightings are occurring with increased frequency. “I will admit that I have received more calls this year about black squirrels than in any other year,” said Maine Department Inland Fisheries & Wildlife Regional Biologist Keel Kemper.

For Kemper, the science of the black squirrel does not support its mystique. “All the ones I’ve heard people talk about are a black-color phase of gray squirrels,” Kemper said.

“These are still gray squirrels,” he said. “They just have this gene that’s expressing itself. As they mate, the gene spreads around.”

Where the gene came from and how it was introduced to the gray squirrel population in Maine were questions Kemper could not answer.

Residents of Westfield,

Massachusetts assert the answer can be found in the history of their small city, sandwiched between the Springfield metropolitan area and the Berkshire mountains. Black squirrels have been coined a “Westfield phenomenon” by a Westfield nonprofit and local stores have black squirrel apparel on display.

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KEEL KEMPER,
REGIONAL BIOLOGIST, MAINE
DEPARTMENT INLAND
FISHERIES & WILDLIFE

Westfield native and historian James Ring Adams has been fascinated by black squirrels since his youth, he said. Adams still vividly remembers a grade school field trip to the Springfield Museum of Natural History where Westfield’s place at the epicenter of the black squirrel spread throughout New England was solidified.

The black squirrel was first brought to Westfield from Michigan in 1948, according to the Stanley Park webpage. Stanley Park is a private park, run by a nonprofit, where the black squirrels were initially released.

Sales managers of Stanhome Inc., a pioneer of the direct-sales industry, spotted the black squirrel while at a conference in Michigan. Two black squirrels were brought back to Westfield as a gift for the company’s founder, Frank Stanley Beveridge. Beveridge was also the founder of Stanley Park.

According to the travel guide book “Weird Michigan,” black squirrels were brought to Michigan from



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A black squirrel from Michigan.

Europe by Will Keith Kellogg, founder of the Kellogg Company, in an attempt to destroy the local red squirrel population in Battle Creek, Mich.

Black squirrels are now common in the Midwest, Kemper said. “There are some city parks out there where these things are rampant,” Kemper said.

According to the Stanley Park webpage, Westfield’s original two black squirrels were kept in cages, did not adapt well to their new environment, and eventually died.

The sales managers tried again, returning to Michigan and bringing six black squirrels back to Westfield with them. The black squirrels were allowed to roam free in the park and soon

became, “an established tenant of Westfield,” the webpage said.

“It was a gene that began to spread,” Adams said. “I can still remember the exhibit that showed how quickly it (the gene) spread from Westfield to New Haven and other parts of Connecticut.” Adams was excited to learn black squirrels were beginning to make an appearance in Maine.

“If there’s a squirrel in Lincoln County, it must be part of the continuation of that spread,” he said.

While eager to claim New England’s black squirrel population as a cultural contribution of Westfield, Massachusetts, Adams did note there have been black squirrel sightings in historical documents dating back

to the 1700s.

According to Adams, “A History of Virginia,” published in 1705, listed black squirrels as a species indigenous to the area.

The Black Squirrel Project is a scientific study on the geographic range of black squirrels in the United Kingdom, conducted by the United Kingdom’s Anglia Ruskin University. The black squirrel was first spotted in the United Kingdom in 1912, according to the project.

Scientists working on the project believe the black squirrel now present in the United Kingdom originated in North America.

While there is dissension over the origin of the black squirrel in the scientific community, there is agree-

ment the black squirrel is a gray squirrel with a gene that causes it to grow a black coat.

“It’s melanism,” Kemper said. “People know about albinos, this is just the other end of the color spectrum. They (Black squirrels) are not their own species. It’s just another color phase.”

According to Kemper, people have reported black squirrels are more aggressive than gray squirrels. However, Kemper is unsure if there is any validity to the theory. “They’re squirrels,” Kemper said. “All squirrels are aggressive.”

Editor’s Note: Westfield historian James Ring Adams is a paternal relation to LCN reporter Abigail Adams.

Active video games may aid seniors

Fitness goals can be met with ‘exergames’

BY KATHRYN DOYLE
REUTERS

Middle aged and older people with type 2 diabetes may be able to meet activity guidelines by playing games on the Wii Fit Plus system, according to a small Swiss study.

“Motivation to exercise is a major unsolved issue in patients with diabetes, especially type 2,” said senior author Dr. Arno Schmidt-Trucksass of the University of Basel. “Alternatives are urgently needed and enjoyable exercise while playing a game might be one.”

The American Diabetes Association recommends that adults aim for at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week, of moderate to vigorous aerobic activities like brisk walking, tennis or hiking. The ADA also recommends some type of strength training twice per week.

The researchers included 12 overweight or obese people with type 2 diabetes in their 50s and 60s. Ten of the participants were men.

The participants started with a test of maximum and average oxygen consumption during peak exertion on a treadmill. Two or three days later, researchers took the same oxygen consumption measures while the participants played three 10-minute bouts of Wii Fit games, including a boxing game, an obstacle course and a cycling game.

Playing the Wii Fit games brought heart rate and resting energy expenditure into the range of moderate aerobic activity, the researchers found. The participants reached more than 40 percent of the maximum oxygen consumption they had achieved in the all-out treadmill test, according to the results in the Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine.

“It could be even more but to start with an intensity just above 40 percent of maximal oxygen uptake is enough in order not to discourage people,” Schmidt-Trucksass told Reuters Health by email. “Further, it should be pointed out, that they chose the exercise intensity by themselves.”



CHARLES PLATIAU | REUTERS

A woman plays with a Wii at French video games publisher Ubisoft Entertainment near Paris in 2012.

The 12 participants individually adjusted the intensity of play according to their own fitness level, he explained.

But the exercise intensity of the games may be too low for younger people, he said.

“These results suggest that exergames may offer an alternative way to meet guidelines,” said Deborah Thompson of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas.

“We need to keep in mind that to receive benefits, a specific exercise needs to be performed routinely and consistently, most days of the week,” said Thompson, who was not involved in the study. “For people to do this regularly it needs to be fun, available and affordable.”

Games like this may suit some older people who have teens or young adults in the home and already have access to the gaming system, but they may not suit everyone, she said.

Regardless, older people with diabetes who want to change their exercise routine should check with their doctors first, she said.

“Particularly if they are not working out now, they need guidance on some of the signs that maybe they’re overexerting or getting hypoglycemic,” Thompson said. “There are lots of things that a physician can talk with them about.”

Slide of Greenland glacier quickens, raising sea levels

BY ALISTER DOYLE
REUTERS

OSLO — A glacier in northeast Greenland with enough ice to raise world ocean levels by 20 inches has begun to slide faster toward the sea, extending ice losses to all corners of the vast remote island, a study showed on Thursday.

Warmer water temperatures meant the end of the Zachariae Isstrom glacier floated free from a ridge of bedrock below sea level on which it had rested until 2012, according to the U.S. study reported in the journal Science.

Without that natural brake, the glacier in the cold north was now sliding quick-

er and more icebergs were snapping off, adding a net five billion metric tons of ice a year to the oceans, according to the study based on satellite and aerial surveys.

“The changes are staggering and are now affecting the four corners of Greenland.”

ERIC RIGNOT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

“Similar changes — even larger — are under way in the south,” Jeremie Mouginot, lead author of the study at the University of California, Irvine, told Reuters in an e-mail.

Greenland contains

enough ice to raise world sea levels by about 20 feet if it ever all melted in a slow-motion collapse that could take thousands of years.

Its ice losses, along with thawing ice from the Alps to Antarctica, have raised sea levels by about 8 inches since 1900. That aggravates storm surges for cities from New York to Shanghai and threatens low-lying tropical island nations.

A nearby north Greenland glacier, Nioghalvfjærdsfjorden — often called “79” for ease of pronunciation — was also melting fast, the study said. But its slide was restricted by an uphill section of seabed under its icy base.

“The changes are staggering and are now affecting the

four corners of Greenland,” Eric Rignot, a co-author at UCI, said in a statement.

Almost 200 nations will meet in Paris for a summit starting on Nov. 30 to try to limit climate change. The U.N. panel of climate scientists estimates that sea levels may rise by between 10 and 32 inches this century.

Ruth Mottram of the Danish Meteorological Institute, who was not involved in Thursday’s study, said Greenland’s glaciers sometimes accelerate after small changes in the environment.

“A small retreat can become a much bigger retreat because these glaciers are only stable when they are resting on bedrock,” she said.

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