

FURTHER NOTES ON FRANKLIN'S GROUND SQUIRREL

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In reviewing the status of Franklin's Ground Squirrel (*Poliocitellus franklinii*; hereafter, FGS) in Canada, I mentioned an apparent lack of records for parts of central-eastern Saskatchewan near The Pas, Manitoba, where it has occurred since the early 1940s, notably in the Carrot River agricultural area.¹ Here, I summarize correspondence from David Meyer and Joe Graumans on their observations of FGS along the Carrot River near Arborfield, Saskatchewan and in the White Fox area near the west end of Tobin Lake, respectively. I also add some reports of unusually early spring, late fall, and even winter activity of FGS.

David Meyer wrote that FGS is quite common in the Carrot River/Arborfield area (53.2°N, 103.6°W), where he grew up in the 1950s-1970s. He later added: "I have been going through some material relating to my ethnographic/historical work with the Red Earth Crees, 1971-75. My journal of the summer of 1975 has a reference to eating Franklin's ground squirrels... The Red Earth people call this squirrel *āpistanikos*. When I recorded this observation, I was camped with Red Earth people at a summer haying camp in the marshes of the Saskatchewan River delta, a few miles east of Red Earth village [53.5°N, 102.8°W]." This is about 80 km upstream of the Carrot River agricultural area near The Pas.

Joe Graumans wrote that, from 1997 until 2017, he operated a big-game outfitting business between the Torch and Missisuskiow rivers, 12 km north of his farm at 53.51°N, 103.86°W. In the summer, during trail clearing in the outfitting area, he saw FGS several times in that area. His guide, the late Archie Smith (1937-2020) of White Fox, told Joe that he regularly saw the squirrels over many years. During 2008-2012,



Franklin's Ground Squirrel eating an earthworm that it drew out of the ground, West Hawk Lake campground, Manitoba, 10 August 2022. Photo by Peter Taylor.

from the end of September to the end of November, Joe and Archie used a type of deer feeder, constructed from PVC pipe and filled with peas, along with a game camera, to check for the number of White-tailed Deer in a specific area. Most feeders were set up on jack pine ridges and poplar bluffs. Several times they found a Franklin's Ground Squirrel in the pipes. They got in the open top but were unable to crawl back up and out of the pipe. Several of these squirrels were found when there was already snow on the ground, sometimes in November — well beyond the normal activity period at the northern edge of their range.¹ Finally, Joe noted that, in the summer of 2020, he saw one FGS for the first time in his yard, where it seemed to have a den under his back porch. The following spring, five squirrels emerged from hibernation there, three slightly smaller individuals presumed to be the offspring of the two larger ones.

These observations show that FGS has been present in east-central Saskatchewan for many decades, and is indeed quite common in some areas. This is to be expected, and may date back prior to European settlement, given that the 1820 type locality for FGS is at Carlton House, along the Saskatchewan River in west-central Saskatchewan. The Saskatchewan River delta wetlands and the Carrot River likely provided a corridor

for the squirrels to reach The Pas, with agricultural development and highway and railway construction perhaps also playing a role in this range extension in the 1940s.

In ongoing correspondence, Michael Dawber reported a record-early emergence of FGS from hibernation in the Rainy River district, Ontario, on 21 March 2021 (iNaturalist observations 71792417, 72015843, and 72260023). This was likely prompted by unseasonably warm weather combined with the presence of a bird feeder. It seems that supplemental food, though not provided intentionally for the ground squirrels, was an important factor in both this early spring activity and the late-fall observations reported by Joe Graumans. I previously overlooked two reports of extraordinary winter activity, unfortunately without details, on Saskatchewan Christmas Mammal Counts at Asquith on 23 December 1975 and Saskatoon on 26 December 2013.²

I thank Michael Dawber, Joe Graumans, and David Meyer for their helpful correspondence.

1. Taylor P (2021) History and current status of Franklin's Ground Squirrel in Manitoba and elsewhere in Canada. *Blue Jay* 79(1):16-24.

2. Smith AR (2014) 41st Annual Saskatchewan Christmas Mammal Count – 2013. *Blue Jay* 72(1):53-58. 🐿