

Warbles in Ohio Squirrels



Warbles appear usually as a bald lump or swollen area on and under the hide of a squirrel. The warble is actually the larva of the botfly or warblefly. The swollen lump increases in size as the warble grows under the hide.

Botflies, of which there are several types, initially deposit their eggs on vegetation used by squirrels. It is doubtful these eggs are ever laid directly on the squirrel's fur.

The larvae hatch from the eggs in response to a quick temperature rise, which occurs when a squirrel pauses over the eggs. The larvae then enter the squirrel through its nose or mouth and migrate to a site under the skin, where they start to develop. They eventually become large, usually dark-colored grubs an inch or so long and one-half to three-quarters of an inch wide. As each warble starts development under the skin, it cuts an airhole through to the outside. It eventually will emerge from this hole, drop to the ground, and pupate until the adult fly emerges to reproduce.

Warbles are most prevalent on squirrels in Ohio from September through early October. Over a six-year period nearly 27 percent of the gray and fox squirrels sampled in southeastern Ohio were infected with warbles in late September. By mid-October most of the warble sores are healed and the fur has regrown over the area.

Gray squirrels get more warbles than fox squirrels, primarily because the gray squirrel's habitat of dense woods is also good botfly habitat. Botflies do best in the temperature range of the southeastern United States; their northern-most range reaches into Ohio. Warbles are much more common in states such as North Carolina and Alabama. Many other small rodents such as white-footed mice and chipmunks also get these warbles.

Warbles seem to have little effect on the overall health of a squirrel. Squirrels can have as many as four or five warbles at one time. They are usually located on the front half of the squirrel's body – on the back, around the neck, or on the front legs.

Squirrels with warbles are frequently shot by hunters. These squirrels are fine to eat but some people find the sight of the warble offensive and unnecessarily discard the squirrels.

The skinned carcass of a warbled squirrel may show a lesion or callused area on the meat, although during the early stage of warble development there may be no scar at all. The scar can be trimmed off and the squirrel can be cooked like any other squirrel.