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### Blackwater Canyon: West Virginia's ark of rare species

"Ginny," the endangered West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel, lives in six West Virginia counties, and one in Virginia.

Ginny is a relic of the ice age - a cute, furry, big-eyed nocturnal creature who feeds on funguses that grow on the roots of trees. Ginny has been on the endangered species list since 1986, and she is a symbol of West Virginia's magnificent Northern Highlands and a "poster child" for the diverse ecology of the Blackwater Canyon.

Last year, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service refused to let the public see 196 pages of documents about the Service's wacky proposal to remove all federal protection from Ginny and her species. (What can be so secret about a squirrel?) Rep. Nick Rahall held hearings that revealed improper political interference in scientific decisions on species like Ginny.

In a recent interview in our Friends of Blackwater newsletter, Ginny was quoted as saying she was counting on us humans to keep her legally protected, since at the moment she's pregnant!

So, what are we humans doing to protect Ginny?

More than 25 groups have formed the "SOS! - Save Our Squirrel" Coalition, and have pledged to protect Ginny and her family. All of the public and expert comments on the "de-listing" proposal have said that it would be wrong to remove protection from Ginny and her species.

In early April, an important scientific opinion about Ginny was prepared and submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by the distinguished scientist Robert Leo Smith, West Virginia University professor emeritus in wildlife ecology.

Dr. Smith has an international reputation in wildlife population studies, and he is the author of a standard textbook in the field.

Dr. Smith's 25-page report concludes: "Thus, with very weak data on all aspects of the species' recovery, and lacking any data whatsoever on the actual population status of the species, the Fish and Wildlife proposal is not supported by acceptable and provable scientific evidence showing that the species is no longer endangered, so as to warrant the removal of endangered species protection." For a complete copy of Dr. Smith's report, go to [www.saveoursquirrel.com](http://www.saveoursquirrel.com).

The "Save Our Squirrel" Coalition welcomes Dr. Smith's important scientific contribution on behalf of Ginny, her species and those who love the West Virginia Highlands. Now that a scientist of Dr. Smith's stature has weighed in solidly on behalf of continued protection for "Ginny," we hope that Fish and Wildlife will drop this flawed de-listing proposal completely. To push ahead with a proposal that lacks any shred of scientific credibility, and that is bound to be defeated, would be a major waste of taxpayer dollars.

*Rodd is director of the Friends of Blackwater.*