Squirrels! Gray squirrels! In our trees! In our yards! TRYING to cross the street! It’s hard to go anywhere outside in the eastern half of North America without seeing our favorite gray fluffy tails. But 150 years ago, most of those gray tails were black.

Yes, the same species can come in different colors. People can have different colored hair, dogs can have different colored hair, and squirrels can, too. Eastern gray squirrel fur comes in white, gray, or black.

In the United States today, most gray squirrels’ manes live up to their name, but black squirrels still thrive in some cities. Why? Researchers suspect rapid evolution, the type of evolution that happens over a short period of time, may have something to do with it. But they need your help!

Right now, evolutionary biologists, the scientists who explore the pathways that resulted in the diversity of earth’s life, and
ecologists, the scientists who study how creatures interact with the world around them, are exploring city animals. They want to see which animals live in the city, and how species that evolved in natural environments adapt to city life. They hope to find clues about how animals adapt when their environments change quickly.

Are you ready to help crack the mystery of critters in the big city? First, we need to know a little more about evolution and natural selection.

When humans build cities where our forests and farms used to be, we change the environment more quickly than nature could change itself.