

## Wild Things: Tree Squirrels

BY MARGARET BAIRD

It's a bit peculiar, really, how we humans seem to at once adore and revile squirrels. Some of us admire their ingenuity, impressive aerial acrobatics, and nut-gathering work ethic, while others curse them for gobbling up the birdseed we set out for their feathered competitors. Some of us, in fact, do both.

Squirrels inspire strong opinions, and round about September, more of them will be appearing. They usually give birth to two litters per year—one arriving in late winter or early spring, the second batch coming in late summer or early fall. Squirrel-related inquiries to the shelter during this season will often be from folks worried about squirrels nesting in their attics, chimneys, or other inappropriate places. Passing on info on squirrel habits and humane exclusion techniques will help calm these panicky callers.

North America is host to a bevy of squirrel species, but the ones we're talking about here are the true tree squirrels, those of the bushy-tailed, Squirrel Nutkin variety who are well-adapted to high-rise living—as opposed to ground squirrels, their bottom-dwelling brethren. Tree squirrels include red, fox, and flying squirrels, in addition to the well-known and widespread gray squirrels. The latter plucky rodents are the real heavyweights of the urban wildlife world, making a comfortable living in gritty city parks, the greener acres of suburbia, and just about anywhere in between.

Much to the curmudgeonly dismay of songbird lovers, gray squirrels are particularly proficient at shaking down birdfeeders, which have a strong tendency to function as veritable squirrel takeout stands. Squirrels may also acquire a taste for the ornamental plantings and fruit and nut trees found in gardens and yards. They'll stockpile acorns and other nuts during the fall months, busily stocking them away for their winter cache.

Despite squirrels' notoriety for raiding birdfeeders, and the cottage industry that's sprung up around outwitting them, the more serious human-squirrel conflict



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is that of squirrels nesting in buildings. Squirrels do hunker down in tree cavities or make leaf nests (also known as dreys) for shelter and to raise young, but given the opportunity, they'll also make ample use of chimneys, attics, and any number of nooks and crannies in and on the houses that, according to the paperwork, technically belong to us humans. Squirrel problems usually begin with poor roof maintenance. Unfortunately, roofs tend to be one of those "out of sight, out of mind" locations for many homeowners—deteriorating boards or small holes can often go unnoticed. That is, until some enterprising squirrel in search of a warm, safe place happens by (cue the *Mission Impossible* theme song), gnaws an even larger hole, and quickly gains access to a building. Once inside, squirrels will use whatever they find within to construct a cozy nest, making a cheeky mess of insulation, boxes, and even attic treasures. It's usually the pitter-patter of little feet that gives them away to their human hosts. While other building invaders such as rats, mice, or raccoons will be most active and noisiest at night, the comings and goings of squirrels mostly happen during daylight hours.

If possible, homeowners should investigate to see what they can see, by casing the attic or climbing a ladder to check out the roof. If it's a mama squirrel with young who is causing the conflict, the first and best advice to preach is tolerance until the babes have left the nest. This can be a hard sell

to many homeowners, who'll balk at allowing the unwanted guests to stick around. It's harder in the fall, since autumn-born squirrel litters often stay with mom right through the winter, rather than being weaned and on their own within 10 weeks or so like litters born in spring.

If homeowners can't bear to share their space, and it's no later than October, attempting to get mama to pack up and move the kids to a more hospitable location is a humane option—she'll have an easier time wrangling her offspring while they're still quite small and helpless.

Squirrel eviction can require oodles of persistence, but tried-and-true harassment tactics are usually successful. Keeping attic lights turned on 24/7, tuning a portable radio to a loud station, and planting a few cider vinegar-soaked rags in the vicinity will often be all it takes to force relocation. Once the human residents are positive everyone's out for good, they can seal up all holes with aluminum flashing—or make more permanent repairs on the spot. Homeowners should be careful about handling any squirrel-chewed wires! Advise them about the virtues of prevention: Future squirrel squatters can be discouraged if the resident humans get in the habit of carrying out routine seasonal checks on their home, from foundation to rooftop. **AS**

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