

Living with Squirrels

NATURAL HISTORY

Squirrels are highly intelligent, inquisitive, and skillful creatures—all characteristics that often lead people to rank squirrels number one on the list of troublemakers. Squirrels eat nuts and large seeds during the fall and winter; fruits, berries, mushrooms, and insects during the summer; and bird seed any time of the year! Squirrels are diurnal animals, meaning they are active during the day. Squirrels are seldom far from trees; they rely on trees for shelter, to escape from predators, and to bear and raise their young. However, as people continue to cut down more and more trees, squirrels have adapted by utilizing almost anything that looks or acts like a tree for their activities. As a result, squirrels often make their way into attics, chimneys, and crawl spaces along upper levels of houses. Fortunately, there are ways to live peacefully with the squirrels in your environment.

Q: How do I keep squirrels out of my bird feeder?

A: The best thing to do to prevent squirrels from eating out of your bird feeder is to keep them away from the beginning—once they become accustomed to food, they will be persistent at getting to it! There are a number of specialized feeders and baffles available that are considered “squirrel-proof.” One effective squirrel baffle is shaped like a stovepipe and is placed on the pole portion of the bird feeder. This allows the squirrel to climb up the pole and into the closed pipe, but he can go no further. The pipe must be at least 15 inches long to prevent the squirrel from climbing over it, and set at least 4 feet off the ground (to the bottom part of the baffle) to prevent the squirrel from jumping over it. The feeder itself must be placed far enough away from nearby trees, wires, buildings, or any other objects a squirrel could use to jump on top of the feeder. You may also want to try stocking your feeder with seeds that are undesirable to squirrels, such as safflower seeds, but attract birds such as cardinals and grosbeaks, or niger thistle, which will attract goldfinches and other songbirds. Another newly designed battery-operated bird feeder has a ledge that twirls when a squirrel lands on it, literally flipping the animal off. We strongly discourage the use of any capsaicin-based “hot pepper” powder mix, which, although advertised as a “humane” repellent when mixed with bird seed, reportedly can

make squirrels sick and may be irritating to the humans that handle it.

Q: How do I get squirrels out of the attic?

A: Again, the best way to prevent squirrels from nesting in your attic is to keep them away from the beginning. Continued maintenance on your house is essential; prevent wildlife problems from occurring by sealing up all possible entry holes, trimming all overhanging tree branches, and installing a chimney cap.

Squirrels have two litters a year, one in early spring (February–May) and one in late summer (August–October). If you have a squirrel in your attic for more than a few days at those times of the year, the animal is most likely a mother with her babies. The best thing to do is wait six to eight weeks until the young are old enough to follow their mother on outings. Once the young are old enough to accompany her, and you observe this occurring, you can install a one-way door (available from Tomahawk Live Trap, 800-272-8727, or ACES, 800-338-ACES) over the entry hole, which will allow the squirrels to go out but not come back in.

If you absolutely *must* evict the squirrels before the young are old enough to leave on their own, you can place rags sprinkled with a strong-smelling household cleaner, like ammonia, along with a blaring radio tuned to an all-night rap or rock station, in the attic. Be careful not to place the ammonia rags too close to the nesting site, as the babies can be asphyxiated by the fumes. Also, illuminate the nest by shining lights on it. (You can generally locate the attic nest by looking near the entry hole for lumped-up insulation along the perimeter of the attic interior.) This will turn the squirrels’ safe, quiet nesting environment into one that is smelly and frightening. If the mother knows of an alternate nesting site, she will often move her young that day. If she has to find or build a new nest, it may take longer.

Once you have not heard any sounds coming from the attic for several days, you need to make sure the squirrels have left before you seal the entrance hole. Place a soft plug, such as a paper towel or crumpled newspaper, in the entry hole and check the next day to see if it has been pushed out. Once you are completely sure the squirrels have

abandoned their nest, you may remove the one-way door and patch the hole using 1/4-inch or 1/2-inch hardware cloth. Extend the hardware cloth 8–12 inches beyond the hole on all sides, and secure it over the hole using a staple gun and U-shaped nails. Next, spray the area with Ropel (found at some garden stores, can be ordered online from Burlington Scientific Corporation at www.gardeningdepot.com, or call 631-694-4700 to find a local distributor) or Miller's Hot Sauce (call 800-233-2040 to find a local distributor) to prevent any chewing. To make sure that no squirrels were inadvertently trapped in the attic, put flour down in front of the entry hole and check the next day for footprints of any squirrel left behind. Continue to listen for sounds of activity in the attic, and watch to see if a squirrel is persistent in attempts to gain entry from the outside—a mother squirrel will go to great lengths to reunite with her young, and can cause extensive damage in the process.

If you notice squirrel activity in your attic during the winter months and you are positive there are no babies present, you may use the one-way door or exclusion methods as described above. Exclude the squirrels at mid-morning on a warm, sunny day when the squirrels are out eating. Again, listen for any squirrels inadvertently trapped inside the attic. However, remember that if you evict a squirrel from your attic during the winter, the squirrel may not find, or be able to create, a vacant cavity and may freeze to death. For this reason, consider waiting until early spring to do an eviction.

Relocating a squirrel by trapping may sound kind, but it is usually a death sentence for the squirrel. In the winter, squirrels bury a food cache that supports them. If relocated at this time of year, they will most likely die. Trapping and relocating squirrels at other times of the year subjects them to being run out by other territorial squirrels, being preyed upon, and being hit by cars as they frantically search for the habitat they know.

Q: There's a squirrel loose in the house—how do I get him out?

A: Squirrels enter houses by accident, and often frantically search for a way out. Create a clear-cut path to the outdoors for the squirrel by closing all doors to any rooms in the house that the squirrel is not in, and darkening all windows and doors except for the one you want him to go out. Make sure that there is a chair or piece of furniture that the squirrel can use to reach a windowsill, if necessary.

If the squirrel is in a ground-level room, he should head toward daylight and will find his way out if left alone. If the squirrel is trapped in a second-story location, hang a knotted bedsheet out of the window to provide the squirrel with something to climb down upon.

If you are unable to create an exit, set a live trap* on the floor near the squirrel, baited with peanut butter, and leave him alone for a few hours. Once the squirrel is trapped and released outside of the house, it is important to look around for any possible ways he might have entered. Carefully and thoroughly inspect the inside and outside of your house for possible entry points. Check for tracks of soot around the fireplace or dust around the furnace. Also check your attic (on a sunny day) for an entrance hole that may need patching.

Q: How do I get a squirrel out of my chimney? My fireplace?

A: *Under absolutely no circumstances should you try to smoke an animal out of your chimney—you will succeed only in burning or killing the animal!*

Once again, prevention is the key. It is absolutely essential to have a chimney cap installed by a chimney sweep to prevent any animals from falling down, or nesting in, your chimney.

If you hear a squirrel scrambling around in your chimney, it is safe to assume that he is stuck unless you have seen evidence that he can climb out. To provide the squirrel with a means for escape, lower a thick (3/4-inch) rope down the chimney, making sure it is long enough to reach the damper. Tie one end of the rope to the top of the chimney to secure it in place, and the squirrel should climb up on his own within daylight hours. If a rope is not available, you can tie knotted bedsheets together to create a makeshift rope.

If the squirrel is in your fireplace, the best thing to do is place a live trap baited with peanut butter in the fireplace behind the fireplace doors. Typically the squirrel will huddle in the back corner of the fireplace when the doors are opened, and will stay there as you place the trap slowly and quietly just inside the doors. Close the doors to the fireplace and leave the room to wait for the squirrel to enter the trap, then simply release him outside.

Note: As a precaution, you may want to prepare a "funnel" system leading out an open door before attempting to place the live trap inside the fire-

*You can usually get a live trap from your animal control facility, a Rent-It store, or a hardware store.

place. While most squirrels will huddle in the far corner of the fireplace when the doors are opened, they may also bolt into the room out of fear. Tables and chairs tipped on their side can create a path out an open door.

Finally, be sure to have a proper chimney cap installed by a chimney sweep once the squirrel is captured and released outside so this problem does not happen again. Also, to prevent squirrels from getting onto your roof, trim any overhanging tree branches and block access from the trunks of trees adjacent to your house.

Q: How do I prevent squirrels from climbing up a tree into my attic or chimney?

A: First and foremost, it is important to make sure there are no active nests in the tree. Then, take a 3-foot-wide section of sheet metal and drill a hole in each of the four corners. Next, wrap the sheet metal around the tree, but instead of harming the tree by hammering the metal into place with nails, secure the two ends together using two metal coils running between the drilled holes. This way the protective band will stretch as the tree grows. The sheet-metal band must be at least 4 feet above ground level and at least 3 feet wide to prevent squirrels from climbing up the tree and jumping over it.

Q: A squirrel is looking disoriented and falling over. Is he rabid?

A: Like all warm-blooded mammals, squirrels are susceptible to the rabies virus. However, the incidence of rabies in squirrels is extremely low, and squirrel-to-human transmission of the virus has not been documented. This stems in part from the fact that squirrels are such small animals. If a squirrel were to tangle with a rabid animal, most often he would not survive the attack long enough to incubate and transmit the virus by biting another animal. The squirrel may be looking disoriented for a number of reasons: he may have been hit by a car; fallen from a tree; or be suffering from roundworm, a parasite that affects the brain. The symptoms of all three look similar to rabies. Roundworm is *not* airborne—it can only be transmitted through the oral-fecal route—the ingestion of an infected animal's feces.

To help this squirrel, contact your state fish and game agency or humane society for assistance and a possible referral. However, roundworm is a fatal illness and you must carefully evaluate whether or not the trauma of a trip to a veterinarian or reha-

ilitator is more humane than simply allowing the squirrel to die a natural death.

Q: How do I keep squirrels from eating my garden tomatoes?

A: Squirrels not only help themselves to your prize-winning tomatoes, but they have the audacity to take just one bite and discard the rest! However, this is usually because squirrels are not particularly fond of tomatoes or other vegetables, but will eat them if hungry enough. So, the first thing to do is to make sure that squirrels are actually the nibblers! (A more likely scenario is that you have a woodchuck dining on your tomatoes.)

If there is a squirrel eating the tomatoes, rest assured that this is a temporary inconvenience and will subside shortly. To protect your tomatoes in the meantime, you can use a repellent called Hinder (available through your local garden store or Forest & Wildlife, 800-647-5368), which is safe for human consumption.

Q: How can I stop squirrels from digging holes in my yard?

A: The good news is that this digging is a seasonal phenomenon, and rarely causes significant damage to lawns. Squirrels bury nuts in the ground for later retrieval during the winter and early spring months. Interestingly, the squirrels that bury the nuts are not always the ones that dig them up, since squirrels retrieve nuts using their keen sense of smell—not memory! The easiest solution is to wait a few weeks and let the problem end on its own. However, if you absolutely must prevent squirrels from digging in your yard, you can sprinkle some cayenne pepper on the affected areas.

Q: How do I stop squirrels from chewing holes in the wood trim or stucco on my house?

A: Sometimes squirrels will chew the trim on a house for unknown reasons, particularly in winter. The cause may be a mineral deficiency, but no one knows for sure. The solution is to spray Ropel (found at some garden stores, can be ordered online from Burlington Scientific Corporation at www.gardeningdepot.com, or call 631-694-4700 to find a local distributor) or Miller's Hot Sauce (call 800-233-2040 to find a local distributor) on the affected areas to prevent any chewing. It is a good idea to pretest the repellent on a small section of the trim or stucco first if you are at all unsure of the paint used on your house. Some repellents can cause discoloration of latex paint if the paint has been mixed with certain ingredients.

Q: I cut down a dead tree and found a nest of baby squirrels! What should I do?

A: Give the mother a chance to reclaim her young. If the babies fell from the tree uninjured, leave them where they are, leave the area, and keep people and companion animals away. Monitor from a safe distance; if the babies are not retrieved by nighttime, contact your state fish and game agency or local humane society to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you. If there is any risk of predation, you can put the squirrels in a wicker basket and attach the basket securely to the tree. Do not cover the squirrels with leaves or blankets because the mother may not be able to find them. If it is chilly outside, provide the babies with a heat source, such as a portable heating pad, a hot water bottle, or rig up a heating pad using an extension cord.

Q: Why not just trap and relocate the squirrels in my yard?

A: Squirrels are territorial animals, so your resident squirrels are actually keeping other squirrels away from your yard. If you remove the existing squirrels, others will quickly move in and your problems will continue. Also, trapping and relocating squirrels often leads to starving young being left behind. Homeowners are then horrified to smell a foul odor. The only permanent solution is to eliminate the problematic behavior, rather than the animal, using the strategies described here.

We discourage trapping unless an animal is stuck somewhere and can't get out, or poses an immediate threat to humans or domestic animals. If you do hire a nuisance trapper, we recommend that you find someone who will give you a written guarantee that he will (1) use nonlethal methods only, (2) release the animals together (so juveniles aren't separated from their mothers) and release them on-site (relocated animals have low survival rates when released in unfamiliar areas), and (3) do the necessary exclusion and repair work to prevent wild animals from entering your home. Ask the right questions so you don't pay hundreds of dollars for an inhumane "solution."

A NOTE ABOUT FLYING SQUIRRELS

Flying squirrels are small squirrels (approximately 9 inches from nose to tail tip) that people rarely get the chance to see. They have bulgy, shiny black eyes, a flat tail, and a loose skin flap that extends from the foreleg to the hind leg. This flap allows the squirrels to glide through the air, or "fly." Flying squirrels most often nest in abandoned woodpecker holes or natural tree cavities, in birdhouses, and sometimes even in attics.

Unlike gray squirrels, flying squirrels are nocturnal and highly sociable animals. Therefore, if you are hearing squirrel activity in your attic at night, you may have flying squirrels—and you may have a colony! The methods for evicting flying squirrels are similar to the ones used for gray squirrels. If you absolutely *must* evict the squirrels before the young are old enough to leave on their own, simply place rags sprinkled with ammonia, along with a blaring radio tuned to a rap or rock station, in the attic. This will turn the squirrels' safe and quiet environment into one that is smelly and frightening.

Since flying squirrels are active at night, it is difficult to determine when the young are old enough to start following their mother on nightly outings. For this reason, one-way doors (available from Tomahawk Live Trap, 800-272-8727, or ACES, 800-338-ACES) should be a last resort and used only during midsummer or late fall, and avoided at all other times.

Live traps should also be avoided, as flying squirrels tend to become highly stressed and have a high mortality rate when trapped. Many state fish and game agencies actually require that you get a special permit and approval to trap flying squirrels. Under no circumstances should glue traps be used to capture any wild animal, including flying squirrels. They are inefficient and extremely inhumane.

Written by Becca deWeerd
Urban Wildlife Program

The Fund for Animals • 200 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019 • (888) 405-FUND • FAX: (212) 246-2633 • www.fund.org