



Nutty or Wise?

The Eastern gray squirrel is adept at hide-and-seek, especially where it involves a winter stash of nuts.

Eastern gray squirrels evoke one of the most mixed reactions of any mammal. Their acrobatics and antics have amused people for centuries. Their propensity to gnaw on bird feeders and houses conversely maddens many a property owner. Birders don't care

for their nest raiding skills, which include eating adult birds, eggs, and young. They will even eat each other, although most of their diet is forest mast— fruits of trees, especially buds, seeds, acorns, hickory and walnuts.

Squirrels are one of the species that habituates possibly too well to people. Years ago, out of frustration with one particular squirrel I hurled a yellow apple to chase it away from a bird feeder it was destroying. The squirrel leaped about three feet in the air, flipped around, grabbed the large apple, and ran away with it in its mouth, resembling a circus seal with a beach ball.

I suspect this wasn't his first thwarting rodeo. These rodents can leap nearly six feet high, straight up. And they can jump eight feet horizontally and 11 feet branch to branch. Their tails provide balance as they execute some impressive acrobatics; this often allows them to survive major falls since it serves as both a parachute and a cushion. And when squirrels bed down for the

night, this fluffy anatomical extension serves as a blanket. Their tails also allow them to communicate silently with others of their species. A number of researchers claim that three flicks is an SOS. I have also heard them imitate the call of a red tailed hawk to ward off intruders.

In the 1840–60s, it was fashionable to provide nesting boxes in urban areas. In fact NYC's Central Park was deliberately populated in 1877 in order to "increase enjoyment of parks," (Etienne Benson, Oxford U Press Urbanization of Eastern Gray Squirrels, US). A visitor seated on a bench and sharing a stash of peanuts with a squirrel is iconic city imagery. Squirrels are now so prolific in parks that some locales are even holding comprehensive censuses (Central Park, New York Times, October 2018).

If you have observed squirrels for any length of time, you are likely to have taken note that they seem plotting, contemplative, and intelligent. Years ago, I watched a

squirrel go through many gyrations to fool another squirrel about the placement of a food cache. Scientists at Wilkes U, PA, call this strategy “deceptive caching.” These creatures often pretend to bury mast and then hide it in their jowls to place it elsewhere. In the fall, they are hoarders for the long winter, using not just any location but making categorized stashes that biologists call “spatial chunking.” This helps them remember where they have particular food sources hidden—hickories here, acorns over there, peanuts yonder. You might not view this as a memory or mnemonic technique unless I suggest that you probably use it all the time yourself. If you’re looking for soup, or cereal, or baking supplies, you surely have places in your cupboard for each. So when you need a spice you doubtless go to the section where you keep your spices and not to the cracker shelf.

Squirrels are also our foresters. All this stashing works out for them as things often work out for me. In a hurry, I accidentally shove

a nut jar in with the soup, never to be found again. Thus, the errant acorn becomes an oak. Conversely, my nut jar becomes simply lost, showing that the squirrel's mislaid treasure at least serves the greater good; in fact it feeds future squirrels. They also prune trees, dropping small leafy branch ends to the ground. Then they gather up the tiny limbs and cart huge mouthfuls back up into a nesting site. Here, they raise families in the spring and sleep in the winter. They will also utilize tree cavities for shelter. In winter, they often band together in groups for warmth. While they do not hibernate, they do a lot of sleeping in cold weather.

Squirrels are not only predator but also prey, and they have adapted an interesting escape tactic of scurrying to and fro. This is often effective in foiling aerial hunters, but with autos it usually ends as roadkill. In Longview, WA, in the early 1960s, an office worker was tired of seeing flattened squirrels from his office window (likely Western gray squirrel, since our own species

goes about as far west as the eastern part of Texas and upward into Canada, east to Maine and south to Florida). He decided to fashion a suspended safety bridge out of a length of retired fire hose. The town now capitalizes on its squirrel bridges, dubbing one the Nutty Narrows Bridge. It has become a bit of a tourist attraction (I know, only in America!). Those folks refer to themselves as "Nutty" and have an annual Squirrel Festival. So whether you are nuts for squirrels or they drive you nuts, they are clearly more interesting than first meets the eye.