

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Illustration by Chris Hill

Squirrels: Humanely Bid These Foragers Farewell

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

While many enjoy watching squirrels in their own backyards, these intriguing and acrobatic animals may also cause frustration if they enter and nest in human homes. Here is some information about these creatures and how they can be managed humanely and effectively.

General Information

Squirrels are an abundant species worldwide. North America is home to a wide variety of tree squirrels and an even larger number of ground squirrels. The fox squirrel and eastern and western gray squirrels are the species most commonly involved in conflicts with humans. Highly adaptable creatures, squirrels have adjusted well to the urban and suburban landscape.

Squirrels primarily consume plant matter, and their diet varies with the seasons. They typically eat and store acorns and other nuts underground, which provide them food for the winter. Spring flowers and growing buds are also eaten as the weather warms. In the summer squirrels often eat fruits and berries.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

While many enjoy watching squirrels

in their own backyards, these intriguing and acrobatic animals may also cause frustration if they enter and nest in human homes. Squirrels naturally den and raise young in tree cavities and leaf nests, using trees for food and protection from predators and the elements. But attics, chimneys, and small openings in buildings are also very appealing to them. They often enter chimneys or attics through unscreened vents or openings left by loose or rotten boards and can sometimes cause damage by build-

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ing nests in walls and floorboards. Eastern gray and fox squirrels have two litters each year, the first between February and April and the second between August and September. Squirrel activity is high during mating and after young squirrels are driven out of their mother's nest to disperse into new territory.

Digging in lawns, eating ornamental plants and bulbs, and stealing food from bird feeders are also common behaviors of squirrels. During the winter months, it is important to remember that these animals are only doing what is natural to them

in their quest to find food during an often limited and sparse time of the year. Tolerance is especially important, if at all possible, during this time of year. Bulbs can be protected by soaking them in certain repellents before planting or by planting them below 1x1-inch wire or plastic screening. Spraying repellents on ornamental plants can help deter inquisitive squirrels. Wrapping ripening fruit trees with netting and using various squirrel-proof bird feeders can also keep them away. Most bird supply centers sell these types of feeders. For a list of repellents that can be used to deter squirrels, please contact the Living With Wildlife program office.

If a squirrel becomes an unwanted tenant in your home or building, take care when attempting to banish the animal. In most cases squirrels are easier to deal with because, unlike other wild animals, they are active during daylight hours—in the early morning and then later in the afternoon. First, in order to ensure that babies are not orphaned, it is critical to check that young are not present. Locate the nest and listen for noises that will indicate the presence of young, such as squeaking and rustling. If young are present, please tolerate them until they are old enough to accompany the adults out of the building. If young are not present, install a one-way door or watch for when the animals have left the

building to seek food, then seal up the entry holes with quarter- or half-inch mesh hardware cloth while they are away. Though often exasperating, it is very important to locate the areas where the squirrels are gaining access, and permanently seal up those entryways. If the animal is removed without this necessary follow-up, another animal will most likely move in and take advantage of the available good habitat.

Trimming back any long tree branches close to rooftops, installing a chimney cap, using squirrel-proof bird feeders, and keeping your home in good repair are also good preventative measures.

Public-Health Concerns

Squirrels are carriers of disease organisms that can affect humans,

THE LIVING WITH WILDLIFE MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term, and cost-effective manner.

but are rarely documented as causing human illness. Rather, squirrels are often regarded as a beneficial indicator of environmental quality. As in all mammals, rabies can occur in squirrels, but squirrel transmission of the disease to humans is not documented.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's

Living With Wildlife program, visit www.livingwithwildlife.org, call (617) 522-7400, or e-mail lww@mspca.org.