

Squirrel Sense

Submitted by the Natural Resources Commission

Whether they are raiding your bird feeder, transplanting tulip bulbs, making themselves at home in your attic, or delighting you with their antics, gray squirrels are one of the main attractions of backyard gardens. They are the second most watched wildlife in North America (after birds), and there's no denying their appeal with their long, fluffy tail, soft brown eyes, and amazing acrobatic skills.

As their name implies, gray squirrels have predominately gray fur on the top of their bodies and lighter fur on their bellies. Their most distinctive physical characteristic is their bushy tail, which is a handy tool that can be used for balance, a sun shade, an umbrella, a blanket, a rudder when swimming, and a signaling device to alert other squirrels of potential danger. They have four front teeth that, like other rodents, are ever-growing, and are worn down by constantly gnawing on wood and other materials in their environment.

Believe it or not, the numerous black squirrels that you see running around North Oaks are actually gray squirrels that are "melanistic variants," just as albino squirrels are "albanistic variants." Other species of squirrels in our community include the small and noisy red squirrel, flying squirrels, and (rarely) fox squirrels.

Gray squirrels make a variety of sounds including a harsh chirping or chattering noise when they are angry or scared. They mate twice per year and nest in tree hollows or in a leafy tree-top nest. Each litter consists of 2 to 4 babies, which are born hairless and are completely independent by the time they are 12 weeks old. Squirrels are omnivores and frequently dine on acorns, seeds, tree buds, fruits, and plant fungi. They will also feed on insects and other animal matter such as bird eggs. A gray squirrel can hide 25 nuts in a half an hour and can later find roughly 80 percent of those it buried. Predators include house cats, hawks, coyotes, foxes, and weasels.

Observing and enjoying squirrels helps us maintain our connection with nature. However, sometimes squirrels may wear out their welcome. Squirrels rarely, if ever, damage plants, so if you suspect that a squirrel has been sampling your tomatoes, it's best to make sure that a squirrel is in fact the culprit before you attempt to remedy the situation. Because squirrels are diurnal (active during the day), it is usually pretty easy to see for yourself if squirrels are responsible for damage to plants and vegetables. If you know the damage occurs at night, you can rule squirrels out entirely and should focus your efforts on nocturnal animals, such as raccoons and opossums. Preventing problems with squirrels (and other wildlife) is much simpler and less aggravating than dealing with the problems after they occur. Taking a few simple steps can help you prevent many of the most common squirrel-related problems around your home.

Squirrels and buildings: Squirrels can be excluded from buildings by securely fastening hardware cloth over attic vents, which are a common entry point into buildings. Also seal openings at joints of siding and overhanging eaves. In addition, seal openings where utility cables or pipes enter buildings. Install chimney caps on all chimneys and check for gaps in the flashing at the chimney base. Please note: when securing your home, be sure to NOT trap squirrels inside!

Squirrels and trees: To prevent squirrels from climbing up trees to gain access to buildings, taking fruit or nuts, or stripping bark from a tree, fasten a 2-foot band of sheet metal around the trunk 6 to 8 feet above ground.

Squirrels and bird feeders: Squirrels can be prevented from raiding bird feeders by placing feeders on top of poles and mounting a baffle around the support structure at a height of 6 feet or greater. Another option is to suspend a feeder from a cable or rope running over pulleys between two buildings or between a building and a pole. Placing a baffle on top of the feeder will prevent persistent squirrels from accessing the feeder from the suspended line.

Squirrels and flower bulbs: Newly planted bulbs can be protected with 1-inch-mesh poultry wire. Dig a trench slightly deeper than the desired depth of planting and fit the poultry wire in the bottom. Add dirt and plant the bulbs. Place another strip of poultry wire over the plantings so that the bulbs are completely encased, and finish covering with dirt.

In North Oaks, we certainly coexist with a variety of wildlife species. In spite of the problems they can produce, gray squirrels play an important ecological role in forest regeneration. The tree seeds and nuts that are buried and forgotten later sprout and grow into trees. Squirrels are also an important part of the food web. For you iPhone and iPad users, you may enjoy playing the game "Squirrel vs. Bird Feeder," produced by the National Wildlife Federation and available from the App Store.