An Ode to the Eastern Grey Squirrel (Thanksgiving Edition)

By Sue Sweeney 20 Comments

Eastern gray squirrel having her own picnic at Scalzi Park in Stamford CT

Stamford CT

While our street-wise eastern gray squirrels probably still dream of the ocean-like expanses of unbroken forest where they once lived, gray squirrels are thriving in the sub/urban environment, where many other native species fail. How do they do it?

SKILL SET: For starters, squirrels have impressive physical abilities. Squirrels are, admittedly, rodents but they are most closely related to prairie dogs, woodchucks, and beavers -not mice and rats, or even porcupines, for that matter. Like most rodents, squirrels have clever hands; keen eyes, ears and noses; ever-growing, sharp teeth; and alert, inquisitive intellects (albeit encased in walnut-sized brains).

An eastern gray squirrel's tail is a major asset.

What distinguishes squirrels from other rodents is the long, bushy tail which serves as an eloquent communications device, a balancing pole for high-wire work, and a portable parachute, blanket, and umbrella. Should a squirrel be required to swim, as in the storied 1933 mitigation of a thousand gray squirrels across the Connecticut River, the squirrel's all-purpose tail is also useful as a rudder. (Before you ask, no one knows why the squirrels swam the river; the going theory is food shortage.)

Flying squirrels, red squirrels, and chipmunks, despite most of the same abilities, are much more rare in the urban environment; so what makes gray squirrels special? Part of the secret is the gray squirrel's ability to make good use of both the ground and the tree canopy. However, watch a gray squirrel flatten itself against a tree and cautiously edge out of sight, but a minute later, there's a little gray face peering down to see if you're gone yet; you'll know that there's something more at work here.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Gray squirrel success is partially attributable to sharing territory in loosely-associated colonies. Colony members band together to drive off new squirrels, if there isn't enough food for all. Gray squirrels will also drive off other species that are perceived as food competitors. This territoriality helps regulate squirrel population density.

young squirrels in a human playground

In addition to protecting the food supply, colony living gives each member the benefit of the whole group's knowledge and experience. Squirrels do learn by observing other squirrels. Thus, as soon as one squirrel figures out that those lumpy, tan things next to the bird feeder are good to eat, the whole colony is munching peanuts.

Colony members also share defense. Squirrels communicate via sounds and posturing, including dramatic tail waving. There is a special warning call for serious predators like the red-tailed hawk. The squirrel talk that you're most likely to hear is a "chit-chit-chit-chit", accompanied by an erect, twitching tail, which translates roughly into "go away, now!". The squirrel's remarks may be addressed to another squirrel, a neighborhood cat or you, if you're interfering with forging or too close to a nest.

Living in a gray squirrel colony, though, is not all sweetness and light. Experts say that colony members have an alpha-beta hierarchy, and that the cause of inter-squirrel friction, predictably, tends to be food, mates, and territory. Further, sharing only goes so far; gray squirrels have been observed faking where they bury food in order to hide it from each other.

Grey squirrel inspects a hickory nut to assure it's worth keeping.

SCATTER-HOARDING: Gray squirrels certainly do get a boost by being able to rely on communal food stores. Gray squirrels are "scatter hoarders" in that they do hoard, but don't create central caches. Gray squirrels, instead, spread their stores over their whole territory, minimizing the risk of loss of a significant part of the year's harvest.

Gray squirrels remember the general area where they buried things but find the exact spot with their super-noses, even through several inches of snow. Since there are only so many places to bury stuff in the sub/urban environment (e.g. my friend's window box), a canny squirrel can usually find something that she or someone else stashed.

The forgotten "left-overs", of course, are tomorrow's oaks, hickories, pines, dogwoods, and crabapples. All that scattering and burying make the gray squirrel an important seed-disperser for nuts and other large seeds. It seems that oaks need squirrels as much as squirrels need oaks.

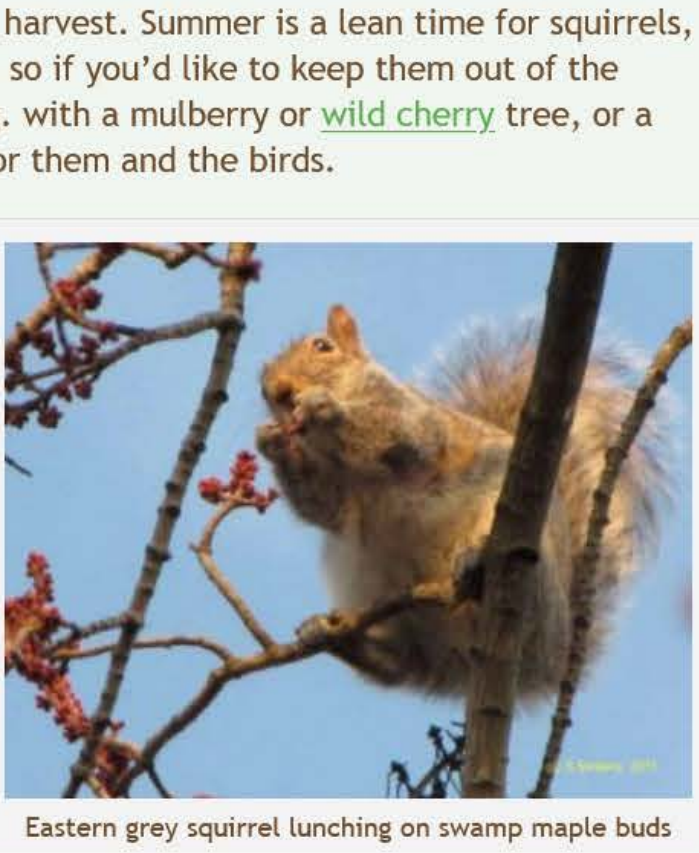
FLEXIBLE DIET: Gray squirrels greatly benefit from food adaptability. Gray squirrels can be characterized as "food-turnal" in that they'll adjust their schedules to the food supply. Given a choice, though, gray squirrels prefer to forge early morning and late afternoon, thus avoiding mid-day summer heat (they are wearing fur coats!) and night-time predators. During the frenzy of fall acorn-gathering, when the hawk isn't around, you can often glimpse an exhausted squirrel sprawled on a sunny branch catching a well-deserved mid-day nap.

Squirrel enjoying ash tree sap

Gray squirrels recognize a wide range of foods and readily accept new foods. Young squirrels learn what is good to eat and how to store food by experimenting and by watching their parents and other squirrels.

In spring, gray squirrels live on tree buds, roots, flowers and stores. If stores run out, early spring can be a hungry time. Red squirrels are said to be adept at tapping sugar maples for the high-carb spring sap. There are mixed reports on whether gray squirrels have widely perfected this art but my local gray squirrels appear quite good at it.

As the year progresses, there are fruits, seeds, roots, and mushrooms to help the tide the squirrels over until the nut harvest. Summer is a lean time for squirrels, though, so if you'd like to keep them out of the garden, it's good to supplement their food (e.g. with a mulberry or wild cherry tree, or a squirrel feeder). Don't forget a water source for them and the birds.


Eastern grey squirrel lunching on swamp maple buds

Squirrels are mostly vegans, but young squirrels, in need of protein and calcium, also eat insects, bird eggs, and small critters. City squirrels will eat a good part of whatever ends up in the trash.

Even urban gray squirrels are dependent on acorns and other nuts that will last all winter. Squirrel populations, therefore, absent bird feeders, rise and fall with the nut harvest which varies widely from year to year.

Because squirrels fixate on one or two available foods at a time, it is much harder to get a squirrel to stop eating bird food than to keep it away from him entirely. Thus, it is best to start with a reasonably squirrel-proof bird feeder and take more action at the first sign of squirrel interest.

Not a good place for a squirrel nest!

EFFICIENT NEST BUILDING: In a few hours, a gray squirrel can craft a serviceable summer nest that will last a year or more. Gray squirrels construct leafy nests out of freshly-cut twigs with the green leaves attached. The leaves curl as they dry, creating a snug, water-resistant nest. There are usually plenty of summer nesting sites since leafy nests can be built in most trees over 12 feet tall. Adaptable as they are, squirrels will also use man-made articles for nest building- I've seen plastic bags, newspaper, duct tape, mattress-stuffing, and even a man's shirt.

This squirrel nest looks like it's mostly made of mattress stuffing - certainly warm enough for winter use.

Gray squirrels construct at least one substantial summer home but may also make some slap-dash temporary ones, for example, near a seasonal food source. In addition, gray squirrels have learned the wisdom of maintaining back-up shelters so they won't get caught out in potentially-fatal cold or wet if the primary nest is destroyed or invaded. Some experts estimate the gray squirrel population at 1.5 leafy nests per squirrel.

Winter housing is a problem for urban squirrels and, thus, another check on population density. A gray squirrel needs least one safe, water-proof, wind-resistant winter home. The traditional dwelling is a tree hollow at least 12 inches deep and 6 inches wide, with a 3-inch wide door. The best winter nesting trees are dead or half-dead standing trees, called "snags", which are a natural part of the forest. However, in the 'burbs, snags are often removed as unsightly or dangerous.

If tree hollows are lacking, squirrels have to find other winter accommodations or move on, a risky undertaking, and the cause of many late-season squirrel deaths. The next best choice, from the squirrel's perspective, is a human structure. A squirrel nesting box, placed away from the house, is a fine way to share but the attic is not. When a wild animal gets in the house, the encounter seldom ends well for the animal, and can be upsetting and costly for the human. It is best to keep our furry friends out of places where they don't belong by capping chimneys, screening windows, keeping garage doors closed, and annually inspecting building exteriors for gaps to seal.

Sidewalk watchers do see gray squirrels frequenting their leafy homes in winter. It is not known whether these squirrels are using the summer homes for food storage, day-time naps or over-wintering due to a shortage of proper winter quarters.

Teenage black-phase eastern grey squirrel wrestling with its gray-phase sibling

GROWING UP FAST: Surveys show that, in the 'burbs, 75% of gray squirrels die their first year. Those that survive the first year to become parents are the smartest, fastest, and luckiest.

Historically, gray squirrels had two litters a year; however, with warming temperatures, a third litter is possible. The cold-season babies are conceived in January or February, born nearly hairless and blind 44 days later, nurse for about 6 weeks, and leave the nest as teenagers by May. They are not fully grown until the fall, when they turn 9 months old. Gray squirrels can conceive as early as the following January. While gray squirrels in captivity can live up to 20 years; in the wild, a gray squirrel is considered "old" at 6 years.

After the teenagers leave the nest, they have to find unoccupied locations to construct their summer and winter shelters; gather food, and be safe from predators. It is critical that the young squirrels quickly learn their territory so that they don't use too much energy finding food, and so that they know the local dangers and the means to avoid them. A single mistake during the learning process can result in the young one ending up as hawk lunch or road kill.

Eastern grey squirrel

PLAYFULNESS: The above observable, measurable qualities explain how gray squirrels survive in the urban environment. What these traits don't explain is why gray squirrels tease dogs, bat tulip flowers back and forth, and perform death-defying feats to break into a bird feeder when there's other food available. Nor do these measurable things explain why we so enjoy watching them do it. It's a quality of the spirit, I think. Gray squirrels are definitely industrious, inquisitive, inventive, and stubborn, but there seems to be joyfulness, too. Could it be that the gray squirrels' true secret is their playfulness or even a sense of humor?

Do you have a favorite gray squirrel story to share? What's your take on our furry friends? **Please click to leave a comment and join the discussion. We can't wait to hear from you.**

PS: Squirrel National Appreciation Day is Jan 21.

Male squirrel, on the left, having just won the right-to-mate challenge race

Squirrels scavenging in an alley

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Filed Under: Mammals Tagged With: eastern grey squirrel, gray squirrel community, gray squirrel habitat, squirrel diet, squirrels and bird feeders, urban squirrels, urban wildlife, Wildlife, wildlife habitat garden

About Sue Sweeney
Master Gardner Sue Sweeney, a life-long naturalist and gardener, specializes in non-chemical, minimally-disturbing conservation area restoration. She is a freelance nature photographer, and author of numerous articles on urban flora and fauna, chemical-free gardening, and similar subjects. A passionate environmentalist, Sue lives in a downtown high-rise, and does not own a car. Her indoor and balcony container garden has shrunk over the years, from a high point of around 500 plants, as her responsibility for Stamford-area conservation work has grown. Currently, she is Volunteer Head Steward of the Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve near the heart of downtown Stamford CT and teaches conservation restoration to Master Gardeners Interns and other interested parties. See Restoring Native Connecticut for more information.

Comments

Loret says:
November 25, 2011 at 9:45 am

Sue, they are lucky to have you as a spokeswoman. I am ever so happy that my trees are far enough apart that I don't have to deal with the little devils! (I'll refrain from calling them furry rats in deference to your tribute 😉) I guess their invading my NY home, breaking the bird feeders I maintained in NY and inciting my irish setter to the point of a tree climbing tizzy doesn't endear them to me.

On the other hand, I must admit that seeing 6 or seven together in a tree playing and doing acrobats is a wonderful nature encounter.

Great article!

Loret recently posted..Pond Prank

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
November 25, 2011 at 10:01 am

invading my home, breaking the bird feeders.. and inciting my irish setter to the point of a tree climbing tizzy….. yep, that's our guys! I'd say your ID of the animal involved as the grey squirrel is correct. LOL

REPLY

Arnold says:
November 25, 2011 at 9:46 am

Very enjoyable article. I agree that squirrels must have a sense of humor. We have watched them for years in our trees and gardens and much of what they do could only be explained by a sense of humor.

REPLY

Carol Duke says:
November 25, 2011 at 12:38 pm

Quite an amazing tribute to our grey squirrels Sue! Brava! Though they drive me mad at times, I do enjoy their animated tail language. I knew of someone who wrote a dissertation on that very fluffy subject. Who would think?! They were not given such luxuriant bushiness to merely add to their rodent beauty.

Carol Duke recently posted..Gathering Wildflowers Fields and Meadows Gone To Sleepy Seed

REPLY

Jean Warren says:
November 25, 2011 at 9:20 pm

I think I can speak for many, if not most, in the State of Washington that the Eastern Grey Squirrels are, though cute, are a scourge in our area. We have (or had) populations of Western Grey Squirrels which have been pretty much extirpated west of the Cascade mountains due to the invasion of the Eastern Grey Squirrels. Our native squirrel population persists in some areas which includes, in Washington, Joint Base Lewis-McChord and the San Juan Islands and perhaps a few others. Most of us squirrel fans would rather we didn't have these creatures here. I can speak from personal experience about how they are very hard, sometimes impossible to keep from taking over the bird feeders, whether they have anti-squirrel features or not. I do feel sorry for them, but the birds come first with me.

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
November 26, 2011 at 7:26 am

Eastern gray squirrels are West Coast invasive and invasive in England. Please stop moving wildlife around, people!

Many, many people on the East Coast successfully feed birds. Generally, you have to bribe the squirrels by feeding them too. Feed the squirrels separately from the birds and give them larger stuff like peanuts in the shell and dried corn. Also, as mentioned, it's very important to keep the squirrels out of the bird food from the start.

REPLY

Donna says:
November 26, 2011 at 9:29 am

Sue these little devils rode reign over my garden in my old house where there were lots of close knit black walnuts and silver maples..they destroyed my garden, bird feeders etc…they were amusing to watch but there were too many without predators…now we see a few squirrels at the new house where it is more open and there are predators..today we saw our first black squirrel..I think he is looking for a nesting place…I live in harmony now with the squirrels…your post describes them well..I can attest to their intellect and ability to fly…

Donna recently posted..Health

REPLY

Carole Sevilla Brown says:
November 26, 2011 at 12:30 pm

There is an abandoned house next to ours which now has a family of squirrels in addition to a family of raccoons, a family of opossums, and a pair of Eastern Screech Owls living in it. The squirrels are so funny to watch because the entrance they have chosen is underneath a ledge so they have to really contort themselves to get inside. They have provided endless amusement to me, especially on days when I'm feeling sad.

Carole Sevilla Brown recently posted..Wildlife Garden Thanksgiving

REPLY

Debbie Roberts says:
November 27, 2011 at 8:35 am

Sue, I have to admit I'm not a huge fan of squirrels…most people who visit my garden comment on the high # of squirrels and chipmunks running around within the few minutes of being here…but your post have given me a new appreciation for them. Like others have mentioned, I'd prefer to feed the birds rather than the squirrels, even though it's usually a losing battle.

Debbie Roberts recently posted..Wordless Wednesday – Nature's Bounty

REPLY

Ellen Sousa says:
November 30, 2011 at 9:18 am

Sue - thanks for all this interesting info! I had not heard about the great "migration" across the CT River but it does not surprise me that they would find the ability to swim so far when necessary. Their intelligence makes them kind of a super-race among New England mammals…wolves and the "big cats" couldn't survive the early European settlers but squirrels will probably out-survive our species too 😀

Ellen Sousa recently posted..The Year I Shall Win the Pachysandra War

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
November 30, 2011 at 9:31 am

Ellen - I like the image of "Super-Squirrel"! I can see one now, up there on the high wires, wearing its little cape, about to throw itself on a transformer and shut down MetroNorth railroad (which happens only too frequently from the commuters' point of view).

However, I can't help thinking about how this also makes them so invasive in their non-native territory - sort of the house sparrow of the squirrel world. Another reason to ban sale of exotic species as pets.

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
November 30, 2011 at 12:42 pm

OMG it's s true - totally unrelated to this article, a picture of the eastern gray squirrel changing into its super hero costume just change across my FB feed.

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150351829478983&set=o.77233058793&type=1&theater

REPLY

Ruth says:
December 8, 2011 at 7:42 am

Sue,

Great biography of gray squirrels! Here in W. MA we are seeing more red sqirrels for about the last decade. Their natural range used to more northerly. They seem to displace the gray squirrels…they are adorable but testy and fierce little creatures, who don't play well with others. But what's really interesting to me is their impact on forest regeneration.

Unlike gray squirrels, red squirrels stash nuts above ground, such as in tree crotches. So their unretrieved nuts sprout in inappropriate places. I'm rooting for gray squirrels to continue living successfully in our woodlands, and I'm willing to put up with the bird-feeder frustrations (black bears are worse…).

REPLY

Beatriz Moisset says:
December 14, 2011 at 1:26 pm

And, let us not forget that squirrels, as well as many of their relatives, ensure the reproduction and dispersal of mycorrhizae by eating mushrooms and passing their spores through the digestive system (Squirrels, trees and mycorrhizae).
This is a very important function.

Beatriz Moisset recently posted..Black-and-yellow lichen moth, a little known pollinator

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
December 14, 2011 at 1:36 pm

Beatriz - while I knew squirrels in my local woods favor the toadstools, I haven't thought about the squirrels' role in spread our wonderful wood fungi around. Thanks. Here are pictures of my local woodland fungi (plus ferns, moss and frogs)
http://www.stamfordplus.com/eventpicsn/index.php/MillRiver/north/fungi

REPLY

Gil X. Fox says:
December 31, 2011 at 1:13 pm

Oh Happy New Year's Eve.!!
That WAS a fun post on the squirrel too..
I have always been quite "sensative" to plants and animals..
..and have engaged in full, sign-language "conversations" with squirrels since childhood.
..I often carry nuts and berries around for my own consumption..and they come in handy to treat all my little friends.
It's fun to get "shouted at" by a woodland neighbor..who will run towards me, and do the "one fist to chest" sign.."seated scratching ear" sign..or full-on "sitting erect with both fists on chest"..
My apt. windows are at ground level..and I often have "Gil's Take Out Window"..
Wise looking Mom's with ten nipples, and virile, downy teenagers knock on the glass, or chit-chit thru the screen for an order of raw walnuts or almonds.
The cats love the show..as the visitor eats their fill..and caches the rest of the booty in a widdening radius within the grounds..

REPLY

Sue Sweeney says:
December 31, 2011 at 1:40 pm

Gil - thanks for the comment. Do you have a read on what those different squirrel hand/posture signs mean?

REPLY

Barbara S-P says:
January 1, 2012 at 12:53 am

Finally found your "Ode to the Eastern Grey Squirrel" and ate it up. I love these smart, agile, imaginative, cute kids. They seem to me smarter than many humans and seem to enjoy making me laugh with their antics. Maybe they like me for the absence of any chemicals in my gardens and the abundance of acorns from my big old oaks.

REPLY

Trackbacks

Woodcocks in the Wildlife Garden says:
December 13, 2011 at 10:41 pm

[…] and they stay hidden during the day unless you flush them out of hiding. Last year, we saw a group of squirrels flush one out of […]

REPLY

Flowering Dogwood – An Underappreciated Beauty says:
April 20, 2012 at 6:34 am

[…] clusters of shiny red fruit are a favorite of many songbirds and small mammals like chipmunks, eastern grey squirrels and even foxes and skunks. Butterflies are often seen nectaring on flowers and the new leaves are a […]

REPLY

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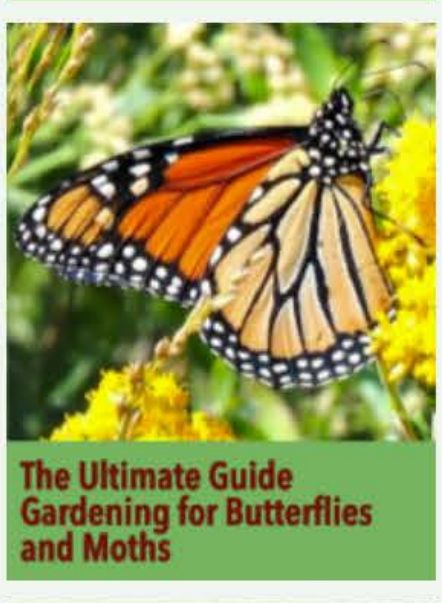

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