

In Appreciation of The Squirrel.

Feeding birds through the winter is one way to keep the view from the living room window interesting and full of life during a time when much of the outdoors is dormant and very limited in anything colourful. Many people enjoy keeping feeders stocked and seeing what birds come by to supplement their winter diet on their handouts. Of course the birds are not the only feeding visitors. Perhaps one of the most common guests to this dining area is the sometimes unwelcomed squirrel; either the American Red or Eastern Grey squirrel. But, instead of battling to out-manuever these little creatures we have learned to live with them, accepting that they too are creatures of the wild, and although, like the birds, likely to be able to survive on their own, we appreciate their contribution to the winterscape outside our window. We just put more food out in more locations.



Grey Squirrel



Red Squirrel

It has only been in relatively recently that the Gray Squirrel has been part of the urban scene in the Miramichi region although they have existed in most of southern New Brunswick for many years. This seems to be the northern most limit to their range as a species. They co-exist with the Red Squirrel in our garden out-number them. The Red Squirrel has a more limited individual range and perhaps finds our garden habitat less attractive.

However, It has always seemed a little strange to me that although the Grey Squirrel is very common in our residential areas, in the many hours I have spent in the “urban forests” of Miramichi, it is the Red Squirrel that is so common, the Grey Squirrel is rarely seen. It might be that there are fewer predators in the city although, dogs, cats, raccoons and even Red Squirrels which can predate on young Greys are serious urban threats.

Apart from the greediness at birdfeeders and the sometimes home invasions, the Grey Squirrel is harmless, usually nesting in trees, either constructing one of vegetative material or living in tree cavities. They have a preference for hardwood but do nest in pine trees. In warmer climates they can have 2 litters annually and live for about six years. A litter can be expected in April, the second in July. As primarily herbivores they eat nuts and small fruit, but occasionally they will eat birds eggs or hatchlings. They are thought to be beneficial to re-forestation as many of the nuts such as acorns, and maple seeds, they store for later consumption are unclaimed and left to germinate. They are somewhat gregarious in that they are often in the company of fellow Grey Squirrels.



Grey Squirrel Nest (or Drey)
in Hardwood Tree

Although their habitat preference is slightly different, Reds preferring coniferous woods and Greys preferring hardwood, they do share the same territory very often as in our garden. It is the smaller solitary Red which is noisy, excitable and aggressive. It is more of an omnivore and can eat the eggs of birds, even young birds and baby Grey Squirrels. It is also known to scavenge on animal remains or even chew the wrapper from an ice cream treat. It also can chew off the growing tip of a branch shoot to enjoy tree sap. Its nervous fidgety behaviour and propensity for public dining on a stump or fallen log make it very entertaining when spotted when we walk through the woods.

Squirrels adapt to winter well, as evidenced by their scavenging behavior at bird feeders. They can burrow in the snow to recover cached food supplies and protection from predators and the cold.



A third squirrel in the local area is the Flying Squirrel. It is not seen as commonly as its cousins mentioned above because it is nocturnal and prefers large trees and old growth forest. It is more common in the Fundy region of southern New Brunswick. One of their main food source is underground mushrooms, although it too may not pass up an opportunity to visit a birdfeeder to enjoy black oil sunflower seeds. Its reputation for “flying” is a result of skin flaps between its fore and hind legs that allow it to leap from high on a tree and glide to another. This is its main means of getting around. Logging operations can severely impede its movement and hence its survival as a species.

Flying Squirrel Next to a Birdfeeder