

The Outside Story



Squirrel is My Co-Pilot

By: Elise Tillinghast

The first red squirrel appeared at about 50 mph. It climbed up over my headrest and landed in my lap. I don't recall the next few seconds very clearly, but according to my 5-year-old daughter Lucy, I yelled something along the lines of, "oo squirrel. oo oo. squirrel squirrel."

What I do remember is concentrating on finding a safe place to pull over, and my surprise that the squirrel remained in my lap for the duration. It had a warm, soft weight. Puppy-like. I brought the car to a stop by some woods and pushed the button to the passenger side window. The squirrel came out of stasis, ricocheted off the steering wheel, and launched itself into the bushes.

And that, I thought, was the end of the anecdote. No harm done, and a cautionary tale about why it's unwise to leave the sun roof open in squirrel country.

Alas, the sun roof was not the problem. Squirrels are still getting in my car, and I don't know how. What I assumed was a one time occurrence, I now see as an opening volley. This is war, and the stakes are existential: is my car a car, or am I driving a midden?

When I turn the ignition key, I brace for rodent alarm calls. Last week, I found a hemlock cone wedged between the console and my seat. Lucy has regaled her friends, and their parents, and random people we encounter in awkward retail settings, about her mother's wonderful, magical squirrel-inhabited car and the happy day when a cute little fuzzy friend perched on her head.

There is scat. It almost always appears on the dashboard, just above the radio where I'm sure to see it. And no, I don't think this placement is a coincidence.

There are photos. My husband set up a game camera in the back seat and acquired a number of action shots and contemplative poses. He attached a "best of" selection to an email, along with a carefully worded suggestion that perhaps it was time to reduce foraging opportunities.

I vacuumed out the car, and devoted a couple hours to shampooing the interior. This made no difference.

I showed one of the car-cam photos to Steve Parren, Wildlife Diversity Program Manager at Vermont Fish & Wildlife. In his professional opinion, the squirrel "looked quite content."

Parren provided some background on red squirrel population dynamics and feeding

behavior: as with many rodents, numbers rise and fall based on how much mast is available. Red squirrels are especially dependent on pines and other conifers for winter food, so in a year after a big cone crop, their population booms. They typically have two litters in a summer, which is just as well for the species; there's a long list of creatures that eat them, from weasels to birds of prey.

And likewise, during the warm months, they take an anything-goes approach to where they get their calories. Fruit and fungi are common foods – they'll sometimes cache these in a notch of a tree to dry and store for future consumption. Insects, eggs, and baby birds are also on the menu.

They may even consume adult birds. Parren described the case of a horrified bird watcher who witnessed a red squirrel snatch a chickadee right off the feeder. In general, he said, people are taken aback by carnivorous squirrels, which he described as “cute little creatures with a dark side.”

I also spoke with Steve Faccio, Conservation Biologist at the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, and asked how squirrel populations may affect bird nesting success. Faccio said that at high elevations, there's a distinct pattern between balsam fir cone production and red squirrel nest predation. Balsam firs – the dominant conifer up on our mountains – typically produce cones in synchronized biannual cycles. In the winter of a cone production year, squirrels thrive on well-stocked middens, and are present in high numbers the next spring. Faccio described videotapes of red squirrels sitting in nests, cracking open

one egg after the other and lapping up their contents. (In the case of eating fledglings, the tactic is more grab and go. The squirrel seizes its prey and carries it out of the nest).

Then winter comes, cones aren't available, and red squirrels are pretty much absent from the habitat the next spring.

What is not well understood, said Faccio, is squirrel dispersal in low cone years. He expects that squirrels respond to the low food conditions by moving downslope, but the pattern of their movements is a topic that merits more study.

It turns out this is one of those years when there aren't many red squirrels high on the mountains. So assuming they didn't all just die of starvation or predation – where did they go?

I'm working on my own idea about this. I call it the Toyota hypothesis.

Elise Tillinghast is the publisher of Northern Woodlands magazine. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine: northernwoodlands.org, and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: wellborn@nhcf.org

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