

The Outside Story

A Young Red Squirrel Grows Up

By Susan Shea

Years ago, a hitchhiker found a baby red squirrel beneath a tree and brought it to the nature center where I worked as a naturalist and wildlife rehabilitator. The squirrel kit had not yet opened its eyes, so we estimated it was only three weeks old.

Most squirrels are born in the spring, but this one arrived at the center in November and was likely born in mid-October. Red squirrels sometimes mate twice a year, in mid-winter and again in summer. Kits are born after a gestation period of about 38 days and stay with their mother and siblings until they are around 10 weeks old.

Our squirrel, which I later named Jumpy, was likely born in a tree cavity, perhaps an old woodpecker hole. If a female red squirrel cannot find a suitable tree cavity for a nest, she may renovate an abandoned crow or hawk nest or build a large, bulky nest high in a conifer. Squirrels construct these nests where a branch meets the tree trunk, using leaves, twigs, and cones. They line the interior with shredded bark, moss, and grass. Mother squirrels will sometimes move their kits from one nest to another – perhaps to evade detection by would-be predators. This may be how Jumpy fell to the ground.

Jumpy likely had three or four siblings, all born furless, with eyes and ears closed. Squirrel kits grow fur during their first few weeks and open their eyes around four weeks of age.

When Jumpy first came to the nature center, he lived in a cardboard shoe box lined with crumpled facial tissue and placed on a heating pad. Since he needed to be fed every four to five hours, I took the young squirrel home each evening to administer nighttime feedings. Whenever I opened the box lid, he twitched warily, which is how he received his name. While awake, he moved quickly, guzzling the milk formula I fed him through an eyedropper, sometimes making soft, purring noises. His temperament was much different than that of the young gray squirrels I had raised, which were slower and rather mellow. (These differences between the two species are noticeable in adult squirrels as well.)



Jumpy opened his eyes a week after he arrived at the center. During the next few weeks – around the age that young red squirrels in the wild begin exploring outside their nest for short periods – he became more active and began to run and climb. We moved him to a larger box, then to a small cage. By two months of age, Jumpy was weaned and eating peanuts, popcorn, and apples. He was also chewing on spruce cones we provided; conifer seeds are a mainstay of a red squirrel's diet. He made churring sounds similar to those of adult squirrels.

Our plan was to release Jumpy to the wild, but it was now winter. He would have struggled to survive without adequate time to acquire a territory and a winter food cache. But Jumpy was going crazy in his indoor cage, and driving us nuts, even though we let him out for exercise in the building twice a day.

We moved him to a larger, roofed, outdoor cage, with a birdhouse stuffed with bedding, and branches for climbing. He was eating nuts, spruce and hemlock cones, and beginning to chatter like an adult red squirrel. Soon, he started escaping from the cage when we opened the door to feed him, and eventually he refused to go back into the enclosure. Jumpy lived in a brush pile near our bird feeders for the rest of the winter, and we supplemented the birdseed with nuts and cones. By early spring, he was still visiting our feeders, caching food, and interacting with other squirrels, including chasing gray squirrels.

Jumpy was now six months old. He had survived the winter with our help and had a much better chance of survival. There would soon be abundant spring foods for a red squirrel in the surrounding woods: tree buds, new leaves, insects, birds' eggs. Watching Jumpy grow had given me a fascinating look into the development of a young red squirrel, and I was glad that he seemed to acclimate to life in the wild. Even now, years later, when I hear a red squirrel chatter overhead or see one at my bird feeder, I often think of Jumpy.

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