

Squirrel P'Nutkin

By Kim Smith

What was that cacophony of scritch and scratch coming from behind the bed? Several years ago we found a mouse stuck in one of the clothing trunks stored there, but this was impossibly loud. What now, a super-sized mouse? While gingerly poking around the trunks, I realized the noise was coming from inside the wall. I peered out the bedroom window, and to my dismay, met the eyes of an eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) as he cautiously appraised me from the electric wire that connects the telephone pole to our home. The squirrel quickly scurried back into the perfect silver dollar-sized hole he had gnawed in the right front corner soffit. The unusual sounds we had been hearing for the past several days were the squirrel zooming back and forth along the length of the soffit, gnawing, tearing, shredding, and generally having a grand time building a nest and making himself a home.

The next morning we heard him leaving the nest and, dangerously so, my husband Tom crawled out onto the porch roof and standing on tip toes, using a long pole, crammed steel wool and hardware cloth (heavy gauge wire netting that can be manipulated into whatever-shape-needed) into the hole. Later that afternoon we found all the squirrel deterrents that had been stuffed into the hole, as well as all manner of insulation and nesting materials, strewn about the ground below. Our attempts to keep the squirrel out had only served to trap his mate within. In her desperation to get out, she chewed a hole five times as big. Ridding our home of the squirrels was proving to be more difficult than anticipated and now, with the huge black gaping hole in front, our home looked like "Central Ave," as my mother-in-law would say.

All advice from helpful friends and Internet websites led to one conclusion. We must first rid our property of all squirrels by trapping. Our friend Jim Holscher, contractor and roofing specialist, shared that, despite the fact that he had installed a new roof on a project, because the squirrels had formerly built a nest there, they ate through the new wood determinedly trying to reestablish their former nesting site.

Our first Havahart trap was too small and of no interest (designed for small squirrels). We needed Havahart model number 1030 (for large squirrels). Tom placed the 1030 directly below the telephone pole where we had seen our squirrels accessing their nest, where I could also observe it from my office window. Almost immediately after setting the trap, the neighborhood busybody phoned and informed us she was calling the police to have our trap confiscated. Reluctantly, because I hated to bother the police, I called our local department, using the non-emergency number. The officer on the line said are you joking? Of course they were not going to confiscate our trap. But to be sure we weren't in violation of city codes, he referred me to the local animal control officer. The officer also shared his advice on effective squirrel trapping. A few days pass and still no takers to the peanut butter cracker feast arrayed in the trap.

Early the next morning, after a fresh-fallen snow, I thought that would be a perfect time to observe squirrel footprints to determine their route, to better place the trap. Fortunately, it was school vacation week, our street was very still, and I was hoping no one would see me shivering and staring up at the trees at daybreak. By 7:15 (squirrel wake-up time) I had positioned myself strategically to observe any squirrels exiting our home. The first squirrel emerged, and warily eyeing his surroundings, he dropped from our home onto the electrical wire and scurried to the phone pole. Did he head down toward the trap, with the fragrance of mini-diced apples, chunky peanut butter, and whole grain crackers wafting there to greet him? No, he scurried across the wire, in the opposite direction, and merged onto the Squirrel Super-Highway that is our

neighborhood. Sailing from phone line to branch, tree limb to tree limb, and dexterously flying up and down the lengths of the trunks— very quickly the entire neighborhood became alive with the Squirrel Breakfast Club. Amidst their playful greetings and noisy chattering, all the while they were collecting food from their stockpiles in their summerhouses. The eastern gray squirrel's summer home is the nest of loose leaves and twigs typically observed when the trees become bare in autumn. During the winter months, they rely on the food stored in their summerhouse. The breakfast fête lasted for about half an hour, when after circumferencing our neighborhood, and never once touching ground, our squirrel made his way back up Plum Street and toward our home. Before entering our nice cozy soffit, he traveled along the six-foot tall fence that encircles our backyard. As luck would have it, our fence was a thoroughfare on the Squirrel Super Highway.

Tom rigged the trap onto the top of the fence. We did not want the squirrel to suffer so he placed the trap within view of the kitchen window where it would be checked frequently. I had purchased *roasted peanuts in the shell* to try using as squirrel “chum.” Tom placed one peanut on top of the fence, one in the trap entry, and a third peanut at the far end of the trap. Within fifteen minutes he had a squirrel. Peanuts in the shell, plain and simple, is what squirrels live for. Thirty-eight squirrels later—as many as three in one morning—we have heard neither a scritch nor a scratch for several days. Tom kind-heartedly drove all trapped squirrels across the bridge to mature forests with densely wooded areas where we had observed an abundance of seeds and berries and plenty of rotted, fallen tree trunks, the ideal squirrel habitat. I had read that one needed to drive at least fifteen miles away or over a barrier such as a body of water, although a friend of Tom's reported that, when out on her boat, she observed a squirrel swimming across Marblehead Harbor. We have seen several squished squirrels on the Abram Piatt Andrew Bridge, so I am not sure if the “over a body of water” theory is accurate. Some readers may object to trapping squirrels; however, squirrels carry diseases, urinate in their nests, and should be removed, more humanely, before they begin raising their young.

End Note: Squirrel Nutkin, of Beatrix Potter fame, was written about the European red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). As have introduced species of European birds such as the pigeon, starling, and house sparrow reeked havoc with our native songbirds, the North American gray squirrel, which was introduced to Europe during the Victorian era, is out-competing the red squirrel for food and habitat.

Kim Smith Designs is an interior and garden design firm. Kim's first book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!* (David R. Godine, Publisher, 2009), which she wrote and illustrated, is available through your local bookseller and Barnes and Noble. For more information about *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!*, design work, current projects, exhibits, and events, please visit her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com or email at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.

