



# MONTEREY NEWS

January 2019  
Est. 1970 Vol. XLVIII • Number 1



## Grey Squirrels and Hardwood Forests

These grey squirrels, we see them in or under the birdfeeder this time of year and think they are somehow undeserving, unfit to receive the bounty. We bought this in town and brought it home to give the little birdies a boost these cold and difficult months, and we like to watch the little fliers partaking of our generosity. We look for the return of our avian dependents in the winter, so small and lovely, and miraculous. We feel warm and loving.

Then a big squirrel lands in the feeder and no more warm and loving for us. We feel robbed, intruded upon. If there ever was an unwelcome guest, an alien on the birdseed scene, it is the native Eastern Grey Squirrel.

Over the decades I have wondered how we'd respond if this cute, furry, native neighbor were rare and endangered. Maybe we'd be putting out the seeds in hopes of encouraging the population to grow, to inhabit our part of the world once more as they did way back when. Why do we hate them so? What can we learn about ourselves by considering this question? Is it that they cost us money because they can tank down so many sunflower seeds at one sitting? Is our prejudice built on economy, our bottom line?

Is it some long-lived battle or struggle learned at our parents' knees? My mom and dad fed the birds, and when a squirrel showed up in the feeder, Dad would go tiptoeing down to the cellar, get out his "spear" and head into the yard heaving a long-straight goldenrod stalk towards the feeder, butt end first.

Dad was pre-Columbian Man, with his hand-made weapon. He was taking on the natural world, altering the scene, making his own brand of balance. He was favoring the birds. The squirrel? Leapt clear of the feeder, scampered across the lawn and up a tree, chattering its warning. The birds had much the same response, not liking the spear-thrower any more than the squirrel did.

In a few minutes Dad was back at the breakfast table, happy with his daily return to Early Times. Within minutes the birds were back, and then the squirrel. This was a good thing all 'round, we felt, a great way to start the day. Then Dad was away to his office, we were away to school, Ma sat down in the peace and quiet with another cup of coffee and her organizing lists. But we'd all had a taste of another way of life, thanks to the grey squirrel.



I like to read my old book by Leonard Lee Rue III, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammals of North America* (Thomas E. Crowell Co., 1961). I recommend it, over Wikipedia or anything offered to me by Google. Thanks to Rue, I have some facts and observations to pass along. He says that years ago there were huge populations of these squirrels in these parts. There were big old nut trees everywhere in the Northeast forests, producing acorns, hickory nuts, chestnuts, and walnuts. They also provided fine nest trees. When an old limb died and fell off, an opening on the trunk was made, letting in water and weather, so the tree would rot a little. Tree dens were easy to make, and the squirrels knew enough to keep nibbling off the bark around the place where the branch had broken off, so the hole was kept open.

If we keep an eye on our grey squirrels today, we'll see plenty of bark-nibbling still going on. Our sumacs, sugar maples, and lots of other trees and shrubs have bald spots on their branches where the squirrels skin off the bark.

A grey squirrel can live fifteen years, giving birth to one or two litters per year, with four or five babies each time. The males are polygamous and don't take part in rearing the litters. Babies are born blind, naked and helpless, as we say, but they have remarkable moms who will move them to safety if any danger threatens. By six weeks of age, they open their eyes and are fully furred. They stay with the mother through summer, fall, and the first winter, forming social groups of twelve or more inside those hollow tree dens.

The squirrels are diurnal, only active during the day, and particularly in the 6 to 9 a.m. slot and then again 3 to 6 p.m. They are holed up for the night, safe from the nocturnal predators, but by day they are prey to foxes, bobcats, house cats, dogs, pine martens, fishers, hawks, and snakes. Hard on the squirrels? Not too bad, and certainly supportive to many a wild neighbor. We should welcome them all. As we fret about our birdseed bill, we should remember the economic multiplier effect. Our dollar influence does not stop at the birdseed store, nor even at our feeder. This is a web, here, and we are a part. Feed a squirrel, feed a tree full of them, feed the martens, the fishers, the hawks. Don't feed the squirrel? That's okay she will feed herself just like she did before we came along. But she needs us to leave the hardwood forests standing. — Bonner McAllester

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*Monterey News*, December 2018