



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Red Squirrels, Small and Feisty

We have three kinds of “tree squirrels” in these parts. Anyone with a bird feeder will have seen two of them by day, and the third only at night, or perhaps never at all. The night visitor is the flying squirrel, said to be our most common mammal! And yet many folks think only of the cartoon character, or perhaps something mythical, when they hear of a “flying” squirrel.

Of the two diurnal species, the big ones are the grey squirrels, which come also in handsome black. The other daytime squirrel is the red squirrel, known to the Anishinaabe (or Ojibway) people as *adjidaumo* or *tail-in-the-air*. The red squirrel is highly vocal, and folks hearing all that chattering and chipping find it to be saucy or scolding. Ernest Thompson Seton felt the red squirrel to be “an embodiment of merriment, bird-like activity, and saucy roguery.”

So we writers and speakers identify with others. We think, “If I were scampering about the trees with my red tail up in the air, chattering away like that, it would be a sure sign I was scolding, saucy, and full of roguery. I’d be telling everyone all about myself.”

In his book *Life Histories of Northern Animals, an Account of the Mammals of Manitoba*, 1909, Seton gives a detailed account of a red squirrel dragging an “enormous mushroom” through the woods. It caught on something and the squirrel gave it a strong jerk but then it broke. This squirrel gave off much chattering and scolding, grabbed part of the big mushroom only to have it break again. “It now exploded in wrathful sputterings,” Seton writes. Even we readers a century later identify readily with the frustrations of our little cousin. Seton assures us the squirrel was not so mad he couldn’t make three separate trips carrying the pieces of this treasure to a safe storehouse.



Besides mushrooms, red squirrels eat a great variety of things: all sorts of buds and flowers from willows, aspens, poplars and birches, also seeds and twig-tips and flowers from pines, larches, butternuts, hickories, oaks, cherries, plums, apples, maples, ashes, and basswoods. They like the seeds and fruits of shrubs like elderberries, raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries, also wintergreen.

In the late winter and spring, they will drink sap from sugar maples and black birches, cutting depressions in the upper side of a branch so the sap collects there. They have also been known to follow a sapsucker and drink from the horizontal rows of holes these woodpeckers make.

Usually red squirrels live somewhere near white pines and spruces, and they eat the seeds from inside the cones. This involves climbing way up the trees and nipping off the cones before they are fully ripe. Once the cones ripen at the tops of these trees, their bracts will open wide and the seeds drop out and be carried off in the wind. Red squirrels snip them off green, before this can happen, then scurry down to the ground and pick up the cones to carry off for storage.

One year here in Monterey Kit Patten called about a stash of such cones in his garden and tool shed. They had been carefully laid up and it seemed clear they were not intended to fully dry out and open any time soon, rather to keep for later.

Red squirrels have certain places where they like to sit and open cones and eat the seeds. The cast off bracts and inner stems pile up in such places, which are called middens, and these heaps can be three or four feet across, and high. They also make a good place in which to bury more cones for later on.

Besides all these kinds of food, red squirrels do like mushrooms, also insect larvae, moth pupae, and grasshoppers. They pick up bones and antlers in the woods and drag them to a high spot where they will chew on them for the calcium.

None of the tree squirrels are hibernators. They have good protection for winter, and good food storage strategies. By April or May the red squirrels give birth to their babies, three or four of them, and in a couple of months they are weaned, all set to learn about foraging and enemy evasion.

There are two kinds of agile hawks in the woods which are a danger to the squirrels, the Cooper’s hawk and the goshawk. When one of these comes hunting, a red squirrel will lie flat on the upper side of a branch. At the last second, when the hawk stoops with talons ready to grab, the squirrel slides quickly around to the underside and clings there. The hawk may regroup and come back, and then the squirrel will spiral fast down the trunk of the tree, often with the hawk in a tight spiraling pursuit. One may live another day, one may get a meal.

This is life on the edge every day in the woods. The red squirrel brings a good measure of spice, most times coming out on top, thanks to what Seton calls, “vigor, pluck, and pertinacious aggressiveness.”

— Bonner McAllester