

## A Long Winter's Nap

For the past two summers I have spent time as the personal servant to a couple of (according to one scholarly source) “semi-fossorial sciurids”—members of the squirrel family that spend some of their time underground. While my small striped masters offered no direct compensation, the hours I spent attending to their demands were among the brightest of those warm green seasons.

Jackson trained me first. He appeared on the stonewall by the lilac bush each morning. In no time I learned to bring him breakfast, and then lunch, and then...well, you know the rest. By the end of that summer many pounds of seeds and nuts had been transported to Jackson's larder.

This year Electra, a dainty chipmunk, took my level of training even further. Chipmunks, as it happens, lose their fear of people rather quickly if one is appropriately humble and offers food. It didn't take Electra long to show me where she liked to eat and what she liked to eat. I thought that I trained her to take the next steps; I soon had her sitting next to me while she ate, and once there, she was just as happy to eat from my hand, and then on my hand, and then on my lap. The other neighborhood chipmunks soon learned. Once they saw her climbing onto my hand for food, they saw no reason not to do the same. Since Electra had a low rank in local chipmunk society, she had certain privileges in my company. I made sure that the other chipmunks had their piles nearby, but would let her eat in safety on my raised hand. I now suspect she had trained me to guard her from interlopers while she stuffed her furry cheeks.

I still recall the surprisingly light touch of her tiny feet, and the warm fur of her belly as she delicately vacuumed the seeds from my hand (yes, her full name was Electra Lux). And how her cheeks could expand! She once fit 70 seeds in her cheeks, and may have been able to take more, but I never managed to count out more than that before she was back for a refill.

Naturally, it is difficult to study the winter activities of chipmunks. What little we know comes from a few studies of excavated burrow systems and from captive chipmunks. According to this literature, the burrow systems of chipmunks range from a simple one or two entrance tunnel with a single chamber to elaborate networks with many tunnels and chambers. One tunnel system was found to have thirty entrances, although not all were in use. Such systems typically have one nesting chamber with ample

room for chipmunk activities, lined with leaves or leaf fragments. The burrow will also have storage chambers. The tunnels are fairly shallow, with the deeper ones only thirty inches below the ground surface.

Chipmunks have long been snubbed as “not true hibernators.” It is now known that during winter torpor their respiration rate drops from 60 breaths per minute to 20, and their temperature drops from about 100°F to 42-45°F. This is slow enough and low enough to put them in that selective group of true hibernators. Unlike other members, however, eastern chipmunks do not retire bulging with fat. They must awaken every once in a while to eat. Just how often is uncertain, but some have been observed waking every six days in captivity.

As I watch the red squirrels eating outside my window, wind blowing wet snow into their fur, I wonder at how they contend with the elements during the long months of winter. It is more pleasant to contemplate Jackson, Electra, and their clan snuggled solitary in their soft nests in the ground. Every week or so they might yawn and stretch, and then wander down some dark corridor to a well-stocked pantry for a snack. Then it's back to bed to continue the long winter's nap. Knowing they are snug underground makes me feel less guilty about hoping the winter is long and snowy. Whether it is or isn't, spring will surely come and one of its pleasures will be the return of the chipmunks. They are likely, of course, to make many requests, and will probably find that I am easily trained.

—Patti Smith

