

# The View from Heifer Hill—May 2012

## Bean

The orphaned red squirrel, bright-eyed and fuzzy-tailed, attempted to scramble off the scale while I attempted to push him back on, and hoped that the number that appeared most often on the display was not his full weight. It was. After a week of wheeling, cajoling, adjusting the formula and timing of feedings, Bean had gained just a gram.



The little squirrel had arrived for care, chilled, hungry, and dehydrated, the only survivor of three little squirrels found the night before. The color of a pinto bean and not much larger, he knew what he liked and didn't like, and he didn't like his formula. Nuts and fruit were interesting and tasty, but after a few drops of formula, he would turn his head and push the syringe away. Knowing the attitude of wild red squirrels, I shouldn't have been surprised that he was so discriminating; few who pass near a conifer glade can be unaware that red squirrels are adamant in their opinions and not afraid to tell you about them. I have a number of squirrel books and articles in my library, and the following quote is typical of those describing Bean's clan: "The red squirrel is characterized by its noisy vivacity, an impetuous inquisitiveness, and a sense of ownership that is pugnaciously maintained."

Red squirrels have reason to be feisty; to survive a northern winter they depend upon a well-provisioned larder. Like gray squirrels, they spend much of the late summer and all of the autumn in a manic gathering and storing. Conifer seeds make up the bulk of the red squirrels' winter fare. The cones must be harvested before they ripen and release their seeds. When I camped beside a fir tree one summer, I awoke each morning to the thud of falling cones. The squirrel responsible gathered this sticky treasure and stashed it in a shallow pit she had excavated and would later cover with dirt and duff. How much easier it would be to simply raid another squirrel's cache than to gather one's own! Vigilance must be maintained to thwart raids.

Since few besides red squirrels are willing or able to strip cones to eat the seeds, however, are they wasting their en-

ergy on indiscriminate rants? Cones are not the only foods stored. I first noticed red squirrels harvesting and stashing mushrooms in the dense spruce-fir forests of Nova Scotia where I saw mushrooms in repose on many branches. Red squirrels even store and eat mushrooms that would be deadly to hu-

mans. Other foods of more general appeal are also stored; I have watched red squirrels bury nuts and even individual sunflower seeds gray squirrel-style. They also stash fruit and nuts in bark crevices or at the base of branches. Who knows which among these delicacies might appeal to a hungry hominid?

Among my favorite anecdotes about the scrappiness of *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*, are those recorded by Mason Walton in *A Hermit's Wild Friends* (1903). Walton's descriptions lack objectivity, but it is hard to be objective about a creature that stamps its feet and chatters when upset. In one, "Ten crows, made bold by hunger attacked Tiny and tried to take possession of a loaf of bread. The squirrel never flinched, but stood over the bread and whenever a crow got over the deadline, filled the dooryard with feathers. . . The black rogues were obliged to retreat when Tiny got downright mad." In contrast to this account, Walton describes Tiny's relationship with a "to-whoee bunting," the type of bread thief he usually chased away. In this instance:

"The bunting was eating from a loaf of bread, which was staked down in the dooryard, when Tiny appeared. The squirrel thought the bird would run away, but instead the latter set its wings and lowered its head in preparation for battle. Tiny was astonished. He sat up, folded his forepaws on his breast, and looked on the gamy little bunting with wide-eyed wonder. The bunting soon turned to the bread. Tiny brought his forepaws down hard on the ground, apparently to frighten the bird. Again the plucky little bunting set its wings and lowered its head. Again Tiny sat up and looked the fellow over. This time there was

a comical expression on the face of the squirrel. . .That he admired the pluck of the bunting was evident by his action. He crept quietly to the opposite side of the loaf of bread and allowed the bunting to eat unmolested. . .”

Walton wrote that Tiny not only allowed this bird to feed with him regularly, but noted that the pair greeted each other, Tiny with a chuckle, and the bunting with “something in bird language that seemed to express joy.”

Stubbornness must be accepted in red squirrels, but refusal to grow? I took my problem squirrel to Debra, an authority on problem wildlife orphans of all kinds. She examined the bitsy Bean and said that he appeared to be perfectly healthy. She would try him on *her* formula. “All squirrels love this,” she assured me. Bean tasted a drop and pushed it away. When she offered him solid food he sat up, held it in his paws and ate like a proper little squirrel. “Why, he’s just a runt!” she declared, “Let’s put him in with the others.” We took Bean out to the large enclosure where five adolescent red squirrels were busily preparing for independence. Bean took to his new surroundings immediately, exploring the cave beneath the water bowl, wrestling with a pinecone. . . Soon another young red squirrel, more than twice the size of Bean, approached; the two sniffed noses, pawed at each other tentatively, and headed off in their own directions again.

Bean soon became a full-fledged, romping member of the juvenile gang. He was released a month later, and while he was still a diminutive fellow, I have no doubt that he was fully prepared to express himself with the audacity of his tribe.