

Flying Circus

One night last fall the neighbors' motion detection light went on. I knew they were away on vacation so thought I'd better investigate. Only a slight rustling in one of the apple trees betrayed the culprit; there, in my flashlight beam, a flying squirrel clasped an apple in a furry embrace. The petit squirrel was so engaged in its meal that it paid no attention to me and I admired it for several minutes. Few can dispute the pleasures of such a task. The back of its thick lustrous fur cape had a border of black and the belly side was a snowy white. The paws gripped the apple like pale-gloved hands, and it watched the night through immense dark eyes. When I turned to see if it had company in the other apple trees, it disappeared. That is the way of these little sprites.

I have had ample opportunity to observe flying squirrels in a less-than-wild situation. One winter I provided a temporary home to nineteen of them. They resided in a large outdoor enclosure equipped with branches, two cozy nest boxes, and all the nuts, seeds, and dried fruit their little hearts could desire. The situation was not ideal, but I judged it far better than their other option—a mid-winter release in an unknown forest with no cached food.

Mind you, the squirrels thought they already had a pretty nice situation. They had found a crack that allowed them to squeeze beneath a roof—a warm, dry, soft space to spend the winter. They were so happy there! Their nocturnal celebrations lasted much of the night, or so it seemed to the people trying to sleep beneath them. The squirrels were lucky that the family in question loved nature or some of the flying squirrel recipes they concocted during those sleepless nights might have been prepared. As it was, they lured them with peanut butter, one by one, into a live trap and brought them to me.

Each night I would head to the Nut House at dusk with a jug of warm water, flying squirrel provisions, and my headlamp with the red filter. Some of the squirrels remained too shy to come out when I was there. The boldest squirrels perched like gargoyles, shoulders hunched, noses pointed down, on the roof of the nest boxes, daring me to come closer. My favorite squirrels popped out eagerly and came to see what I brought. They would settle

down on my hand or arm and tuck in to supper. When they were finished they would hoist their skirts and scamper out my arm, down my leg, up the walls, then leap onto my head. By this point the gargoyles would join the melee, and some of the shy squirrels would watch from the nest box openings.

When their frolics began to involve mating, I did the calculations and determined the date when they'd need to be released. In early April I transported them to some good habitat where I had put up nest boxes, and wished them well with their families.

Two species of flying squirrel can be found in our region—the northern flying squirrel and the southern flying squirrel. They are as good as indistinguishable unless you have them side-by-side or can examine the roots of their belly fur. Northern flying squirrels average just under eleven inches, nose to tip of tail. Southern flying squirrels



are smaller, about nine inches. Chipmunks, for comparison, average about 9.5 inches long. The belly fur on northern flying squirrels is typically gray at the roots, while the belly fur on southern is white to the base. The two do have different habits. The southern eat a typical squirrel diet—nuts, fruits, insects, buds and other plant parts. Northern flyers will eat these things as well, but are fungus specialists. Subterranean fungi are a preferred food. These fungi are related to the much-revered truffles of the Old World, but I have found no human enthusiasts of our local truffles. Research has shown that flying squirrel scat provides an ideal growing medium for these fungi, so when the squirrels eat the truffles, they transport and “plant” the spores. These fungi become part of the structure of tree roots and are important, sometimes even essential, for tree health, helping the roots to absorb nutrients and moisture.

September is good time of year to find flying squirrels. If you position yourself beneath an oak, beech or hickory after dusk you might hear their bird-like twittering. If the night is still enough, you might also hear what sounds like the tapping hammer of an elfin shoemaker. This will be a southern flying squirrel using its incisors to wedge a nut into the crotch of a branch or a crack in the bark. This is the way they conceal much of their winter larder.

Although they may well be more abundant than red or gray squirrels, flying squirrels seldom reveal themselves. When they land on a tree, they scoot to the far side of the trunk so quickly it can look as if they’ve vanished. Such evasive maneuvers help foil owls. The best way to see flying squirrels is to watch bird feeders at night. The ideal feeder is a platform at least five feet up on a tree illuminated indirectly. I have read that placing something aromatic, such as peanut butter or bacon grease, will help the squirrels find your feeding station faster. Of course such items are also likely to lure our friends the bruins, so wait until November to try this.

You might wonder why anyone would want to lure these squirrels into the proximity of their homes. The fact is, they are probably already there. If, however, you set up a feeder, and then find your sleep disturbed by impish frolics, you know whom to call.