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Solving Problems with Squirrels



Squirrels generally rank as the top problem-makers among all species of urban wildlife. Paradoxically, these charming, bushy-tailed creatures are also consistently

judged "Most Popular" among our wild neighbors. It seems we want them and we don't want them—depending on what they're up to at any given moment. Either way, squirrels are undisputedly one of the most successful mammals in human-altered environments.

The most serious conflicts with squirrels probably involve adult females establishing nests in buildings. They often enter chimneys and attics through unscreened vents or openings left by loose or rotten boards. Squirrels can also become nuisances at bird feeders, where they consume large quantities of birdseed or gnaw on the feeders. And spring bulbs—especially tulips and crocuses—may be dug up and consumed by squirrels, or clipped and eaten just as they start to flower.

The first approach to dealing with squirrels is to establish limits of tolerance. If they need to be excluded from an attic or prevented from stealing bird food, make sure it is done in a manner that does them and their young no harm.

Before excluding squirrels from a space, first inspect the area thoroughly to find the opening(s) where the nest is and determine whether there are any young present. If the nest can be seen and there are no immature squirrels, attempt to frighten the squirrel outside by making noise or just wait for the animal to leave, as squirrels usually do during the day.

If you can't determine whether the squirrels are outside, *do not seal the entrance*. Instead, install a one-way door over the opening and leave it in place until no more sounds are heard inside the building for several days. If it's likely that young are present (the squirrel has been in the house for more than a few days and it's the birthing season), wait until the immature squirrels are grown enough to come out on their own before installing the one-way door. Then seal up the opening, and any other weak spots, with mesh hardware cloth or sheet metal flashing, securely fastened.

The agility of squirrels makes it difficult to prevent them from reaching bird feeders. Various types of specially designed "squirrel-proof" feeders are commercially available, and these feeders are usually humane and effective. But they cost more than



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traditional feeders.

The trick is to keep squirrels away from feeders right from the start. Once a squirrel becomes accustomed to finding food at a particular source, he will persistently attempt to overcome any obstacles that stand in his way. Feeders on a pole may be rigged with a baffle—a slick tube that prevents squirrels from gaining access. As long as squirrels can't leap from a nearby tree onto the feeder, they must content themselves with whatever the birds spill. The feeder should be positioned as least eight feet away from any limbs or structures. Working on the same principle as the pole baffles, plastic or metal umbrella-shaped dome baffles can also be mounted above feeders to keep squirrels at bay.

Some "solutions" to keeping pesky squirrels out of bird food, such as trapping and killing, are simply unacceptable at any cost. There are some other strategies that we question and do not recommend, but which cause squirrels no apparent lasting harm:

- **Sticky Stuff:** These products cause the most concern. They consist of a thick, sticky, gel-like material that can be used to cover surfaces on which squirrels might walk or poles that hold feeders. The material is certainly likely to repel squirrels, and they definitely don't like to get it on their paws or fur. However, the substance can also get on birds—sometimes with fatal consequences.
- **Hot Stuff:** The active ingredient in hot peppers, capsaicin, has been marketed as an additive to birdseed to repel squirrels. The theory is that squirrels encounter this highly aversive substance, get a snootful, and decide it's not worth the effort to try again. Birds' nervous systems are geared differently, so they don't appear to sense capsaicin and react to it the way mammals do. While studies show that the amount of harm done to squirrels is not that great, we question this approach when others that cause less pain and harm are available.
- **Shocking Stuff:** There are many feeders on the market with an electrical current that will surprise and—literally—shock any offending squirrel. They work, and they seem to cause no lasting harm to squirrels, but again, may inflict unnecessary pain.

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