

Gone squirrely

Wherein our scribe writes
from the perspective of
an American red squirrel,
nuts and all

by Janet Wallace
photography: Paul Dunn

"Back (in) the olden days, huge red spruce provided cones in quantities you can only dream of now," recalls our wistful storyteller.

When the editors of Saltscapes suggested I profile an animal species from the perspective of an individual animal, I was frustrated, stumped—and then tempted. Part of my reluctance stems from my academic background. For my master's degree, I studied ecology and the evolution of animal behaviour. The cardinal rule was to avoid anthropomorphizing—giving animals human characteristics.

I always struggled with this concept... and now I get to ignore the rule altogether.

SHE STARTS running across the road, then stops. She runs back to the shoulder and, in a flash, starts running over the road again. She's going to get hit this time, I know it. There she goes again, back and forth.

I just can't watch. I keep telling the youngsters, "Dodging works to avoid hawks, cats and mink, but it doesn't

work for cars." But do they listen? No. She didn't store enough cones last fall. Now that the days are almost as long as the nights, she's out of her winter food. The spring food is coming on—you know it's spring when you peel a strip of sugar maple bark and taste that sweet sap—but cones are what we need to survive.

I yell out my warning again, and she dashes across the road. She's safe, at least for the moment. But now she's in the old guy's territory. He's already telling her off. He has nerve. I smelled his track over here yesterday afternoon. Next time I catch him rubbing his cheek on my spruce trees, I'll give him a chase he won't forget.

Legend has it that the white spruce wasn't always here. After the age of the big trees... oh, how I wish I could have been here then. A land of plenty

for small mammals, or so they say. Beechnuts, butternuts, hazelnuts and acorns! Acorns upset my stomach—those big grey squirrels can eat their fill of them, and not be bothered one bit—but I do love a nibble now and then, and chewing nuts is a great way to keep my teeth from growing too long.

Back to the olden days: huge red spruce provided cones in quantities you can only dream of now. Mushrooms covered the forest floor under enormous sugar maples. That was when the flying squirrels ruled the woods; I haven't seen one of them in our neighbourhood for a while.

"Get out, get out," I bark. "Go away, go away." It's yet another male passing through my territory to get to the female who lives in the birdhouse. A man-made birdhouse! Has she no shame? Sure, we like to adopt old



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roots & folks: nature



"Before my mother passed on, she taught me to bury hard, lodge soft," says our rodent narrator.

woodpecker holes or tree cavities to raise our young, and in the summer, there's nothing like a drey—or nest—in a spruce. Twigs on the outside and a nice soft lining of bark fibre, moss and feathers inside: a work of art.

Anyhow, that doe is in estrus today and all the bucks in smelling distance have come by. She's running through the trees now with the males following, competing with each other as they run along branches and leap from tree to tree. Who knows how many of them she'll end up mating with? According to the forest chatter, her mother had a dozen last year.

Thank the trees we are only in heat one day during the breeding season. Although, knowing her, she'll probably have two breeding seasons a year. That wasn't done in my day; at least not in my neck of the woods. She might be having fun today, but she'll be complaining in five weeks when she has four blind, hungry babies.

Where was I? Oh yes, the legend of when people first cut down the trees—the hungry years. The people came with their big, slow animals, the—what were they?—horses, that's it, and oxen. They cut down trees and planted tasty

seeds, wheat and oats and barley, but nothing that lasted through the winter as well as cones do.

After many of those people left, the fields grew up in good old white spruce. I love white spruce! There is nothing better on a cold winter's day than ripping open a pile of spruce cones and gobbling up the seeds. And these pasture spruce have so many hiding spots for squirrels; for birds, too. In spring, there's nothing like a tasty bird's egg to put a tingle in my tail.

Some flying squirrels and the townies, those huge grey squirrels, claim to be vegan, but not us. Although personally, I don't like food that moves—except for nice fat grubs, especially bark beetle larvae—I've known red squirrels to eat baby birds and newborn snowshoe hares.

I just wish white spruce were more reliable in cone production. I've never understood why they produce an incredible number of cones one year, and hardly any in others. The last crash was seven years ago, the year before I was born. That's why I was the only nestling that survived; my mom's cone cache was so small she had only enough milk for me, and even that was too

great a strain. She died just after I was weaned. I was two months old, on my own—and the first year is always the hardest. I never did reach full size, but I'm tough. Not many live to my age.

My land inheritance helped. I would never have been able to fight my way into such a big territory. My mother left me two acres, with a stash of dried mushrooms.

Before my mother passed on, she taught me this: harvest green cones only—brown ones may have already lost their seeds. Plus: "bury hard, lodge soft." I'll never forget that. I ignored her advice once and buried a stash of mushrooms; they all rotted. I survived off the rose hips and apples I had lodged in forks of tree branches, and the middens (stockpiles) of nuts and cones.

Now, this yearling who dodges cars has no idea of what hunger is like. She eats at the bird feeder all winter long (contrary to what some people think, we do not hibernate). The humans put out food every day, and they make it entertaining for her. They add toys to the feeders—plastic funnels and metal disks to make foraging more fun. I don't think she has ever made a subnivean, or snow, tunnel—the best way to get around safely in winter, even though weasels sometimes hunt in them. Too much work for her.

Last winter, the humans left for a few weeks and those feeder squirrels went hungry. The pine martens got three and mink caught another. That wouldn't have happened if they had been well fed and had their wits about them.

Another one was caught stealing a cache from the guy with the rip in his ear, and while being chased by him, she ran right into the path of a cat.

That guy is tricky. Last fall, I saw him pretending to make caches. He went through all the motions but when I checked one out, there was nothing there. Not that I was going to steal it—of course not, I was just being neighbourly. I wanted to make sure he had enough food for the winter.

Oh, I can hear the squirrel in the next territory screaming about a predator. Up there, a goshawk. Gotta go. 🦉



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