

What's Not To Love About Eastern Gray Squirrels?

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Two Eastern gray squirrels. photo © Susie Spikol

You can try, but you will never truly succeed. You will end up spending a chunk of change and devoting countless hours in a Wile E. Coyote style pursuit, but face it, you will never outsmart the Eastern gray squirrels at your bird feeder. I came to this conclusion when I was just a kid watching my dad battle many generations of the Piggy family, the bushy-tailed seed-bandit of East 22nd Street in Brooklyn, N.Y.

I never understood my father's war against the Piggys. Didn't the squirrels need food in the winter as much as the birds? In my book, Piggy was the best visitor at our feeder. Such a clever, fluffy, little scoundrel, who I found a lot more interesting and entertaining than birds, and I still kind of think that today. Call me a bird-feeding rebel, but I still love feeding and watching these overstuffed rodents. Pay attention the next time you have a gray squirrel at your feeder, which is probably right this minute. Watch it this time. Really pay attention to its behavior, especially its tail. That luxuriant appendage

the gray squirrel some of its best superpowers. Without it acting as a counterbalance, the squirrel would not be the Olympic jumper it is today, able to clear distances of 8 feet in one leap, which is 10 times the length of its head and body.

Taking A Closer Look at a Squirrel's Tail

Squirrels need this athletic prowess to dash from branch to branch and tree to tree, escaping the teeth and talons of such predators as great horned owls, raccoons, fishers, foxes and bobcats, to name only a handful of the many predators that pursue them. Not only is their tail an important locomotion tool, but squirrels use their tails to talk. Although they make many types of vocalizations, their tails telegraph information to each other through movement.

Just by paying attention to tail displays, the Eastern gray squirrel can figure out social order. For example, a tail flicking back and forward and then straight over its head is a silent message of aggression. But when tails wave from side to side, a friendly social greeting will follow. No sounds are necessary for a squirrel to know who is dominant, social or alarmed around the bird feeder.

If that isn't enough to make you take a closer look at a squirrel's tail, think about this – the tail is also an essential tool in helping the Eastern gray squirrel regulate weather extremes. Such a big bushy back end would be hard to keep warm in the winter, but squirrels have a special adaptation to keep their tails from freezing. At the base of the tail there is a bundle of blood vessels that shift, like a gate, blocking blood flow to this fluffy extremity. This ability sends the blood flowing through the squirrel's core, keeping vital organs warm during winter temperatures.

In the summer, when temperatures soar, the squirrel releases blood to the tail, dissipating heat away from its core, like a heating vent for the body. There is even some anecdotal evidence that the tail acts as an umbrella of sorts, blocking rain and sun from the squirrel's head. In fact, the word “squirrel,” Greek in origin, means “shade-tail.” The tail is one example of the squirrel's physiological adaptations helping it to be a very successful rodent. Squirrels can rotate their hind ankles 180 degrees. Being able to turn their hind paws to face directly behind them enables them to grip the tree and go head first. This gives them an advantage over many tree-climbing mammal predators, who can only shimmy down the tree bottom-first. However, fisher and pine marten share this same adaptation, making these two members of the weasel family formidable squirrel predators.

Preparing for Winter

Don't let this chubby fluff fool you, though. Squirrels who frequent bird feeders are not dependent on you for survival. They have spent a good part of summer and all of fall preparing for the slim times of winter. During autumn, they put on the fat by consuming many calorie- and protein-rich nuts and seeds, like acorns. They eat 32% more food than they need to survive during the fall, ensuring they have a tubby internal larder. They don't just store it all up in their bodies, though. Cached all around

their range, which is often less than 12.4 acres, are hundreds of buried acorns, on reserve for winter consumption. Using a combination of a keen sense of smell and acute spatial memory, squirrels relocate a remarkable number of their stashed nuts throughout winter, even if buried under a foot of snow.

Although National Squirrel Day, celebrated Jan. 21, has recently passed it's not too late to tip your hat to this common but amazing mammal. Next time you watch it eat all the birdseed you just put out, take a moment to observe and acknowledge this highly successful and adaptable creature. It will be a lot less frustrating than spending your time trying keep it from eating your birdseed. 🐾



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