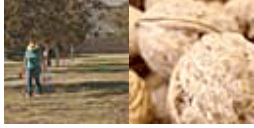


Confessions of a devoted squirrel lover

The little charmers are smart and fast but benefit from rescue, rehab efforts

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

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I have it bad. I am over the moon, infatuated, even a tad obsessed. I got a clue how serious this whole crush thing is, one evening, as I waited for my daughter outside her yoga class. There I was, squatting in the dark, sifting through mud illuminated by the feeble beam of a flashlight, searching for acorns. Of course, spending the previous autumn day rattling tree branches and hunting walnuts in earth-colored piles of leaves should've been a hint.

I am nuts for squirrels!

It definitely wasn't love at first sight. They have run the wires, and scampered over the fence in my yard for years. For decades, I ignored them. As so often happens, though, my heart stirred and opened to these little critters thanks to a matchmaker of extraordinary ability. Lila Travis, director of Yggdrasil Urban Wildlife Rescue, gently, irresistibly introduced me to the delight of fox squirrels. She did it in a spot well suited to romance - her cozy living room in the Oakland hills, the first stop for orphaned baby squirrels delivered to the organization for rehab and ultimate release into their natural environment.

Looking back, I am surprised Cupid's arrow did not strike me immediately.

After all, how could the squirming bundle of innocent squirrel babes nestling in Lila's lap, or the minute mammal, warmed by close skin-to-skin contact, snuggling her, fail to enchant me? How could my emotions not swell as my daughter, who accompanied me on this warm afternoon, took her turn feeding a sweet foundling with a tiny bottle of specialized formula? Sure, they were cute, but still I felt neutral, overall, immune to their charms.

Then came Lila's fascinating facts. You know, those "did you know" tidbits of information that inevitably pique your interest? Like the fact that squirrels are natural gardeners. During their nut and seed gathering, squirrels plant 70 percent of the world's deciduous forests. And they are picky. They can smell through 3 inches of

dirt to detect rotten nuts, and rotten in the shell just won't do. They also do a heck of a job as composters. You know when you find a partially eaten apple at the base of the tree? There is a reason for that. Squirrels instinctively munch and mulch, leaving enough fruit behind to nourish seeds that, hopefully, will take root.

And speaking of trees, I now know how important it is to plan tree pruning around squirrel mating and birthing seasons. Christmas marks the start of court and spark time, babies arriving 45 days later. Mid-February to April, baby squirrel nurseries are full, definitely not the time to be lopping off tree branches and destroying intricate nests. The one to three babies usually born nurse for four months - a long, tender mother-child relationship. Mothered baby squirrels are calm and cuddly; but, according to Lila, their physical, and emotional, health suffers when they are orphaned - upon rescue, they can exhibit the undeniable symptoms of depression.

Healthy, happy, secure squirrels, on the other hand, can be real teases. Oh, be quiet the beating of my heart. They are fast, and they are smart. Smart enough to know that cats make great targets for territorial vocal outbursts and brazen displays of catch-me-if-you-can taunts. I witnessed this in my backyard as our resident squirrel dashed and danced before Brenda, our cat, who followed in quick pursuit, only to inevitably lose the race to the fence - over and over and over again. Somehow, squirrels know cats are easy fodder for playful stunts. Fast, but not quite fast enough.

Dogs are another story. Dogs kill squirrels. Just a mouthful of squirrel tail in an aggressive dog's mouth, can prove fatal to the "de-gloved" mammal. Squirrels depend on their tails for survival. Tails protect squirrels from rain and provide shade. Squirrels use their tails to communicate, warn of predators and for high-wire balancing acts. They hide behind their tails when they are feeling tentative, like a toddler behind Mommy's skirt.

And their tails don't grow back.

Perhaps this explains why I recently found myself chasing a dog that was chasing a squirrel - while directing not very ladylike language at the owner, who sat on a bench across the park, laughing as his out-of-control beast hurled itself at the low tree where the hapless squirrel took refuge. My furious defense confirmed my undeniable passion for these remarkable animals.

But I think my love affair with squirrels really started to blossom months earlier, shortly after my personal introduction on Lila's couch. It happened on a summer afternoon spent in contemplative meditation, sharing the bliss of a lazy, sun-dappled

moment with my squirrely companion. There he was, sprawled full length on the curving branch of the Chinese Hackberry tree in my front yard. His head lolled as he rested his cheek on his barky pillow, his front legs hung limply over each side of his woody bed, his hind legs stretched behind. I sat on my front steps and we gazed at each other for 10 minutes or more. I don't know about him, but I felt a complete sense of surrender, contentment and serenity.

Knowing what I knew about squirrels, thanks to Lila, I was full of wonder and appreciation. I was, I blush to say it, thoroughly smitten, with this smart, helpful, sleepy (with one eye open) little guy who shares my yard. Squirrels have made a tidy little nest in my heart; I am harvesting nuts for them (donated to YUWR), defending them, spreading the word and spreading the love.

How to help

By law, rehabilitated squirrels must be released within 3 miles of where they were rescued. Yggdrasil Urban Wildlife Rescue is always seeking foster-family yards for squirrels. The yards should be free of dogs and as far as possible from busy streets. Foster families must be willing to have small wooden release huts attached to trees, and, duplicating natural conditions, provide food for foraging at the base of the trees during the brief transition period between rehab to the wild.

Rehab center volunteers and donations are also welcome.

Call (510) 421-9897 or go to www.yuwr.org