

Vision Magazine

VISION MAGAZINE is an elegant balance of informative stories and inspiring viewpoints; rich, vivid color juxtaposed with appealing editorial, community resources, and calendar of events, each providing tools for living in a more peaceful and sustainable world. We currently print 90,000 copies of the magazine, which is distributed at over 1800 locations throughout California, Northern Arizona, and Hawaii.



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Human Rights

Nuts for Squirrels

A Love Affair

by Noelle Robbins

I have it bad. I am over the moon, infatuated, even a tad obsessed. I understood how serious this crush was 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. I had spent the previous autumn day rattling tree branches and hunting walnuts in earth-colored piles of leaves.

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 (YUWR), gently and irresistibly introduced me to the delights of Fox Squirrels. She did it in her cozy living room in Oakland, California, the first stop for orphaned baby squirrels delivered to YUWR for rehab and ultimate release into their natural environment.

The mission of YUWR includes education about and appreciation of the role urban wildlife plays in the community. Promoting empathy and wonder, connecting humans with their wild companions, and encouraging preservation and protection are important

goals. YUWR also teaches patience and compassion so that urban wildlife is not viewed as pests, but in a more positive way as fellow members of our environment.

Empathy, compassion, and wonder are powerful emotions. 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 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— those "did you know" tidbits of information that can inevitably peak your interest. For example: squirrels are natural gardeners. During their nut and seed gathering activity, they plant 70% of the world's deciduous forests. They also do a heck of a job composting. And there is a reason you will find a partially eaten apple at the base of a tree. Squirrels instinctively munch and mulch, leaving enough fruit behind to nourish seeds that hopefully will take root.

After spending time with Lila, I was so fascinated by squirrels and their role in our ecosystem, that I dug deeper for "nuts of wisdom." Turns out squirrels are a "keystone species." This term was coined by University of Washington zoology professor Robert Paine in 1969. A keystone species occupies such an important part of the natural world, and makes such a critical contribution to the diversity of life, that should it become extinct, other forms of life dependent on the species would also meet their demise. Keystone species are responsible for maintaining the literal lifeblood of their eco-communities. Squirrels are like the keystone of an arch, which would crumble without the tiny, but indispensable piece.

I love this imagery of squirrels for two reasons. According to the legend from which the name YUWR is derived, Yggdrasil is a Norse Mythical name for "World Tree," and this tree's branches stretch across the universe. Some branches support the heavens while others sustain the earth. Ratatosk, the squirrel, carries messages and mischief – and life force - scampering between the Earth goddess and Sky god. Ratatosk nourishes the tree and the tree provides support for all life in return.

Secondly, I love the image because it reminds me of the crucial role squirrels play in planting the woodlands of the world. It is not too far a stretch to compare squirrels to bees, those pollinators upon which a large part of our food supply depends. In this case, the very air we breathe is at least partially dependent on our little squirrel buddies doing what they do best with nuts and seeds.

Respecting, protecting, and, yes, cherishing squirrels is part of what Lila describes as “interspecies friendship.” Promoting compassion and wonder, and encouraging an emotional connection between humans and their wild companions are important goals of YUWR, which in addition to rescue and rehab, provides educational services about the eco-role of squirrels and other urban wildlife in our communities.

I think my love affair with squirrels really started to blossom shortly after my personal introduction on Lila’s couch. It happened on a sensual 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 ten 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 enchanted, and frankly, full of gratitude. I was, I blush to say it, thoroughly smitten, with this smart, helpful, sleepy little guy who shares my yard. Squirrels have made a tidy little nest in my heart; I am harvesting nuts for them, defending them, spreading the word, and spreading the love. Squirrels are a breath of fresh air—for our lungs, thanks to the trees they plant—and for our spirits, lifting us up, and slowing us down, asking us to pause for a moment to connect with their amusing antics, their emotional depth, and their wild wisdom.

The YUWR website describes easy and pleasurable ways to make yards more squirrel and other urban wildlife friendly. For more info, check out

www.yuwr.org, call 510.421.YUWR (9897) or email Lila at lila@yuwr.org. Read *North American Tree Squirrels*, by Michael Steele and John Koprowski for more about the wonders of squirrels.