

The squirrel that came in from the cold and invaded my home

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE JANUARY 18, 2009



A squirrel scurries for cover. The columnist's neighbours have lots of spaces under their roofs for cold wildlife.

Photograph by: JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

On Unwelcome Guests Our eyes lock. We are both frozen with terror.

I try to break the ice: "I know it's bone-chilling awful out there. I know you need a warm place to rest for a spell. I know you're probably starving. But could you have not just rung the bloody doorbell? You scared the (bad word) out of me, just popping up the way you did!"

I'm talking to a squirrel. It's futile. A minute later, the squirrel breaks for a spot under the radiator. I break for the door and slam it shut. Time to assess.

A few minutes earlier, I was minding my own business in my basement office. Then, out of nowhere, a squirrel popped up on my computer keyboard. Friendly enough eyes, but those teeth were sharp like razors.

Don't have a clue from where the critter materialized - heating duct, water pipe, radiator, heretofore undiscovered hole in the wall. So I call my friend Bob who has dealt with his share of wildlife - usually outside. Bob calls his cronies, two guys called Louie. They quickly come over.

We get hockey sticks, brooms, blankets and a makeshift trap containing a slice of bread with peanut butter. Then we enter the office, which is about six by nine feet, and spend the next few hours trying to coax the elusive squirrel out from under the rad.

We're knocking over stuff everywhere. It's not pretty. Finally, the squirrel, likely laughing out loud, goes for the peanut-buttered bread in the trap. One of the Louies grabs it, scampers outside and releases it.

End of story? Not exactly.

The other Louie tells me to come outside and check out the action around the flashing on my roof. "What's worse than a single squirrel in your basement?" he asks, before quickly answering: "The whole family!"

Great. There is an entire family of squirrels scurrying about on the ledge before entering a passageway to the inside. The squirrels appear to be smiling and waving their paws at us.

Who are we going to call now? "Squirrel-busters!" the two laughing Louies say in unison. "This is a job too big for the likes of us. Besides, we're running low on peanut butter."

The Squirrel-busters turn out to be an outfit called Humane Wildlife Control, one of the precious few companies equipped, as their name implies, to remove wildlife from your home humanely (which is to say not to maim or kill them) and to keep the situation under control.

Kevin Strunga, a biologist by trade, runs the Montreal operation for the Hamilton-based firm. He also does the grunt work of climbing on roofs when it's minus 30 outside and checking for animal tracks and hiding places.

After assessing the situation for an hour on my roof, Strunga informs me he can handle it. The squirrels could have entered anywhere on my block, because my townhouse like the others are all connected, with vents everywhere. But he has found the entry point under my roof.

He has also spotted the family of squirrels who've made my home their's. "They've been living there for years," he explains. "They've probably found a little space between the roof and the crawl space, and you just never heard them running around." Terrific, and here I thought those noises were caused by my energetically amorous neighbours.

But it could be worse. "Much worse," says Strunga, 34. "You could have discovered them after mating season and after they had another couple of litters.

"You could have also had flying red squirrels, which can be a real pain. You could have had an infestation of flying bats carrying rabies. That's really scary. They start colonies and can live up to 30 years. Or you could have had skunks with distemper. Or raccoons with the works. Or bat bugs. You really don't want bat bugs." I'm now feeling nauseous.

After getting the go-ahead, Strunga installs a one-way door to the squirrel-hole under my roof. Any squirrel inside can leave and will - because there is peanut butter at the door. But the squirrels are then locked out, and will have to find new digs.

"They won't have far to go," Strunga says. He points to the house across the street where there appears to be a giant squirrel reunion taking place. "I can drive down virtually any residential street in the city and just by looking up on the roofs, I will notice that one in 10 homes has some form of wildlife living there. Upon closer inspection, it's probably a lot more."

Squirrels don't need much space - to begin. But their nests can be large, extending to several feet along a pipe or in an attic. Strunga figures my squirrel took a wayward turn in a pipe and somehow emerged through a heating duct in the basement. He also figures that if one found the way, others could follow suit, because they smell the urine tracks left behind. Which is why I was quick to engage his services.

"This year, with the frigid temperatures, has been really busy. In one day alone, I had to get five squirrels who made their way down chimneys, not to mention a few birds, too," he says. "Squirrels can get in almost anywhere. They can fit through holes the size of baseballs. The problem for homeowners is that squirrels must constantly chew to keep their incisors from growing too long. When you have five, that can cause major damage. If they chew through electrical wiring, that can be a real fire hazard."

Over the years, Strunga has been called upon to pluck owls from chimneys, pythons from water pipes, a merlin - "a flying raptor-like torpedo" - from a warehouse and a boa constrictor from a toilet. Truly a swell way to start your day, sitting peacefully on your throne ... and yeow.

Strunga has had his share of bumps and bruises. "But mostly bites from squirrels, which thankfully don't carry rabies. They can bite through welders' mitts and wood. That's why folks call us. Then again, no one ever anticipates or budgets for wildlife expenses." True enough.

For more info about domestic infestations of squirrels and other wildlife, go to www.humanewildlifecontrol.com

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