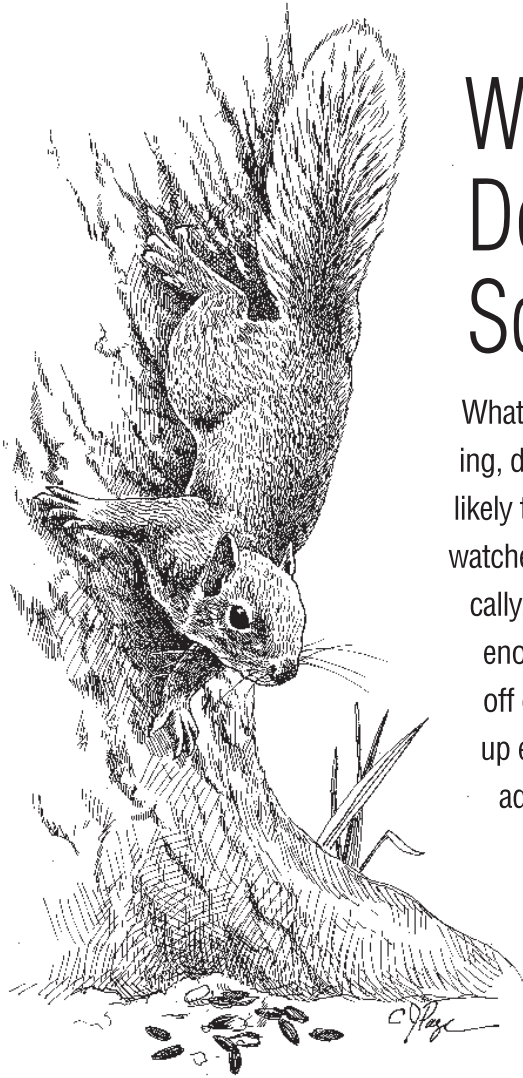


BirdNotes

from Sapsucker Woods

Interpreting and conserving the earth's biological diversity through research, education, and citizen science focused on birds.



What Can You Do About Squirrels?

What's the single most frustrating, annoying, downright infuriating thing a person is likely to face in backyard birding? Most bird watchers probably would answer emphatically, "Seed-stealing squirrels." It's not enough that the furry little felons drive off every songbird in the yard and gobble up expensive seed by the bushel; as an added insult determined squirrels will rip your bird feeder to shreds in the process. What can you do to stop them?

Baffles and Trick Poles

For starters, try to make your feeders inaccessible. That's no easy task when you're dealing with an animal as acrobatic as a squirrel. These creatures can leap 8 feet horizontally or jump 11 feet down from a roof or tree branch onto your feeder. Position feeders at least 10 feet from jumping-off points.

You'll also need to install baffles on all your feeders. Here at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology—where we suspect we have the world's craftiest squirrels—we've experimented a lot with baffle placement. We find that we can repel jumping squirrels by placing tilting baffles over a feeder. Usually, when a squirrel lands on

such a baffle, the rodent simply slides off.

If your feeder is hung from a branch or suspended from a horizontal line, installing a tilting baffle at least 18 inches in diameter above your feeder might just do the trick. Another hint for suspended feeders: try hanging them from a three-to four-foot length of nylon monofilament fishing line instead of wire. If your feeders hang from a horizontal line or wire, place lengths of plastic tubing around the line; the tubing will spin when a squirrel tries to walk on it.

But if your feeder is mounted on a pole, you'll need to set up your baffle below the feeder, because squirrels can climb the slipperiest poles imaginable. In this case, the baffle need not (and probably should not) tilt. You can make a baffle quite easily from a garbage can lid or a similar round object. Or buy a ready-made baffle that fastens to the pole with a clamp. The only truly squirrel-proof feeder in the Lab's bird garden is a tube feeder that's mounted on a pole more than 10 feet from cover. It has a 16-inch baffle fastened about a foot below the feeder bottom. The baffle also serves as a feeding tray that catches seed spilled from above.

Squirrel Spooker

Instead of—or in addition to—a baffle, you could buy a "squirrel spooker" pole. These ingenious spooker devices have a moveable plastic sleeve covering the upper



part of the pole, held in place with a simple counterweight system. When a squirrel reaches the plastic sleeve on its way up to the feeder, the sleeve slips down, dumping the surprised squirrel onto the ground. The sleeve then automatically moves back into place, ready for the next squirrel.

Some people suggest coating feeder poles with grease or glycerin, but we don't recommend using these substances—they might be harmful to wildlife. Many chemicals are toxic, and grease can mat feathers or fur, which could cause both squirrels and birds to freeze to death.

Squirrel-proof Feeders

If your yard has too many squirrel-launching platforms—fences, rooftops, trees—it may be impossible to keep squirrels off your feeders. And if squirrels are chewing your feeders to bits, you have little choice but to switch to a new feeder made of indestructible material, such as Lexan. The best feeders also have seed ports reinforced with metal and come with guarantees against destruction by squirrels.

Another choice is an all-metal feeder with a counterweighted door that closes automatically, protecting the seed whenever anything heavier than a songbird steps on the feeding platform. Several brands are available on the market. They're not the prettiest feeders in the world—some people would say they're ugly—but they do a good job of protecting expensive seed.

If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em

As a final measure, why not try bribing the squirrels with foods that they like more than birdseed? Set out some raw peanuts in the shell, throw some inexpensive cracked corn on the ground, or dangle some ears of corn from your tree. You'll find that the squirrels will end up spending a lot of their time feeding on these

humble offerings, allowing the birds to fill up at your feeder.

Who knows? You might eventually even come to enjoy the squirrels. They are, after all, interesting creatures in their own right. Their presence will only add to the fun of your backyard bird feeding station, once you learn to cope with them.

For More Information

Outwitting Squirrels, by Bill Adler, Jr., is a book that will keep you laughing about your furry visitors. Loads of practical solutions, too.

You might even come to enjoy squirrels. They are, after all, interesting creatures in their own right!



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