

# The Windsor Gardens Society of Squirrels

By Dennis Payton Knight

In spaces along the High Line Canal on the south edge of Windsor Gardens, and the wetlands preserve we call Windsor West, and on our beautiful grounds, exists an ecology of birds and animals that make our lives more rich and full. Sharing their space with us are deer, raccoons, rabbits, doves and owls, larks and sparrows, and butterflies.

And squirrels. Lots of squirrels. Specifically, Fox Squirrels, those fluffy, playful little critters scampering about the grounds. They make their shelter in hollowed out places in trees, but where these dens are not available, they will build leaf nests in the forks of elms and cottonwoods about 30 feet above ground. These two types of homes are called dreys.

It also happens that we have a population of woodpeckers known as flickers, drilling cavities in our deciduous trees with their rapid rat-a-tat-tat. For that reason, flickers are natural allies of squirrels, even if we humans would like to jam corks on the ends of their beaks.

The dreys are where squirrels bear and raise their litters, which can arrive a couple of times a year. Their diet is varied, including tree buds, insects, roots, bird eggs, and wild fruits. Of course squirrels would like to follow the comic book stereotype and feast on walnuts and acorns. They don't seem to bother much with the kind of nuts we have around Windsor Gardens; at least, none have come after me.

Common research says squirrels are not particularly gregarious, and they have even been called solitary and non-social. We humans at Windsor Gardens would be skeptical of that claim, because we watch them run and play every day. Squirrels are teases, often taunting my little Beagle, watching her stalk slowly, approaching quietly and low to the ground, before she makes her dash. The squirrels will often let her get to within about a foot before darting safely up a tree. It must be, for them, an adrenaline rush.

Squirrels have a large vocabulary consisting of clucks and chucking sounds. They warn of impending threats with screams and high pitched whines. They are amazing jumpers, easily spanning fifteen feet in a single horizontal leap, and free-falling twenty feet or more to land softly on a limb.

Squirrels are diurnal, which means they are active only during the day, and because they are, they seem safe from our coyotes, or maybe it's because coyotes, like dogs, can't climb trees. But there are enough natural predators such as owls and hawks and foxes to keep the numbers healthy.

The squirrel does have one enemy, however, and it is not part of the natural order. It is that self-styled benefactor who ignores common sense and the rules of our community, feeding the creatures with salty peanuts, scraps of bread and other human junk. These foods not good for squirrels, and hand feeding takes away their natural fear of their single greatest threat, the human being. Stop it!