OUTDOORS

Tree squirrels of Colorado

Our backyard, which is affectionately known as the playground for our Jack Russell erriers, has a 6-foot high wooden privacy fence along the entire back lot line. My "jacks" who are natural born and bred hunters have a terrific time in the great suburban outback chasing wildlife.

For a long time we had a squirrel that lived in a cottonwood tree behind

the property, and his major quest in life was to irritate the dogs. This crazy squirrel would run along the top of that fence, back and forth, well out of reach of the dogs.

The squirrel would mock, tease, name call, and generally harass the dogs mercilessly, for days on end. The dogs would never give up, barking and chasing the squirrel back and forth across the yard, until one day.

The fatal mistake made by the squirrel was underestimating the intelligence of the Jacks. My large female Jack waited until the squirrel positioned himself on top of the fence in the middle of the yard. As the squirrel was doing his normal name calling to the dogs, this Jack ran full bore to the fence, jump and did a body slam into the fence, similar to a hockey player checking an opposing player into the boards.

The impact caused the squirrel to lose his balance and fall from the fence directly into the jaws of the awaiting Jack, thereby nullifying all of the squirrel's life memberships. I was saddened by the incident because my wife and I really enjoyed the entertainment provided by this animal circus.

Colorado is home to 2 different categories of squirrels. One is known as the ground squirrels. There are quite a few ground squirrel species found in the state but the one most common to us on the Western Slope would be the rock squirrel.

The second category of squirrels is known as the tree squirrels. There are 3 members in our state including the Abert's, pine and fox squirrel. Fox squirrels are not native to Colorado, but have gradually spread into the state from the east. Fox squirrels are the largest species of squirrel in North America, and the one you are most likely to run into around town.

Abert's and pine squirrels are both native to Colorado. These two live in the forested areas of the state and are the ones you will most likely see while hiking up in the mountains.

Abert's squirrel lives mostly above 8,000 feet, rarely going above 10,000 feet in altitude. They are very unique in that their



Tips from the Posse By Mark Rackay

ears are tufted or tasseled in appearance. These oversize ear tufts disappear during the spring and summer months. Their fur color may vary from the usual black to a dark shade of gray.

Abert's rely on the tall ponderosa pines for survival. They use the trees for nesting, cover and food. The Abert's will select the trees with the best taste and most nutritional value. They are

not an aggressive animal and their home range rarely exceeds 20 acres.

The preferred food for the Abert's is the seeds of the cone of the ponderosa pine. During the summer, their diet will include a great deal of fungi. Unlike other tree squirrels, they do not store large caches of food in their nest but they will occasionally bury a cone for later.

The pine squirrel is a solitary animal that can be easily identified by the noises they make. They do not like intruders and are much more aggressive than the Abert's. Pine squirrels will scold, growl, screech and chirp at any intruder, letting all around know of their displeasure.

Home territory of the pine squirrel is restricted to the mature pine, Douglas fir, spruce and mixed wooded forests of the state. They will have several nests in hollow trees, or underground tunnels, and multiple food caches.

The pine squirrel is the smallest tree squirrel in Colorado, averaging 12 to 13 inches in length. Their colors will range from rust red to grayish red, and its tail is outlined with a broad, black band edged with white.

Generally, pine squirrels have a favorite tree where they like to eat. Below this tree, they will drop leftover cone pieces. These leftover cone pieces will accumulate into large piles called middens, which may be up to 30 feet across and a couple feet deep. When you see a large midden, it indicates that several generations of squirrels have used the same feeding tree.

Home territories are usually centered around middens because they contain 1 to 2 years of cone resources. Because of this, their territory averages 2 acres, depending on the availability of food.

Fox squirrels are the critters we usually see around town. They can range in color from a gray with a rust colored underbelly, to a black and brown with a white stripe. I have seen them with a completely beige color over their entire body.

The body length of a fox squirrel may reach 15 inches in length. Their diet is just about anything not nailed down, including acorns, walnut, beech, mulberry, buds, fruits, berries, corn, insects, moths and



This is the new squirrel hanging out around our house. So far, the "Jacks" have not seen him. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Mark Rackay)

beetles. These are also the squirrels that will raid your bird feeder.

The fox squirrel has sweat glands in their feet. During the hot summer weather, it will actually leave damp footprints on a dry surface.

Many people spend a great deal of time trying to squirrel-proof their bird feeders, my wife included. These clever little rodents always seem to find a way to get past the barriers and feast on the birdseed.

Tree squirrels have two litters of 2 to 5 young, one litter in spring and the other in early summer. The gestation period is usually 7 weeks.

Squirrels have a set of incisors, similar to that of a beaver, that grow about 6 inches a year. The squirrel must constantly gnaw on hard materials to keep them worn down and sharp.

Squirrels can be very destructive. They will gnaw bark off a tree, especially in the winter, and commit a constant assault on bird feeders. We had a squirrel break into an outbuilding and build a nest in our boat. The critter tore up all the wood, cushions and floatation, causing several grand in damages. My grandfather hunted him for several months but could never catch up with the burglar.

We have a new fox squirrel around our house now. So far, he has played havoc on my wife's bird feeder but has not yet figured out how to annoy the dogs. Hopefully he will run the fence line and get the dogs to give chase. They need the exercise.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@bresnan.net



Subscribe with us and have the news at your fingertips



sounds complicated, but I've found, if you keep the pile moist, not wet or dry, and alternate layers of green material (nitrogen) with brown stuff (carbon) and mix the layers around occasionally it works pretty well. It definitely beats throwing produce scraps, leaves, and grass clippings into the landfill.

Planting for pollinators has definitely taken off in recent years. I'm sure this trend is going to be even more popular this year. The idea of planting flowers and trees that will attract bees and butterflies just seems to make good sense.

Double duty gardens are also going to be big in 2020. This is basically planting fruit and vegetables to be eaten as well as function as ornamental plants. A tomato plant can easily be tucked into a sunny flower bed. A fruit tree could take the place of a small shade tree. Just keep in mind, plants like fruit trees or grapes don't like as much water as a bluegrass lawn and will require pruning and insect control and perhaps some deer deterrents.

Of course I always have to plant at least one new variety of something. Usually it's a cool flower or an unusual colored vegetable. Last year I finally gave in and tried some dark purple cherry tomatoes. They were great! The color was pretty with orange, yellow and red cherry tomatoes in a salad. And I really liked the flavor.

I'm planning to go into some of these topics in more detail in upcoming articles as the season progresses. Nonetheless, whatever your vision is for 2020 I hope you have a happy year of gardening.

Linda Corwine McIntosh is an ISA Certified Arborist, Licensed Commercial Pesticide Applicator, and Advanced Master Gardener.



Support local journalism by purchasing an annual print or digital subscription and receive a \$20 gift card from one of the following retailers:



Pay monthly with our **EZ pay** program. Call and ask for details

Gift cards available while supplies last. Print subscribers receive digital access. Printed version delivered Tue-Sun.

970-249-3444 montrosepress.com





3509 Woodbridge place Montrose



501 E Main St • Montrose, CO 81401 Monday through Saturday 10-4 **970.417.4361** CokerHomes.com david@cokerhomes.com