

It seems that every time a squirrel gets cut a break, another we've-had-it-up-to-here Southlander cries foul and reaffirms his God-given right to live in a squirrel-free America.

Monday, as US District Judge Emmett G. Sullivan of Washington overturned the Interior Department's decision to remove the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel from the endangered species list, local contrarians reaffirmed their commitment to "thinning" squirrel populations. Within hours spoilers of the small victory for the Northern Fliers stepped up the fight, threatening an all-out squirrel hunt. Squirrel advocate extremists countered with threats to vandalize communities that did not abide by the court's decision. It's getting ugly on both sides of the fence.

Our property is well populated with squirrels. In my experience each squirrel population is unique. Our squirrels are hipsters, squirrels that hang out all day behind a pile of bricks in the backyard, obsessively patting down their untamed hair and looking *laissez-faire*, but look away for just a second and they've disappeared to clog a drain, say, or bring down a power line. It is fair to say that when they're not fussing with their appearance, and when they are not asleep, they're making trouble for the establishment.

Our squirrels are standard issue Grey Squirrels, *Sciurus carolinensis*, but they don't answer to that. They are inflexible that way.

They traverse the yard via a complex snarl of growth that I am always promising to trim back, bare shrubbery and cast-off branches. They take to the undergrowth and then spring up like gag snakes in a can to meet with some high-arching, dead-end bough. I'm not the first to be fooled into thinking that one of them has gotten himself into a pickle this way; my father worries over them. He says he wants to help them out but is concerned about "tainting the nest." Tainting the nest has to do with handing baby animals who are then, because they have been fouled by human hands, kicked to the curb by their parents and for good. I tell him that I don't know if you can foul an adult squirrel, but his concern is for pubescent squirrels; he wants to know how you can tell the difference. He sits in the yard and keeps vigil, and when a squirrel trips up, my father yells, "Squirrel

down." I told him to concern himself with rabies, but I doubted myself and read up. Squirrels don't carry rabies, but it's just the sort of thing they'd use against them in West Virginia.

In our yard the solution to the dead-end branch thing is to leap to a nearby, younger, more-supple branch and vault to subsequently larger branches. Some make use of telephone poles, which are essentially trees, or were trees, so it makes perfect sense that squirrels would be drawn to them. The poles are outfitted with small metal pegs so that the electricity guy can climb up when he needs to and when the squirrels aren't using the pole for something else. Here's what's odd: instead of digging in their nails and properly climbing the pole as the good Lord would have them do, they use the pegs. They stretch and wrap their bodies around the trunk amazingly, like when smallish snakes eat extra large rodents. Our squirrels climb methodically, taking each step rung by rung. I think that were people to pay more attention to some of the astonishing things squirrels can do, they might knock them up a notch or two on the animals-that-deserve-to-live scale and we wouldn't see conflicts like those we're seeing now.

I worry about the lesser-seen squirrel population in West Virginia. You hardly ever see a female squirrel because their young are born naked, toothless, helpless, and blind, so you can understand why a squirrel mother just takes up residence in some tree or under a log and never comes out, just holding it together while she laments her station. I imagine that those who are out to rid the earth of squirrels draw no distinctions among more-visible squirrels, the young and blind, and their bedraggled mothers.

The cooler months, before winter arrives in earnest, are prime nut-gathering season, so there is less time for mischievousness. A new crop of nuts doesn't start to crack and sprout until early spring. With reserves diminished and with new food sources not yet available, squirrels rely heavily on thieving. Some take the higher moral ground and stick to meals of insets, pinecones, and fungi. Blossoms are also a popular stopgap measure. But again, in my estimation you're not likely to find many virtuous squirrels.

I read that a rogue squirrel once took down a young chicken. On a squirrel scale, that's about as ambitious as you can be and at the same time about as low as you can sink.

The United Kingdom is hugely out of favor with squirrels nationwide. I can say this with complete certainty and without any credibility, and I assure you that I am 100 percent correct.

In the United Kingdom, the Eastern Grey Squirrel has few natural predators. This has aided its rapid population growth and has led to the species' being classed as a pest. Measures are being devised to reduce its numbers, including one plan for celebrity television chefs to promote the idea of eating the squirrels. In areas where relict populations of Red Squirrel survive, such as the islands of Anglesey and Brownsea, programs seeking to eradicate pest squirrels are in progress in an effort to allow Red Squirrel populations to recover.

Although complex and controversial, the main factor in the Eastern Grey's displacement of the Red Squirrel is thought to be its greater fitness and, hence, a competitive advantage over the Red Squirrel on all measures. The Eastern Grey Squirrel tends to be larger and stronger than the Red Squirrel and has been shown to have a greater ability to store fat for winter. The Grey can therefore compete more effectively for a larger share of the available food, resulting in relatively lower survival and breeding rates among the Red. Parapoxvirus may also be a strongly contributing factor; Red Squirrels are fatally affected by the disease, whereas Eastern Grey Squirrels are unaffected but thought to be carriers. The Red Squirrel is also less tolerant of habitat destruction and fragmentation, which has led to its population decline, while the more adaptable Eastern Grey has taken advantage and expanded; the same is true of squirrel populations in the American Northwest, where the Native American Red Squirrel has been largely displaced by the Eastern Grey.

Ironically, 2008 saw the rise of fears for the future of the Eastern Grey Squirrel, as the melanistic form (black) began to spread through the southern British population. In the United Kingdom, if a Grey Squirrel is trapped, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is illegal to release it or to allow it to escape into the wild; instead they should be humanely destroyed.

The UK decree combined with the impending West Virginia showdown as you can imagine has everyone around the brick pile pretty much on edge. Still, they put on brave faces and get on with their morning ablutions before dropping almond shells down the sink vent.