

Trapped in the Nuthouse and other Trials of Motherhood

Among my pleasures, these November days, are visits from Priscilla. I see her in the yellow birch tree and call to her. She climbs down headfirst and bounds over, her tail following like a ribbon behind her. She climbs up my leg and sits on my shoulder to eat walnuts. I bury my nose in her soft gray coat and inhale the scent of her nest—*eau de* autumn leaves.

When she has had enough to eat, she will take a proffered walnut in her teeth, hop to the back of my neck, push the nut through my braid and give it a few pokes with her nose. She then musses my hair over it, pats it down, and comes back for the next piece.

I am able to have this relationship with Priscilla because, as far as she is concerned, I am her mother. Priscilla came to me, orphaned, when she was about six weeks old, and joined Albert, a squirrel of about the same age. The comfort of “mother” is a keen need in mammals, and she was quick to accept any bearer of sustenance and warmth.

I am also able to have this relationship because I am a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. It is illegal to raise orphaned wildlife without a license, and unwise to attempt it. It is only the support and experience of the network of rehabilitators that has allowed me to successfully raise my furry children.

My first squirrel was Mr. Alberts. I named him, indefensibly, after my childhood schoolbus driver. The little squirrel was most content when sleeping inside the back of my collar under my hair. He never objected to being fussed with. Instead he would stir, yawn, and then grab my hand and pull it close like a security blanket. If I scratched his chin and chest, he would stretch his legs and tilt his head to make sure I hit all of the “good” spots.

As soon as he could hoist himself onto his wobbly legs, Mr. Alberts was ready to play. Kitten style, he would arch his back, give a few bucks, and attack. I took to wearing gloves to protect my mauled hands and looked forward to his siestas.

As baby squirrels get older the oblivious trust of infancy gives way abruptly to awareness of the world. This awareness induces curiosity as well as alarm, and each day the little squirrels expand their orbit around their nest. Then one day they de-



cide to make their own nest. Mr. Albert's first nest was in the laundry basket. Once he had made it he refused to sleep anywhere else.

Surely such independence suggested he was ready to meet a tree. I ran a plank from the bedroom windowsill to a branch on the adjoining maple. He made his way cautiously up the plank, and there he discovered the essence of squirrel-dom. He began slowly, fascinated by smells and flavors. Then he realized he could go, and went. In seconds, the fearless Mr. Alberts dangled from dainty twigs seventy feet up. Few things in my life have been as thrilling and terrifying as watching my squirrel kids discover trees.

After a few days of sorties, he made his first outdoor nest and seldom came in the house again.

My squirrel rearing has changed since then. I now work with other rehabilitators to make sure my squirrels have “siblings.” Their first home is a cardboard nest box. When they are old enough to leave the nest, I place their box in a three-story wire cage, replete with sticks, dirt, leaves and foods to sample.

When they are about eight weeks old I put them into a big outdoor pre-release cage where they can experience climbing, sunshine, rain and wind, while remaining safe from predators. This cage is called The Nuthouse, naturally. I do not visit the Nuthouse to feed the squirrels when I have to be somewhere else soon. This is partly because the squirrels are so entertaining. They combine the abilities of trapeze artists and superballs. Here is a sample series of maneuvers: spring from a branch, ricochet off a vertical trunk, bounce off the ground

to grab leg, cling there upside down, dash spirals up and down legs, scamper up to shoulder, leap to a branch, swing around it, make a flying leap to the top of mother's head. Take a bow. This goes on and on.

Even when I want to leave, challenges await. Squirrels are not like cats. You can't pick them up and put them down. They are, well, squirrely. Furthermore, any one of their eighteen claws can attach a squirrel to a surface. Good luck freeing all of them at once. I can only wait for a moment when all the squirrels are off me and slip out the door. The squirrels soon learn my ways and will interrupt whatever they're doing and leap for me when I make my move. This is not because they have any interest in getting out; they ignore the open door itself. They want to keep me, mother and favorite tree, in the Nuthouse.

When they are ready for the big world they let me know. They are no longer content in a confined space, but begin to pace. Assuming there is a block of good weather and the whole group is ready, that will be the day they discover trees.

By the end of their first wild season my squirrels have no interest in people, not even their doting mother. I sometimes recognize one of them out in the world. This summer I even met some grandchildren out with their mother. I am glad to know they're doing well, though a little gratitude would be welcome!

These are a mother's stories. The best stories about squirrels have to do with their role in forest ecology. I will tell them to you one day, but right now I see Priscilla in the yellow birch. I don't want to miss any of November's ephemeral pleasures.

