

Dining at the Maple Shade

Rows of maples have stood sentry along the path up to the barn at Log Cabin Farm for two centuries. The trees' craggy bark and sprawling branches act as a neon sign, beckoning birds and mammals from the neighborhood. I offer further enticement by leaving treats at the bases of these trees. I also dish up seeds in piles along a shed roof. Within five minutes the regulars are seated—mostly red squirrels, gray squirrels, and chipmunks. Blue jays, grosbeaks, chipping sparrows, and cardinals add local color. On special mornings the crows come, too. This morning a velvety gray shrew popped in for a quick bite.

Every day I catch up on the gossip at the Maple Shade Diner. I have to admit that I find the squirrels the most entertaining. They always have a lot to say, and if you spend enough time watching them, you can begin to tell them apart by their markings and personalities.

I used to put food out each evening so I could keep track of the comings and goings of the Maple Shade visitors from the comfort of bed each morning. One morning, however, a new guest appeared at the base of the nearest maple. The graceful dark fisher didn't linger, but loped across the yard toward the goat encampment. I wasn't sure how to feel about a squirrel predator showing up for breakfast at the diner, but decided that I needed to see more and jumped out of bed. From the window, however, I saw a different guest where the fisher disappeared—a tawny red fox. After admiring the fox for a minute, I discovered that his interest was not in the goats. A long dark tail thrashing in the little tree near the fox revealed the location of the fisher. These two predators were not much different in size, and I'll admit I was surprised to see the big male fisher held at bay by the fox.

Once I saw the fisher through binoculars, all my animosity toward the squirrel-eater vanished. His stubby bear face gazed down from fifteen feet up in the tree. He

seemed more perplexed than concerned. I admired his short, wide ears and the pattern of colors in his salt-and-pepper coat. At last the fox's gaze began to wander, and after twenty minutes he strolled up the hill a bit and lay down. By then it was 7:15 a.m. and a few cars rumbled by. I suspected Fox and Fisher would prefer to be somewhere more secluded. At 7:30, Fox trotted off, feigning innocence. Fisher clambered down headfirst and continued through the goat pen in hunting mode, weaving, nose to the ground. Just past the barn he picked up speed and bounded up a pine, a canine streak in pursuit. Now Fox and Fisher spent some seconds demonstrating their fitness. Fox scraped the earth with his front paws and then hurled himself onto his belly in a short slide. He scent-marked a stump. Fisher swished his tail vigorously and stared down at Fox. Within a few minutes Fox seemed less committed to his challenge, and within 15 minutes he disappeared. Fisher's demeanor changed. His attention concentrated on shifting points below. He was back in hunting mode. By now squirrels had arrived at the Maple Shade, oblivious to the menace draped in the pine behind the barn. I was happy to watch the fisher lope away into the woods.

Since then I've been putting squirrel food out after I get up in the morning. Sure, fishers are cute, and they're hungry, too. Still, it doesn't seem fair to invite squirrels in to dine, and then include them on the menu.

Though I now serve only well after dawn, I know plenty of diners are drawn to the Maple Shade at night. Flying squirrels, mice and voles clean up whatever the diurnal patrons leave behind. In the winter I've seen tracks of red and gray foxes. I've long been fascinated by gray foxes. They have such crisp, beautiful markings. Discreet and retiring, these foxes are less flamboyant than their relatives in red. I'd seen the red foxes, but had yet to see the shy



gray fox at the Maple Shade. On my way down from the barn last week, I finally captured that sought after shape in my flashlight beam.

After gazing briefly into my light, the gray fox calmly returned to her rodent stalking. I noted her black-tipped tail and dainty gray legs (red foxes have white-tipped tails and black legs). Soon she left the Maple Shade and headed for the woods. I stood a moment longer, with all the flying insects within a quarter mile now fluttering around my light. Sure enough, the fox came back. It soon became clear that my light and its insects intrigued her. She stalked closer, giving me time to wonder whether she might be rabid. She did not look like a diseased animal.

Still, I decided I'd let her know I was behind the light if she came closer than five feet. Soon the beautiful black, gray, red and white markings of her face came into clear focus. At five feet she paused, stretched out her nose, and then leapt away. About twelve feet away, she composed herself, and trotted back into the woods.

Life has a way of getting busy, and I don't get to spend as much time as I'd like in the woods. The Maple Shade and its patrons bring a bit of the brightness of nature to me every day, and I like to think, as I listen to the chatter of the guests, it brightens their day, too.