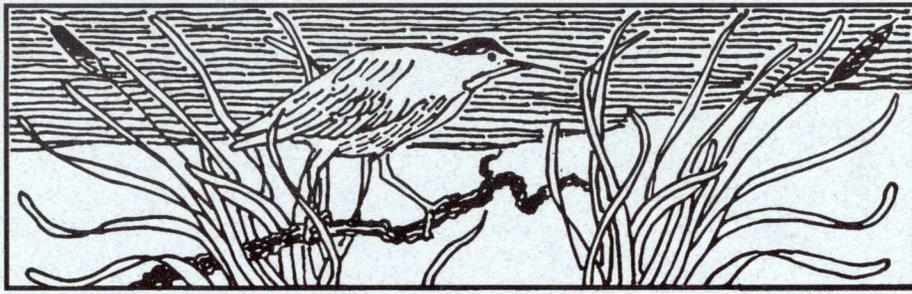


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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Black Fur at the Feeder

--Mark Spreyer

As I write this, four squirrels are scrounging for spilled seed under the bird feeder. (Thanks to a slippery section of stovepipe, the squirrels are denied access to my platform feeder.) Three are typical eastern gray squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*) but one is a dramatically pure black squirrel. Where did he come from?

Before answering this question, I have to discuss squirrels and feeders in a bit more detail. Early last winter, I did battle with one of the most persistent gray squirrels I ever met. It was because of her that I wrapped the feeder's wooden post, that was easily climbed, with the stovepipe. She then launched an aerial attack-- leaping from branches that were so high above the feeder it was hard to believe she survived the jump. So, I did some strategic pruning and the poor rodent was left sitting on the stub that had been her launching pad. She twitched her furry tail in frustration and, in my imagination, cursed me.

When it comes to feeders, why are squirrels so persistent? Squirrels not only eat to live but live to eat. Adult gray squirrels consume approximately one and a half pounds of seed or acorns a week. Keeping in mind that the average weight for gray squirrels is one and a quarter pounds, they are eating more than

their entire body weight every week! Putting it another way, if the four squirrels I'm watching ate nothing but sunflower seed, a fifty-pound bag would last around eight weeks.

Of course, it is not fair to portray squirrels merely as feeder bandits. As many of you probably know, many oak trees owe their existence to a squirrel who stashed an acorn to be eaten later and then 'later' never came. In fact, squirrels are the primary animal involved in acorn transport. Squirrels, by the way, don't remember where they bury an acorn. However, thanks to their excellent sense of smell, they can sniff the nuts they've hidden as well as the food others have buried.



This time of year, squirrels are not merely eating to survive. They also need energy for breeding and raising young. Gray squirrels breed once or twice a year with their first season beginning in late January or February and the second in late June or early July. A litter of three to five young will arrive in the nest by the middle of March.

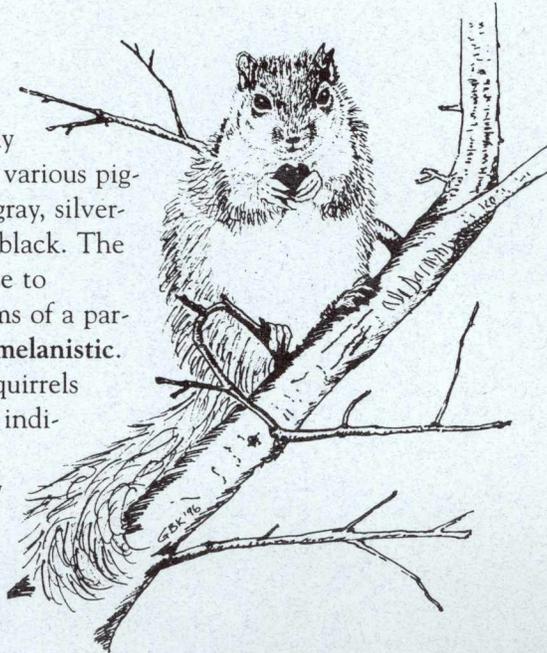
Interestingly, one of the first things a young squirrel does when it leaves the nest is bury nuts.

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On close examination, gray squirrels, young or old, are more than just gray in color. For example, their tails are gray frosted with white. The fur on their bodies has white and gray underneath and a mixture of brown, gray and yellow on top. Their fur also changes with the seasons. The squirrels' winter coat, as demonstrated by the ones under my feeder, include conspicuous white tufts at the backs of their ears. A black coat, though, is not a seasonal development.

So where do black squirrels come from? It turns out that gray squirrels come in various pigments including gray, silver-gray, albino, and black. The term zoologists use to describe dark forms of a particular species is **melanistic**. Melanistic gray squirrels can be sighted as individuals or as colonies. As early as 1857, Illinois naturalist Robert Kennicott collected fifty black squirrels along the Rock River.



Today, black squirrels are often seen in urban areas. The reason for this is unclear. One theory, which I find easy to believe, is that city dwellers are especially protective of their black squirrels. The pro-melanistic bias is also evident in certain areas where the game laws specify that gray squirrels can be shot but black ones cannot.

At Stillman, all squirrels are safe from human hunters. Even with such protection, the average life expectancy of a wild gray squirrel is ten to twelve months. This means my old adversary is long gone. Did she leave any offspring? Recent events make me wonder. Of all the squirrels that have visited my feeding station this winter, one has a particular habit

of scrambling up the tree used by the old-timer. Like his predecessor, this squirrel climbs to the very stub that was the launching pad, and twitches his tail in frustration. I'm told that both black and gray squirrels can occur in a single litter. Since it is the black squirrel that now curses from that branch stub, I think I know where this black squirrel came from.

PROGRAMS

BUILD YOUR OWN BIRD HOUSE

Many birds, including House Wrens, Tree Swallows, and Eastern Bluebirds, like to nest in tree cavities. You can increase the chances of attracting such birds by putting up nest boxes in your yard. Join Jim Kaltsas and Roy Schodtler, Stillman's favorite "tool time" guys, as they help you assemble your own nest box.

Date: Sunday, March 17

Time: 2:00PM

Fee: Please bring a hammer from home.

BIRD BANDING IS BACK!

Watch naturalist Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh, and record data about our resident and migratory birds.

Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.



Date: Sundays, April 7 & May 5

Time: 9:00AM to Noon

Fee: None

SUMMER HOURS BEGIN IN APRIL

In March, Stillman will be open Sundays from 1:00PM to 4:00PM. Starting in April, Stillman will be open Sundays from 9:00AM to 4:00PM.

SPRING TEACHER'S DAY

Besides being open on Sundays for the public, Stillman is available to school groups during the week. If you're a teacher and curious about what Stillman has to offer, this is the morning for you! Staff will be on hand to show you around the grounds and demonstrate activities that classes can do at Stillman. So, bring your questions and come dressed for the weather. We'll provide refreshments and plenty of field trip ideas.

Date: Saturday, April 27
Time: 9:00AM to Noon
Fee: None

**FOR MORE PROGRAM INFORMATION OR
TO MAKE RESERVATIONS, PLEASE CALL
(847) 428-OWLS.**

WILDFLOWER WALKS

Forest wildflowers appear for only a few short weeks each spring. Join us as we explore Stillman's woodlands in search of ephemeral beauties such as white trillium, may-apple, and Virginia bluebells. Bring your camera!

Date: Sundays, May 5 & 12
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



GARDEN CLUB THANK YOU

The Stillman Nature Center Board thanks The Garden Club of Barrington for their generous contribution of \$10,000. Part of the donation was used to purchase a new Macintosh computer and laser printer which will, among other things, facilitate the production of this newsletter. Other plans for the money include plantings and restoration of an arbor that was part of the original Stillman estate.

Not only do we appreciate the monetary gift, but the Stillman Board is also grateful for the vote of confidence The Garden Club donation represents. To all our donors and friends, the Stillman Board says, "Thank you." Our nature center prospers thanks to your support.

ONCE THE BIRD HOUSE IS BUILT, REMEMBER...

1) Never put perches on any bird house. Perches are often used by birds and predators that disrupt the nesting efforts of desired birds.

2) All houses, other than wren boxes, should be firmly attached to a support post, building, or tree. If you attach a bird house to a live tree, use lag screws and washers. This way, loosening the screws will allow for tree growth. Wren boxes can be suspended under an eave or tree limb.

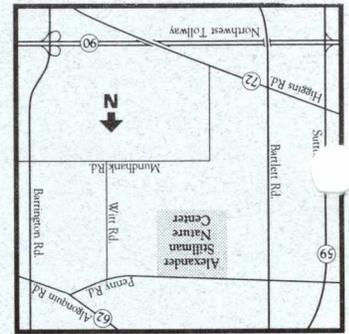


3) Never stain, paint, or treat a bird house with creosote.

4) Small animals, such as mice, squirrels and bees, may take up residence in nest boxes. If this is acceptable, additional houses will be needed to accommodate both birds and unexpected tenants.

5) Should you not want the above-mentioned tenants, take steps to prevent their arrival. For example, when the nesting season is over, leave the front or side of a songbird house open throughout the winter. This step will prevent deer mice from nesting in the box.

If you have comments about this newsletter, please call or write Mark Spreyer at the Stillman Nature Center.



(847) 428-0WLS
 South Barrington, IL 60010
 33 West Penny Road

STILLMAN
 nature center



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