

Consequences of Feeding Squirrels

Fact Sheet

Background

Squirrels are the famous cute little animals found in parks all across America. Did you know that squirrels were intentionally placed in man-made parks? They are generally not aggressive (unless cornered or infesting your home) which makes them great to have in the trees.

Recently some squirrels have increased in their aggression and became more fearless of humans- why is this happening?

The reason is because people are feeding squirrels. Feeding wild animals such as squirrels is very bad for them (and us), and as fun as it is, you should stop doing it- here's why.

Human Food Isn't Healthy For Them

Many people, including wildlife experts, don't think it's a good idea, for a variety of reasons. First, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) says that human food just isn't good for wild animals, and they can survive just fine on their own. Wild animals have specialized diets, and they can become malnourished or die if fed the wrong foods. Also, animals cannot distinguish food from wrappers or foil and can get sick eating these items.

Squirrels (and other wild animals) will eat basically anything that comes their way because they're so used to having to scavenge for food. While it seems like a kind gesture to help an animal out, you might actually not be doing it any good- they may become sick, weakened, or fatigued as a result of the human food you give them. Some wild animals are also meant to go longer periods of times without food, so the unnecessary amounts of food could make them apathetic and sick.

To make matters worse, when well-intentioned humans start giving squirrels food, they become dependent on those handouts. And if the early bird (they are diurnal) buffet closes, they won't be able to become self-sufficient again.

If generous humans do manage to keep the food supply steady, the happy, lazy squirrels go out and inform their squirrel friends that they've discovered a food paradise. So how is that a problem? That endless food supply attracts more squirrels, none of which have any intention of giving up the good life. An area overpopulated with squirrels can mean an increase in diseases that can be transmitted to pets, humans and other rodents (like more squirrels).

Feeding Prompts Infestation

Inflated populations of squirrels lead to big problems. Wild animals infest people's homes in search of shelter or food. Squirrels typically run away when you approach them, but that's only in the wild. In a cramped space such as an attic, they feel they have no other choice but to attack.

Animal infestation in your home is expensive and no fun to deal with. Save yourself the trouble and don't feed animals, especially when it's in the vicinity of your home, otherwise you'll be teaching them to come on in to search for food.

Increased Aggression

Wild animals are not civil creatures. When they are hungry, they'll do whatever it takes to get fed. When wild animals get conditioned to receiving food from us, they have the capacity to get very aggressive when we don't immediately feed them. They want their food, and they will get it. Animals naturally become aggressive in their search of food in the wild when hungry, and we don't want that aggression turning onto us.

Feeding them also teaches them that we will not harm them. Perceived threat of death is enough to keep most wild animals away. When that fear goes away, there's no telling just how aggressive wild animals can get.

As lovable as they may look, squirrels have sharp teeth and nails.

Fights between Squirrels

How many squirrels are you willing to feed? One? Two? One hundred?

When you feed wild animals such as squirrels, others that aren't getting fed get jealous. If you've ever been on the beach and watched a bird get fed, you'll observe that quickly countless birds fly around the one person all wanting their share. The same is true of squirrels. They will fight with each other in desperation for the food if they are hungry.

Again, feeding wild animals sounds like a kind gesture, but it may also promote violence between squirrels, undoing what good you set out to do.

Squirrels Spread Disease

Squirrels may bite and/or attack if you try to handle them, especially if their young are present. Squirrels may carry bacterial diseases that can be spread to humans through bites or by coming into contact with their feces. There are also pests (e.g., fleas, ticks) associated with squirrels that may carry pathogens that can cause disease. While not so common, squirrels can sometimes carry rabies, or other deadly diseases. These diseases are typically spread through bites and scratches, but can also spread just by touching.

Behavior

Female squirrels will typically create an average of four or five nest sites within the geographic range of their primary nest throughout the year. If the mother feels one nest is no longer safe, she will move to an alternative nesting site with her young. She will also create nest sites near the easiest source of food. Squirrels have litters twice a year and each litter averages about 3-5 young.

Damage

If the safety of people and pets isn't enough to sway you, then maybe property damage will. Ask most electricians and they'll tell you squirrels and other small rodents like them are responsible for a lot of the damage to wires and insulation in attics. And they can also do some serious destruction to siding as well.

Squirrels can either sneak their way right into your attic or eat their way in, ultimately causing plenty of damage. Squirrels like attics and undisturbed areas in general, and they especially love enclosed areas in winter for the warmth. If their food source is also right outside, that's even more reason to move on in. The problem is compounded when the population of squirrels in your area grows out of control because that food has attracted so many.

Squirrels will chew on everything except metal. That includes wood, concrete, brick, hardy board and roof shingles. They chew on gypsum board, wood and electrical wires and rip up insulation. They build nests in the attic and defecate there.

Squirrels also tear up yards and gardens in the Fall when they start stockpiling acorns, nuts and other food. The landscape and garden serve as their food depositories.

Summary

An infestation of squirrels nesting on your property can lead to building damage and landscape destruction. Don't let the problem multiply.

Do what is right for you, your family, your neighbors, as well as the squirrels themselves. Please stop feeding them.