

From tiny acorns, mighty squirrels grow: A tribute to Western grey squirrels by Serene Mellenthin



I had been fascinated with squirrels my entire life. Growing up in Wisconsin, I watched squirrels through my windows with binoculars, wishing I knew how they survived the harsh winters and how they remembered where they buried their nuts (turns out they don't remember). I read a book by Bernd Heinrich called Winter World and realized that squirrels are even more fascinating than I ever thought possible. The author inspired me to study squirrels in college at the University of Wisconsin. There, I earned a B.S. in wildlife ecology and habitat management and studied every kind of

squirrel I could wrap my brain around: Northern flying squirrel, eastern fox squirrel, 13-lined ground squirrel, and the beloved black-tailed prairie dog. It was not until I started volunteering at Chintimini Wildlife Center (CWC) after moving to Oregon in 2005, that I discovered my favorite squirrel of all, the Western grey squirrel. With its enormous bushy tail, its loud chatter, and huge body size, it was a charismatic critter that I watched ferociously out of my windows once again as I did as a child.

On Sundays and Wednesdays during my Ed Bird feeding shift, I would sit on the ICU floor with Mary Estes, a squirrel rehab expert, and watch her syringe-feed baby squirrels year after year. I watched in awe and envy. I never saw myself as a "homecare" person; I am a teacher, too busy to look after baby animals. This spring, our homecare staff lost volunteers and Mary asked if I would consider taking three baby squirrels home with me. They had been found on the ground soaking wet, abandoned, starving, and helpless. I was beside myself with glee and stayed up all night with them for the first four days. I tended to them every four hours and even came home at lunch during the school day to bottle feed them. One fretful Sunday morning during the first couple days of being a new "squirrel mom," one of the smallest and sickest of the three squirrels was gasping for air due to pneumonia caught from hours or days on the soaking wet ground. I held her for eight hours while she died in my arms. I cried so hard and my heart was broken. This squirrel was given a second chance, and I had not been given the power to deliver it. I continued my devotion to the remaining two squirrels day and night, and they both survived.

Over the course of the baby squirrel season of 2010, I rehabilitated five squirrels. It seems like a small accomplishment, but to any homecare provider, even one animal can make a huge difference in the world and our hearts. Western grey squirrel populations are crashing throughout Oregon as a result of habitat loss. They are listed as a Species of Concern, because Oak Savannah is their favored habitat and only 1% of that habitat remains. Yes,

Western grey squirrels *are* common in cities where food is plentiful and predators are scarce. It is their native habitat that has little-to-no squirrels present.

It is my duty as a scientist and wildlife rehabilitation volunteer to educate people about Western grey squirrels and teach them how necessary it is to coexist. It is also my hope that you will donate funds immediately to Chintimini Wildlife Center so that all injured, orphaned, and abandoned wildlife can get the treatment they need. You may not realize this, but the majority of injured wildlife admitted to CWC is due to negative human interactions, such as car collisions, domestic animal attacks, and humans unable to coexist with wildlife on their properties. Humans are the cause of many wildlife problems, and it is our job to pitch in and help the folks who help wildlife. I hope after reading this article you will immediately donate to CWC and hold binoculars to your windows and observe Western grey squirrels collect acorns and scamper elegantly in the trees.