Nuts about Squirrels
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Whether you enjoy the entertaining antics of the Eastern grey squirrel or you’re continuously plotting ways to exclude them from your bird feeders, one has to admit that they are resilient and clever creatures. The grey squirrel is the most common and largest squirrel in Connecticut. Their back and sides appear mostly silvery grey with white fur on their undersides. Black or reddish color phases occasionally appear.

The native range of grey squirrels is from Canada south along the eastern seaboard to Florida and west to about eastern Texas. Reputedly, they have been introduced to Great Britain and South Africa as well as Washington and western parts of Canada.

Adults are about 9 to 12 inches long with an equal length of broad, bushy tail enabling them to retain their balance as they leap from branch to branch. Grey squirrels belong to the species, *Sciurus*, derived from the Greek ‘skia’, which means to shadow and ‘oura’, which means tail. So in essence the name suggests a squirrel sits in the shadow of its tail.
Since grey squirrels predominantly feed on various nuts, prime habitat for them is patches of eastern deciduous hardwoods. They are particularly fond of acorns, beechnuts and hickory nuts and can easily open the harder shelled nuts with their strong incisors. When their main food source is scarce, grey squirrels will feed on fruits and berries, tree bark, roots, seeds and buds, flower parts, mushrooms, animal matter and of course, birdseed.

Grey squirrels will hide nuts and other food sources for later retrieval. Individuals may have a thousand of more caches of food and they have an excellent spatial memory, able to retrieve nearly every one of the food items they hid. Their keen sense of smell also helps them locate food caches when the ground is not frozen. When they fear they are being observed stashing their future dinners, grey squirrels will often pretend to bury the item all the while keeping it in their mouths. Populations wax and wane depending on the amount of food available. Squirrels may migrate in times of shortages as was likely evidenced, according to CT DEEP, in 1933 by more than 1000 squirrels observed swimming across the Connecticut River.

Older den trees with splits or cavities in them are preferred nesting sites for grey squirrels but when none are available, they will make a nest of leaves and twigs. These nests, called dreys, are suspended in treetops. Both types of nesting sites also offer protection from the elements and predators. Main predators of grey squirrels, aside from cars, are hawks, owls, snakes and foxes.

Typically grey squirrels in New England mate in late winter or early spring. Following approximately a 44-day gestation period, 2 to 7 blind and helpless young are born. They mature quite quickly and are usually weaned by 8 to 10 weeks of age. Sadly, only about 50 percent of the young make it to their first birthday. In captivity, grey squirrels can live 20 years or so; in the wild, their lifespan is closer to 12.5 years. For the most part, squirrels are fairly sociable and two or more are often seen foraging together.

Grey squirrels are a problem when they enter homes or other buildings. Usually there is some access point or sheltered nook where they seek refuge. Once inside, they can be very damaging chewing insulation and electrical wires. Often a pest control operator is called to trap the unwanted guests. Be sure to patch any entry points so another family of squirrels is not tempted to take up residence. Also, trim any tree limbs overhanging the roof and prune back tall foundation shrubs to make it more difficult for squirrels and other wildlife to access buildings.

Keeping grey squirrels away from the bird feeder is challenging. Probably the best tactic is just to set up squirrel feeders and let them eat. Determined bird lovers can put feeders on poles at least 5 feet high and away from any trees or large shrubs. Several styles of baffles can be attached to the pole to keep the squirrels from climbing it.

Special feeders that consist of a feeder surrounded by a cage with holes large enough for small birds but too small to allow squirrel passage can be purchased. Spring action feeders will close when a heavy bird or squirrel climbs on the perches. Also, squirrel proof seed, which is mixed with red pepper, can be tried.
Regardless of how one feels about them, grey squirrels are very adaptable and here to stay. Enjoy their antics when possible and do give them credit for their cleverness. For questions about grey squirrels or other wildlife or on other horticultural questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.