

INSIDE AURORA: Sciuridae Scurge

By Scott Johnston

Despite the fact that we live in a fairly treed area of town with several ravines nearby, until recently this has been a surprisingly squirrel-free neighbourhood.

We've had lots of chipmunks, who although delightful to watch, are slowly undermining the west side of our house with all their burrows, but a squirrel sighting was a rarity.

That changed this year.

In the spring I noticed our birdfeeder had fallen off of the tree where it normally hangs.

Not long after I put it back up, I noticed a black squirrel climbing down the side of it, so I knew the feeder had not been the victim of a freak windstorm.

Of course, the squirrel's weight soon caused the feeder to come down again, so this time I hung it up more securely on what I hoped was a less accessible branch.

Not only did the squirrel quickly prove me wrong by readily getting to it, but it also showed who was boss by both knocking down the feeder, and chewing huge holes in the side of it, rendering it completely useless.

Looking at options for a replacement, we came across no end of feeder designs, but all looked as insecure, and potentially edible, as our last one.

As for squirrel-proof feeders, we're not completely convinced of their invincibility, although you'd expect they'd be the animal kingdom equivalent of Fort Knox, based on the price.

So after both our existing feeder (and its contents) had been consumed, we didn't replace it. This has been a disappointment, not only for us, but for the many colourful birds who used to adorn it throughout the day.

But at least with no feeder to savage, squirrels were no longer bothering us.

Or so we thought.

Then we noticed that large chunks of bark had been eaten from various branches of our maple trees. The scope of the damage suggested that this was obviously the work of something much larger than an insect. And although my city friends suggest that Aurora's up in the boreal forest somewhere, we're not that far north to be considered firmly into porcupine territory.

That was when we started noticing not only the black and grey squirrels, but red ones as well. A quick bit of research confirmed that all of these members of the sciuridae family have been known to remove bark from trees, including maples.

We're not sure which of them is the culprit, but this is getting more serious, as the cost and time required to cut down, replace and grow a mature maple is a dramatic step up in scope from that of procuring a new bird feeder.

It seems clear that the local food chain is out of whack, because while we've seen an increase in chipmunks and squirrels, there doesn't seem to be a corresponding rise in the number of owls, hawks, foxes and other predators.

And despite the damage that domestic pets can do to local small bird and mammal populations, our neighbourhood dogs and cats are obviously a complacent bunch.

So, I've been on my own protecting our property from this mammalian invasion. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to discourage the chipmunks from digging around our foundation. As for the trees, I have a hard enough time stringing a few Christmas lights on them once a year, let alone contemplating encasing them completely in chainmail or Kevlar, or whatever we'd need to do to make them squirrel-proof.

But, perhaps more alarming, there are still more members of this rodent family native to Ontario, such as groundhogs, ground squirrels, and flying squirrels, which we have yet to encounter.

With our luck, they're queuing up now in the wings, just waiting to pull off our roof shingles, or deflate the tires on the car, or steal our welcome mat, or make their presence known in some new and equally undesirable manner.

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