

Few garden visitors divide the affections of homeowners as much as Grey Squirrels. They are attractive, sociable, playful and confiding animals whose behaviour is interesting, frequently amusing and often acrobatic. They are welcomed into gardens by many and may be the only mammal species (other than people) seen in any abundance by urban dwellers. In contrast, many gardeners and garden birdwatchers regard Grey Squirrels with aggravation, as an annoyance or even a pest.



May contain nuts! Grey Squirrels can consume large quantities of expensive bird food if they can reach it. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

Grey Squirrels are native to eastern North America and were introduced into Britain from the 1870s onwards, often as a fashionable novelty by the owners of country house estates. Escapees soon populated the surrounding countryside and their descendants are now found over most of the British Isles, as far north as central Scotland. Regrettably, their advance has been accompanied by the retreat of the native Red Squirrel over much of the country to isolated pockets of woodland. This has resulted from competition for food resources and the effects of squirrel parapoxvirus, carried by Greys (which are largely resistant) but which is rapidly fatal to Reds.

The Grey Squirrel's conflict with householders primarily results from its resourceful and opportunistic feeding habits. Although the squirrel's main diet consists of tree seeds, it will eat catkins, rosehips, fungi, shoots, buds, tree bark, tulips, crocuses, strawberries, sunflower seed heads, tree fruit and the flower heads of camellias and magnolias. It will also raid bird nests for both eggs and young and, when burying food for consumption later, may dig up ornamental plants and lawns. Grey Squirrels also enter loft spaces and cause damage by gnawing timber and electrical cables.

Despite these traits, many of us would be happy to share our gardens with Grey Squirrels if we could minimise the depredations they have on our bird feeding activities. Here are some steps you can take.

- Avoid plastic feeders - they are no match for a squirrel's chisel-like incisors.
- Locate your feeders far enough from trees, bushes and roofs that squirrels cannot leap onto them (but not so far away that birds feel insecure because of the lack of cover).
- Use feeders with metal cages around them that have a mesh size small enough to exclude squirrels (and large birds).
- Place baffles above hanging feeders and on the poles of feeding stations to prevent squirrels reaching the food

on offer. These can be purchased but much cheaper alternatives can be made using flower pots, plastic pop bottles and the like. (I have great success with clear, plastic bell cloches, available from garden stores.)

- Apply Vaseline to smooth metal feeder poles to prevent squirrels gaining purchase to climb.
- If your feeders are hanging from a horizontal line, feed the line through sections of garden hose or similar loose-fitting tubing on each side of the feeder which will rotate when a squirrel tries to cross.
- Use feeders with a mechanism that closes the feeding ports when a squirrel or large bird alights on the perch. These are more expensive than conventional feeders but the extra cost will soon be recovered in savings on seed.
- Distract your squirrels by offering them corn-on-the-cob or other attractive food at an alternative feeding location away from that used by your birds.
- Mix chili powder, cayenne pepper or piri-piri sauce with your bird seed. Mammals have receptors for the active ingredient of spicy food (capsaicin) that birds do not possess. Chili-coated seed is distasteful to squirrels but harmless and nutritious for birds.

John Arnfield

The author is BTO Ambassador for the GBW scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. Join GBW now and receive a free book, either Garden Birds and Wildlife or Gardening for Birdwatchers. Please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to find out more!



An inexpensive squirrel baffle to prevent access to a feeder. Remove the ventilator from the top of a cheap garden centre bell cloche and attach a collar to fit the support or (to protect a hanging feeder) attach a double-ended hook and hang the feeder inside the cloche. (Photo: John Arnfield)