



SQUIRRELS IN THE ATTIC, BATS IN THE JOHN

THE SQUIRRELS ARE PLAYING SOCCER IN THE ATTIC AGAIN. IT'S ABOUT 3 IN THE MORNING AND THE RACKET IS KEEPING ME AWAKE. A CHESTNUT ROLLS ACROSS THE FLOORBOARDS AND THE SCATTER-HOARDERS TAKE CHASE.

BY BICK TREUT

Dozing, I ponder the days when I thought squirrels were cute. As a boy, I'd chase them around trees to try to pet their soft gray fur. One day, a friend startled me by calling them rats with fluffy tails. It reminded me of Tex, the overweight White Diamond chef, who cynically responded to burger orders by mumbling "rats with tails" under his breath as he flattened ground beef on the grill next to some sizzling onions. For the longest time, I got hungry whenever I saw a squirrel.

Now I see squirrels as a nuisance with a sense of humor — like an uncle who accompanies jokes with jabs just to make sure that you're listening. Joanne Korba of Califon knows what I mean. She's the lady who was driving her new Honda Accord down Main Street awhile back when a squirrel fell out of a tree, through her open sun roof and onto the back seat. After hearing what sounded like a rock hitting the car, she "turned around and there it was, alive but a little stunned," she said. So Joanne slammed on the brakes, exited the car and screamed. Neighbors called the police. Sgt. Jeff Ollerenshaw arrived to coax the critter out the back door.

Since it was click-it-or-ticket month, he thought he'd get some laughs by writing a summons for driving the squirrel without a seat belt. "I don't think she saw the humor in it," he said before his tone became more serious. Sounding more like a physics professor than a cop, he said, "Think about it. You have a car driving 25 miles

per hour. You have a sun roof that's maybe, what, 1 foot by 3 feet? That squirrel's timing couldn't have been any better."

After I told the squirrel-through-the-sunroof story to some of my Raritan Valley Community College students, Emilie Gallagher raised her hand and said a crow flew into her car while driving to school. She was at the stop light at the Route 22 end of Round Valley Access Road when the bird swooped into her open driver side window. It just stood there with its talons on the door until the light turned green and then flew away, she said.

Birds in any man-made edifice are a cause for concern, particularly in the winter when you can't shoo them out an open door or window. One night two sparrows flew around the house after ascending from a nest crammed inside a hanging plant my wife brought in from the front stoop. After some valiant attempts to corner the birds with bed sheets, mops, brooms and dusters, she tried to wake me up to help. I muttered cryptically, "There's nothing you can do with birds" before falling back to sleep.

I wasn't as lucky the night a bat flew down the chimney. While innocently watching *Green Acres*, I sensed a dark form hovering overhead. At first I thought the kids were flying a paper airplane made from black construction paper. But my heart rate skyrocketed at the sight of the repulsive beast fluttering over my head, squealing while baring its ghastly fangs. I dashed for the closet and grabbed a tennis racket. Several overhead swats missed their mark.

Now the bat was angry. It looked me right in the

eye, opened its mouth and hissed like a cat. Convinced of the bat's intention to bite, I ran back to the closet. Seeking protection I put on an oversized winter coat, my son's scuba mask, several wool caps and a New York Mets batting helmet.

I charged the bat like a gallant gladiator — swinging the tennis racket with my right hand while jousting with a wiffle-ball bat with my left. The frightened bat changed course and flew up the stairs, down the hallway and into the upstairs bath. I gave chase and quickly slammed the door shut trapping it.

My nerves were shot and I shuddered over the next move. What happens when I open the door? I had visions of the bat swooping down and biting me in ambush. After watching me pacing the hallway for an eternity, my wife called our neighbor for help. He arrived wearing a giant pair of gloves. He bravely opened the door, grabbed the bat from the shower rod, opened the window, and threw it outside.

Something my dad told me helps put it all into perspective. One winter, just after I missed hitting a squirrel on the roof with a hard-packed snowball, he said, "You know, the animals were here before you were." He was right. When you live in this transition zone between civilization and nature that we call Hunterdon, I guess you've got to expect some ill-timed run-ins with the wildlife.

Hoping for dreamless sleep after all these recollections of outdoor creatures indoors, I roll over, turn my pillow cool-side up, and make my mind a blank. I'm nearly asleep when a chestnut clatters across the attic floorboards. ■