

Squirrels

Photos courtesy of Chuan-Chu Chou

Have you ever taken time to watch squirrels? These acrobatic animals can teach us humans a thing or two about taking chances and making things work out even when they don't go exactly as planned.

You may have seen squirrels jumping and leaping from tree to tree or walking on an electrical wire high above ground. They are sure footed and perform death defying jumps.

Scientists studying squirrels have not only noted their agility but also their decision making!¹

Squirrels contemplate not only where to jump to but also where to jump from. They seek out limbs or surfaces that will support the spring they need to launch a particular distance. While they don't always make a perfect landing, they know how to make adjustments so that they stick it!



In other words, these athletes know how to make the most of the situation they find themselves in!

Brightwood Park has many of these industrious animals that help the park's ecosystem stay healthy in a uniquely squirrely way! Their pattern of storing food underground actually plays a role in regenerating forests.

Squirrels are omnivores. They can eat a wide variety of foods including seeds, nuts, fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, insects, and so on. However, their diet relies mostly on seeds and nuts. These foods are plentiful in spring, summer and fall, but squirrels need to eat all winter too. So, squirrels prepare for winter by caching nuts and seeds.

A squirrel cache is a collection of nuts and seeds that they have buried in the ground to access in the winter when food is scarce. Squirrels generally bury the cache in various

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/05/science/squirrels-olympics-leaping.html>

locations about 1” deep in the soil. They have to remember where they have planted their caches so they develop a mental map. Still, they sometimes forget where all their caches are.

When squirrels leave caches of seeds and nuts in the ground, they are actually helping those seeds or tree nuts to grow and repopulate the forest.



Here are some other things you should know about these hardy animals:

- A squirrel's front teeth continue to grow throughout its lifetime. Squirrels need to chew to keep their teeth a proper length.
- Squirrels use their tails for balance.
- Squirrels rub their faces on acorns. Scientists think this is a way for them to put their scent on the nuts so that they will have an easier time finding them later.
- Squirrels chirp and shake their tails to communicate.
- Squirrels will sometimes create decoy caches to protect their real ones from other animals.

Squirrels! These amazing animals show us resilience and a never give up attitude! They deserve our respect.