

Living with Wildlife – Squirrels and the Summer Birthing Season

By Donna DuBreuil, President

Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre – www.wildlifeinfo.ca

Did you know that squirrels have two litters a year? The first babies are born during the blustery months of March and April, explaining why the mother often chooses a protected soffit or attic as a temporary den.

The second litter is born in July and August. And while the climate is less harsh, mothers will still sometimes seek a secure spot closer to people and away from predators such as crows, ravens and even red squirrels. The leaf nests or dreys high up in trees that squirrels normally occupy don't afford much protection for tiny newborns that weigh as little as 15 grams.

Although a female with babies would prefer to build her nest in a tree cavity, the loss of hardwood forests means she has to seek alternatives. Females will line the nest with whatever materials they can find. Mosses, grasses, dry leaves and shredded bark.

In the colder months the female will pluck and use the hair from her back and shoulders for the nest. You can always tell a mother squirrel with 'teenagers' because her hair will have started to come back in and the short new growth will be a different colour. It appears that the squirrel is wearing a dark vest with light pants.

There were always fewer orphans arriving at the Wildlife Centre during the summer birthing season compared to the earlier spring one. It made sense because the conditions were more favourable during the summer but we also suspected something else. It was that not all females bred twice but that the late litter from the previous summer were more likely to not breed until summer themselves.

The care of the young is the sole responsibility of the mother, and she is very devoted. If the mother senses any threat to the small and vulnerable babies, she will move them to safety. She rolls them up into a tight ball much like a jellyroll and carries them by the scruff of the neck to another location. A roofer who had disturbed a squirrel's nest once told me that the mother came back five times, literally walking over his boots, until she had retrieved each one of her offspring.

The babies mature quickly, developing hair by three weeks. Their eyes open by four weeks and by eight weeks, they are venturing out of the nest for short distances. By 12 weeks they are quite independent, although the summer litter will often den with their siblings over the winter.

For squirrels this is still the height of the birthing season. Do not take any action before first checking www.wildlifeinfo.ca for humane advice.