

Cheryl Kimball Nature Talks: Rodents can be a nuisance

Cheryl Kimball | February 13, 2021

A COUPLE OF weeks ago, I heard a gnawing while working in my second-floor office. I followed the sound to its source and found a gray squirrel peeking in a gable-end window on the opposite side of the house overlooking the sloped roof of the porch and garage.

The squirrel was not easily deterred by “hey, get away from here!” and just went back to gnawing. I rattled the window and knocked on a pane just hard enough to not break it. That sent the squirrel across the garage roof. It sat on the far edge looking back at the window contemplating its next step to complete the break-in. Then it disappeared over the garage roof to the backyard. But I knew this was not over.

Sure enough, a couple more times over the next couple of weeks I was getting up from my work to go shoo the squirrel away. And then when backing out of the garage one morning, I happened to look up and gasped at the damage the squirrel had already done. Windowsills on the two windows on that end of the house were partially chewed away. Clapboards were gnawed along the edges exposing raw wood under the Sherwin Williams Farmhouse Red paint. “We need to do something about this,” I thought. And then of course by the time I got back home from my errand I had forgotten about the damage.

Until the next gnawing episode. I shooed the squirrel off and opened the inside window and the combination storm. Armed with Febreze, which I have found rodents hate, I sprayed the sill and surrounding area with it. A temporary solution until we figured out what to do. So far so good.

So good for that attempted break-in location, anyway. The other day we heard loud gnawing coming from the one-story addition off the back of the house. I looked out the dining room window to witness a gray squirrel who had clearly gotten stuck trying to exit a vent hole on the side of the addition. The vent holes were installed and covered with wire caps to help keep the roof cooler above the ceiling and help prevent ice dams. The wire caps did not keep rodents out apparently.

I went around to the back of the house to encourage the squirrel to try a little harder to get out of the hole. Then I would cover it. She was clearly a pregnant female. I retrieved a few items that I thought I might need to help with the extraction, including my long, heavy “raptor gloves” that I keep in my car. And I got a broom that I thought she could grab onto to get out.

My husband had gone around to the back of the house to witness this escapade. By the time I got back there, the squirrel had come out, turned around, headed back in, and was now stuck in the opposite direction. As my cousin commented when I posted on Facebook the picture that accompanies this column, “Well, it is hard to judge the size of entrances when you are not quite your normal size.”

My valiant husband donned the big gloves and a chainsawing hard hat with face shield and climbed a short ladder to pull the squirrel out. As he gently grabbed her back legs and butt, she braced against the edge of the hole with her elbows. She was not budging. We were in disbelief that this squirrel was so strong and was not coming out backward. We were at a loss as to what to do.

With her butt and back legs hanging out, she was panting pretty hard and we were feeling badly for her. My husband turned around from the top of the ladder and said, “I can just push her in.” I gave the nod and that’s what he did. We have not seen her since. She is likely having her February babies (there will likely be May babies and maybe even a fall litter) any moment in the small area between the ceiling and roof of our addition.

We could have probably trapped her. But what then? Relocating animals at this time of year is almost certain death — they have no food caches in the new area and would likely be highly challenged by residents to get any resources available in mid-winter. I have no interest in causing harm to any animal and yet I do not want them causing harm to my home.

I could stop feeding the birds — every day 8-10 healthy gray squirrels chow down on black oil sunflower seeds — but the many ancient huge oak trees lining our lawn along the road provide abundant food. I am thinking that sometime in early to mid-summer I need to become a skilled squirrel trapper and take them on a little trip elsewhere to reduce the local herd during a more forgiving season. I just hope they don’t fall under any state pandemic travel restrictions.