

Warning: Squirrels May Contain Large Quantities of Nuts

It's not that we don't like them, it's just the damage we're not too keen on. I think it was when we were repairing the bird feeders for around the tenth time we decided something ought to be done to stop the grey squirrels gnawing holes through them.

We'd been thinking about putting up a special squirrel feeder, so this seemed a good time to give it a go. Rather than buy one we decided to go the cheap route and make our own from some old plywood we had lying around. It was just like the ones in the catalogue. It had a special platform on the front for the squirrels to stand on, and a lift up lid so they could reach in and grab the nuts. We hung it on a tree, a good distance from the bird feeders, filled it up and waited.



Grey Squirrel - Cute?



Our Home-Made Feeder

Old Habits Die Hard

For a couple of days the squirrels took no notice of their new feeder. Occasionally they would have a sniff round it on their way to and from the bird feeders. They could obviously detect the faint aroma of 'eau de peanuts' inside, but it was an unfamiliar contraption, and the easy pickings in the bird feeders were clearly a less complicated option.

After a few days we noticed one squirrel had found his way into the feeder. The lid was up and he was having a good rummage around inside. He kept looking in the box,

then looking up, then looking back in the box again. It was like someone with a winning Lotto ticket, who had to keep checking their numbers to make sure it was true. We knew it was a success when he grabbed a nut and scampered off. We figured it was just a matter of time before they were weaned off the bird feeders.

New Arrivals

The next day we looked out of the windows to see half a dozen grey squirrels in the garden. This was more than we'd seen in the garden before. There were some on the bird feeders, some on the

squirrel feeder, some scurrying around the lawn doing squirrel type things. The arrival of extra squirrels was not something we'd anticipated. We checked the squirrel feeder and it was empty. We figured this was quite a lot of nuts to eat in one day, but we for the sake of the experiment we refilled it anyway.

Throughout the morning the squirrels kept visiting their feeder. They also continued to empty and destroy the bird feeders. In the afternoon we checked the squirrel feeder and it was empty again. Maybe this experiment needed a rethink.



Bird Feeder - Chewed Open

If you've ever watched squirrels in the wild you'll know what was going wrong. When there's an abundance of acorns about they eat what they can, then bury the rest. That's ex



Squirrel on one of the Bird Feed-

SQUIRREL FACTS

- Grey squirrels were introduced to the UK in the 1800's
- Squirrels are able to run down trees head first
- A squirrel's nest, made of twigs and leaves is called a drey
- Both reds and greys can be attracted to feed in gardens
- Our native red squirrels are a rare and declining species due to habitat loss and vulnerability to squirrel parapoxvirus



Swinging... but not winning

actly what happens when you put a box full of peanuts in your garden for them. They eat what they can, bury the rest, then come back and empty your bird feeders too. The other side-effect of squirrel feeders is that the population grows in proportion to the food supply. More peanuts equals more squirrels. We



The house sparrow tries it out

now have around a dozen squirrels, as two of the females had babies.

Lessons Learnt

If you're lucky enough to live in an area with red squirrels then putting up a squirrel feeder is a good idea. There are special feeders available which will only allow red squirrels to use them, and prevent the heavier greys from getting a meal. On the other hand, if you're thinking of putting up a squirrel feeder to keep grey squirrels off your bird feeders - forget it.

The best way to keep your bird feeders strictly for the birds is to invest in some "squirrel-proof" bird feeders. We purchased two of these feeders from the RSPB - one for seeds and one for peanuts. They're manufactured by "The Nuttery", based in Pinner, Middx. They're also available from many large garden centres.

When we first put the feeders up our furry grey chums were convinced

they could still grab a free meal. As you can see from the photo all they managed to do was leap onto the nut feeder and nibble the wires a bit. They had a bit more success with the seed feeder. After leaping onto it, they found they could swing the feeder through 90° and tip the seeds out through the port-holes. After we moved the feeder to another location they were unable to leap onto it and the problem was solved.

The birds took some time getting used to the new experience of dining behind bars, but of course the cage offers the smaller birds the added advantage of protection while they're feeding from predators such as sparrowhawks. Surprisingly the first birds to adopt the new feeders were house sparrows. It took a full three months



Blue tits enjoy the extra security

before the great spotted woodpeckers went near the feeders, but even they've now learnt how to squeeze their heads through the bars. Within a few weeks the nuthatches, tits, finches and all the other birds had mastered the technique too, and the squirrels gave up trying.

ABOUT THIS FACTSHEET

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