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How Do You Count All the Squirrels in Central Park?

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“If you’re worried and you can’t sleep / count your squirrels rather than sheep.”

This is Sidewalk Naturalist (<https://catapult.co/editorial/topics/sidewalk-naturalist/stories>), a column by Lenora Todaro which sees New York City through its wildlife citizens, whose lives tell us something about the way we live in a fragile ecosystem that is the city today.

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An acorn whizzes by my ear. I look up: A squirrel stares me down. It drops to the ground, hesitates, nabs its nut, climbs an oak tree. Another squirrel pauses, its tail question-marking, then twitches, signaling fear. Squirrel's cherubic eyes, delicate paws rotating an acorn in and out of its mouth with precision, neurotic glances for predators (think of the adjective "squirrely"), stands alert, white belly bared, head telescoping. Crisis averted. Squirrel digging holes in dirt, pillowing leaves, sculpting a storehouse for its winter food. Squirrel leaping and landing in semi-circular arcs of air, so that it seems the ground is made of trampoline.



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The Eastern Grey Squirrel: nearly a foot long, with half its length its bushy tail, which acts as an umbrella, blanket, fan, counterbalance, and message maker. In a span of twenty minutes, I count twelve of them. I see grey squirrels, mostly, some flecked with brown, splashed with cinnamon, streaked with black. I see their tails talking, but I find it hard to hear their chirruping sounds, like the *kuk kuk kuk!* (alarm), *quaa* (danger retreating), and *muk-muk* (affection or hunger) noises they are known for.

Of the eight-hundred-forty acres that make up Central Park, I choose to squirrel count in a two-acre area described by 66th through 68th Streets on the east side, and by a statue of Balto on the west. The sections were mapped and drawn over fifteen months by cartographer Nat Slaughter, who, together with writer Jamie Allen, conceived and organized the Central Park Squirrel Census (<https://www.thesquirrelcensus.com/>), a citizen science and storytelling project that took place in October 2018. They released their findings

on [NYC OpenData](https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Environment/2018-Central-Park-Squirrel-Census-Squirrel-Data/vfnx-vebw) (<https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Environment/2018-Central-Park-Squirrel-Census-Squirrel-Data/vfnx-vebw>) portal this past month. Like the three-hundred-twenty-three volunteer squirrel scouts and sighters who counted *Sciurus carolinensis* twice per day, over the course of eleven days, I make it my mission to follow in their tracks.

Allen says that the Squirrel Census “forced squirrel sighters to interact with the space in new ways”—by observing activities like a game of soccer and considering how different it looks from a squirrel’s point of view. “On the flip side, the volunteers became an exhibit, like a living art project,” he explains, so that curious passersby stopped to watch the counters watching squirrels.

Central Park, and most other city parks with green space and trees, harbor squirrels. They scamper through community gardens and private backyards. Most of the time, they go unnoticed, unless they gnaw through your kid’s stroller basket to steal rice cakes (happened to me), or dig up someone’s vegetables, or—worse—bite a finger that it mistakes for a tasty nut offering. We often pass squirrels by with nary a shrug. They remain indifferent to us unless we bear a whiff of shareable food. Our mutual indifference is an advantage. In being common, they survive and multiply.

So how many squirrels are there in Central Park? The Squirrel Census team presented their reveal at the storied Explorers Club on the Upper East Side—a home base for adventurers, woolly mammoth tusks, and a cheetah rumored to have been shot by Teddy Roosevelt. Squirrel people like to have fun, so this wasn’t just a number reveal; it was a full-on variety show replete with Elvis songs (and a rocking melodica), a squirrel-pointing contest (a theatrical thrust of a finger toward an imaginary tree), and [audio of squirrel counters’ observations](https://www.thesquirrelcensus.com/epsc-audio-report) (<https://www.thesquirrelcensus.com/epsc-audio-report>) (a mash-up of commentary about squirrels and people that plays like found poetry: “eating a peanut / walking on a branch / foraging / a couple was having an argument / guy talking to himself taking a leak.”

And there was this acapella ditty from one bow-tied participant: “If you’re worried and you can’t sleep / count your squirrels rather than sheep.” Slaughter, the cartographer, presented his eye-popping, five-foot-long, hand-designed map of Central Park, which reminded me of the ceiling at Grand Central Station: celestial blue with yellow stars representing the location and density of squirrels in the park as if they were constellations.

Oh, and the reveal: According to the census, there are 2,373 squirrels in Central Park. I thought there'd be more.

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Before Central Park was coiffed in the 1850s by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it was a rough, messy terrain ribboned with swamps and boulders. Some poorer New Yorkers made it their home; and an African-American community of landowners built Seneca Village in the park at what is now the perimeter between West 83rd and West 89th Streets. The idea for the park was to bring nature back to the city, and to rival the grand parks of London and Paris, but as the area was landscaped, some 1,400 poor Irish immigrants were evicted and Seneca Village was razed along with its fifty homes, three churches, a cemetery and a school. A plaque commemorates the site, and plans are underway for a monument to the Lyons family, one of Seneca Village's prominent African-American families who ran a boarding house that also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

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Olmsted and Vaux wanted to reunite New Yorkers with nature and along the way boost their health and sanity—what one might call a forest bath today. Squirrels were part of the plan. Once food for frontiersmen, they were kept as family pets by the wealthy. People found them entertaining, so squirrels were introduced to Central Park in 1877—just a handful that quickly multiplied into 1,500 within a few years. They brought in more visitors, many of whom enjoyed feeding them so much that fat squirrels began to fall from trees. Ernest Thompson Seton, who helped found the Boy Scouts of America, believed that feeding

squirrels fostered kindness and charity, especially among boys he deemed unruly. The park's squirrel population, in a sense, was enlisted to encourage New Yorkers to coexist with nature and wildlife. And to be kinder, in general.

The New York City Parks Department's website calls the squirrel "the unofficial mascot" of New York City. Richard Simon, Director of the Parks Department's Wildlife Unit, says this is "a little tongue-in-cheek," and mainly refers to their presence in our parks, the way they greet visitors, and bury seeds that might grow into trees. Although Central Park is man-made, Simon says, "it contains all the elements of an urban forest: an herbaceous layer, a shrub layer, an understory, a canopy," making it a healthy ecosystem for squirrel survival.

Squirrels have two breeding seasons per year: one in spring, and one in fall. During the first three or four months of the squirrel babies' life, the mother teaches them survival tricks, feeds them, keeps them warm by lining their shelter—usually a tree hollow, a nesting box, or a drey (a tree nest built with twigs and leaves)—with paper, fabric, or leaves. Like birds, sometimes baby squirrels fall out of their nest, or have some genetic anomaly that lead their mother to abandon them. Or, they are the runts of the litter. November is late in the season, so most fallen or abandoned squirrel babies are unlikely to make it through the winter.

I stop by the Wild Bird Fund on the Upper West Side after seeing [Twitter](https://twitter.com/wildbirdfund) (<https://twitter.com/wildbirdfund>) photos of a baby squirrel with the tag, "The scariest thing about this year's Halloween: we are still receiving baby squirrels." ([@wildbirdfund](https://twitter.com/wildbirdfund) (<https://twitter.com/wildbirdfund>)) Enter the rescuer and rehabber, a tough brand of New Yorker able to withstand the arduous cycle of feedings and medical needs that accompany caring for a baby squirrel.

Phyllis Tseng, Animal Care Manager and resident squirrel expert, introduces me to Tricks, the baby squirrel I saw on Twitter. Tseng transported Tricks to work from her apartment on the Upper East side so that she could keep up with the feedings every two hours, be on hand to stimulate the baby to urinate, and keep an eye on her general health. Tricks traveled nestled in blankets in a small, plastic carrier.

Curled fetally, with soft greyish-brown-black fur, tiny claws, and big eyes, Tricks doesn't seem to mind when I hold her in the palm of my hand. Nearby, in three large cages slung with hammocks, are six juvenile squirrels that Tseng "raised like my kids," slated for release to Hudson Valley's Hyde Park under the watchful eye of another squirrel caretaker.

A veteran rehabber named Christina remembers two rescues vividly: Elliot and Rupert, baby brothers found by a restaurant near her home in a New York suburb at the base of a tree. “I told the finders to put them near the tree in a box with a hot water bottle and play [baby squirrel calls](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaRs5_7_udU) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaRs5_7_udU), which you can get from YouTube. That way, if the mother is still around she can retrieve them.” This is standard protocol, but in this case, the mother didn’t return.

Christina took them home and named them. Elliott was shy, almost afraid of Rupert, who loved roughhousing. “Elliot was a weird little guy,” she says. Some rehabbers are hands-off; others, like Christina and her husband, are hands-on. “They love to cuddle or get a tickle under the chin,” she says. A few weeks later, Rupert died unexpectedly from seizures, the likely result of having fallen out of his nest. Head injuries are not always detectable at first.

Soon, a new set of babies arrived. For the first time, Elliot took an interest in socializing. He found his courage, ventured out of his cage, and began to romp. When Christina released the group outside her home, surprisingly, she said, “They continued to live together, huddled in a tree, which is unusual for adult squirrels who usually live alone.”

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Imagine New York City as one big urban wildlife park. Humans and squirrels see their neighborhoods differently. We design parks and gardens for ourselves, but in so doing create a habitat to which squirrels respond well. While we watch squirrels doing their high-wire

acts, dodging and dashing, digging and storing nuts and seeds, they watch us as well. They are intelligent and resourceful. They know who feeds them and who threatens them. They learn our patterns of passage through their neighborhoods, just as we might learn theirs.

“I call pigeons and squirrels pedestrian animals,” says Colin Jerolmack, Professor of Environmental Studies and Sociology at NYU, “because they’re so common we don’t even think about them, but also because they literally walk on the sidewalk and sit on benches.” These two urban animals adapt and survive, in part through their access to people, many of whom feed them, either explicitly (nuts in hand), or inadvertently by leaving behind waste.

Some people see squirrels as pests, garden vandals, tree rats. Others delight in their entertaining antics, and in having a one-on-one wildlife encounter. One winter day, my friend Joel sat in Union Square Park wearing a down jacket, having just moved from Buffalo to New York City. A squirrel scurried onto his lap and burrowed into the crook of his arm. Joel remembers feeling calm, taking in the moment as an augury of good things to come. When the squirrel lept away, it left him a walnut. He still has it in his kitchen, a souvenir of his first wildlife encounter in the city, evidence of a bond he still feels to squirrels when he sees them effortlessly parkour their way from tree to tree.

“We have this idea that cities are places where nature is not, except in places we allow it,” says Jerolmack. “So we have planter boxes on sidewalks and that’s where trees are supposed to go.” Squirrels don’t stay in their place. For some people, “that is trespassing, but they’ve altered their routines to get food from people so they come into our space. They physically touch us.”

They enter our space and, with their gregarious personalities, invite us to enter theirs.

You don’t have to travel far to go into the wild. In New York City, if you want, you can meander through any number of green spaces and forests throughout the five boroughs. You can scan the tree canopy for movement, or glimpse fur or feathers when a tree’s leaves blow aside. It might be a squirrel or a bird. You can count them. Or not. You can see them. Or not. But to live in the Venn diagram of the city is to coexist in overlapping neighborhoods, intersecting circles of human and nonhuman life.

We move through each other’s spaces with indifference or heightened attention: a pigeon flies into the subway, a rat skulks along the tracks, a raccoon dodges behind garbage cans, parakeets weave condo-style nests in a Brooklyn cemetery, a coyote scurries along a Bronx

shoreline at midnight, a seal spy-hops in New York harbor and hauls out on its uninhabited islands, a shark and a whales cruise brackish waters, a falcon perches on a bridge marking prey, a seagull eats your Doritos on the beach, migratory birds journey along the Atlantic Flyway (the carcasses of unlucky birds swept up each morning after a night of smashing into glass buildings).

A beaver dams a pond, deer and wild turkey tramp through Staten Island woods, a horseshoe crab glides beneath the muck of Coney Island Creek. Osprey, herons, and plovers take refuge in Queen's Jamaica Bay, oyster reefs swallow polluted waters. Bats and bees pollinate the city's flora, while worms decompose organic matter thereby improving our soil, which grows trees and plants that shelter and feed our wildlife.

And the cycle repeats. We become a part of each other's ecology. Urban wildlife is an indicator of the health of a city's ecosystem.

To judge by what I've seen, New York is only getting wilder.



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