Squirrels in Self-Destruction

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The month of April blooms with fresh beginnings as a new spring season is welcomed to the Northeast. The streams are flowing, the birds are chirping, and the front lawns of the neighborhood are inhaling the green glow of new life after suffocating under the winter snow. Mother Nature energizes her creatures with a spirit of freedom. We're all especially amused by watching the playful antics of the squirrels. Our fuzzy little friends seem to be having so much fun. However, if we only knew the daredevil motives behind some of the squirrel stunts, perhaps we would see that their capering is not so carefree. We observe these actions as being cute - cheek stuffing, car racing, dog chasing - but they are nothing but dangerous! Human beings need to be exposed to the problem of squirrel hazing so that measures can be taken to end this cycle of self-destruction in the squirrel community."

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We often associate the word “hazing” with the ritual initiation into a fraternity. However, college students are not the only ones harassing new group members with foolish pranks. Squirrels have been forcing each other to perform meaningless, difficult tasks since the birth of their species. It's time we realize that young squirrels who feel pressured to be part of the group are being tortured by these humiliating acts. Hazing is not only physically harmful, but it's damaging to the rodent's emotional health as well.

Cheek stuffing has been around since the first squirrel on earth discovered a nut. It's one of the most cherished rituals of squirrel hazing, but it comes with a price. The object of the dare is for the squirrel to stuff as many nuts as possible into his cheek pouches. Too many naive youngsters, simply trying to be “one of the gang,” have fallen victim to this stunt. They suffer from permanent disfigurement of the cheek pouch for the rest of their lives. Even more of a bodily threat, however, are the hazing practices of dog chasing and cat taunting. Numerous squirrels attempting to be “macho” have been maimed by agitated dogs. The act of teasing cats poses a heightened risk, because the feline fighters will chase antagonists into the sanctity of their own home—a tree. These poor, shredded squirrels serve as reminders to human beings to take a stand against hazing.

Car racing is the latest fad in the initiation risks taken by squirrels. This task involves dashing out in front of a car at the last possible moment. Scientists have offered the explanation that this action is a normal behavioral response to a fast-moving object passing in front of the animal. Yet, the fancy rhetoric of experts
cannot shield us from the horror of hazings when we see it! A variation of this trick is for the squirrel to freeze still in the road when a motor vehicle approaches. This game of "chicken" is known for its tragic results. If the challenger moves too soon, he is labeled a coward for the rest of his life. The consequences get a little messy, though, when the squirrel moves too late.

The self-destructive actions of our furry rodent friends are actually desperate cries for help. As human beings, we have an obligation to help fight squirrel hazings. The first step that must be taken is to get rid of the squirrel judge. Any time one of the humiliating tasks is forced upon a victim, there is always a nearby squirrel who stands alone and observes from a safe distance. This is the judge—the one who decides when another nut cannot possibly be crammed into a bulging cheek pouch; the one who must be satisfied with the daredevil performance of a dog-chaser or car-racer. Elderly members of the squirrel society usually act as the judges - a reward for surviving the hazing of their own youth. In order to eliminate the position of judge, the entire squirrel community must undergo social reconstruction. Humans can help their furry neighbors adjust to this institutional change. For example, it's not difficult to refrain from pulling out the wild mushrooms and various weeds that clutter our front lawns. Thus, we provide elderly squirrels with an alternative position in their social structure: lawn maintenance.

Another step that can help halt the hazings is eliminating "observers." Those chosen to carry out the stunts are not as affected by human on-lookers as they are by crowds of their own species. Therefore, it is up to us to disperse the squirrel "observers" as they gather to watch a friend humiliate himself. These crowds serve as a double-edged sword: taunting victims if they hesitate and punishing them if they fail. When a human happens to see a group of "observers" beginning to assemble, that person must break it up. Those clusters of squirrels only lead to trouble. It's our duty to take an authoritative stand by policing our neighborhoods in this way.

Counseling is the final portion of the three-step process. This is a vital part of a solution to the problem. The emotional toll on those squirrels who have undergone hazings is immense. Scars to their self-esteem last a lifetime and make it hard to function socially. Many of these troubled rodents estrange themselves from the rest of the population and become recluses. Furthermore, it's not uncommon for these particular "hermit" squirrels to suffer a mental breakdown. We've all witnessed the results of such a freak occurrence: none other than Rocky the Flying Squirrel.

By creating a supportive environment filled with peace and
tranquility, we can help the emotionally damaged squirrels adjust to their surroundings. When encountering our fuzzy friends, use soothing sounds and gentle movements. Humans must make an effort to stop the hazing and start the healing. Such accommodations might lead the squirrels to a road of recovery and steer them away from their ultimate road of destruction........road-kill.

--Krista Malagisi