



Red Squirrel

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## OSTEOPHAGY IN THE RED SQUIRREL

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There are many published accounts of non-carnivorous mammals, particularly rodents, eating or gnawing on bones (osteophagy). Squirrels are known to be osteophagic, and to store bones in their food caches<sup>2</sup>. I observed an interesting example of osteophagic behaviour by a Red Squirrel at Williamson Park, Alberta. The park is located on the shore of Sturgeon Lake, approximately 8 km west of Valleyview, Alberta.

At 0700 on June 3, 1976, I was watching a Red Squirrel foraging in a stand of Jack Pine. I had been observing and photographing this animal for about 15 minutes when it climbed to a limb about 4 m from the ground and went directly to a bough about 1 m from the trunk. A bone was wedged in the angle formed by the limb and the bough. Squirrels have been reported to store fungi in crotches in a similar fashion<sup>1</sup>. The squirrel picked up the bone with both forelimbs, in a manner similar to that

used to manipulate pine cones, began gnawing on it. When I moved to get a better angle for a picture the squirrel noticed me and dropped the bone.

The bone had been cleanly cut by a technique used by butchers in cutting blade steaks, and was later identified as being from the mid-section of the right scapula of an ox. The squirrel had likely obtained it from a garbage container in the area.

The storage of bones in trees would reduce the possibility of scavenging animals, such as dogs, from being attracted to and destroying caches. This would also allow the squirrel to work on the bone in relative safety, without attracting the attention of predators.

<sup>1</sup>BURT, W. H., and R. P. GROSSENHART. 1976. A field guide to the mammals of North America. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

<sup>2</sup>MacCLINTOCK, D. 1970. Squirrels of North America. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.