

ANOTHER RED SQUIRREL BIRD-KILL

ROBERT W. NERO, Box 14, 1495 St. James St., Winnipeg, Manitoba.
R3H 0W9

The capture of a House Sparrow by a Red Squirrel at a bird feeder in our Winnipeg yard in July 1987 was described in a previous note in the *Blue Jay*.¹ That particular squirrel, which generally was more aggressive towards birds than we appreciated, was eventually removed from our premises. That still left us with at least five Red Squirrels and several Gray Squirrels, the latter posing no problem. Belligerent passes at birds by Red Squirrels and the occasional appearance of feathers on the lawn near our feeders suggested possible squirrel-bird predation. Not until 1992, however, did we actually see this happen for the second time.

By late fall 1992, Gray Squirrels had stopped visiting our yard, and only two Red Squirrels were resident. On 14 October, at 1:05 p.m., we saw a Red Squirrel seize and carry off an adult White-throated Sparrow. The sparrow, which had been seen at the feeder for a few days previously, seemed a little slower than normal, but it was active and appeared able to fly capably. At the time of the observation, it was feeding inside a box-type feeder, one with a window at the closed end. When the squirrel suddenly dropped from an overhanging spruce bough onto the feeder shelf, the sparrow rushed to the rear of the box, to the window, where it was cornered by the squirrel. After a brief struggle, the squirrel carried the bird in its mouth up the spruce tree and, apparently, onto the roof of the house.

Three days later, at 1:00 p.m. on 17 October, a Red Squirrel, presumably the same one, came down the spruce tree with a bird in its mouth. I dashed outside to chase it, whereupon it ran up a nearby oak tree, still carrying the bird. I frightened it enough so that it dropped the bird and then fled to the back of our yard. To my surprise, the bird was a White-throated Sparrow, which I judged to be dead for a few days. I guessed that it was the same one that we had seen a squirrel kill three days earlier. Apparently, the squirrel had cached the sparrow somewhere, and was in the process of retrieving it to take to its den beneath a brush pile in our backyard, for that is the direction in which the squirrel headed.

This reinforces the suggestion made in my earlier note that these are opportunistic kills, perhaps motivated by aggressive defense of the food source, as much as by a carnivorous appetite. On 23 May 1986, Brian Sullivan, near Minnedosa, Manitoba, observed a Red Squirrel "attack and kill a male American Goldfinch from a flock of goldfinches on a feeder fastened to a tree two metres above the ground. The squirrel approached the tree from the ground, climbed to the feeder on the opposite side of the tree trunk, and rushed in on the flock. The squirrel carried the goldfinch to the ground and did not return within 10 minutes."² Sullivan suggests that the "squirrel killed the goldfinch in defense of a food source, rather than for consumption."²

Our feeders are certainly not under constant scrutiny. Who knows how many birds we may have lost? This may even be part of the reason for the complete absence of House Sparrows at our feeders the same winter, something we had not seen previously. Given the propensity of Red Squirrels for attacking birds,

perhaps it is a mistake to place feeders on or near trees.

1. NERO, R.W. 1987. House Sparrow killed by Red Squirrel. *Blue Jay* 45:180-181.
2. SULLIVAN, B.D. 1991. Additional vertebrate prey items of the Red Squirrel, *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*. *Can. Field-Nat.* 105:398-399.



Red Squirrel

Larry Morgotch