

# FLY-BY-NIGHT

JUNE-ANN MUIR, Waskesiu Lake, Saskatchewan. SOJ 2Y0

This past winter we had a surprise visitor at our bird feeder. Around 9 p.m. or later a most furry little creature would appear on the feeder just outside our window. At first we were not positive what he was but by looking in 'Mammals of Canada' (Banfield) we found him. The little animal was a Northern Flying Squirrel.

From our window we look out upon a spruce and aspen forest. This habitat is ideal for many birds and mammals. And with our feeder, which is no more than a foot away from the window, a great attraction sight, we have a unique observation post.

The nocturnal squirrel differs from its daytime cousin the Red Squirrel, in several interesting ways. It is grayish-brown with a dark brown stripe down both sides. Its head is much more oval than the Red Squirrel's and the eyes are very large and dark. The nose and lips are pink. It looks chubbier than it really is because of the folds of skin connecting the front wrists to his hind legs. These folds of fur-covered skin enable it to glide and that gives the animal its name. We noticed that the flying squirrel's small front feet are handlike and grasp objects as easily as do the Red Squirrel's front feet. The hind feet are long and allow him to assume an upright posture. The tail measures 5 to 6 inches in length and has extremely soft fur.

We saw the squirrel 'fly' only once. It leapt from the cedar wall of the building and glided to the base of a spruce tree about 30 feet away. We believe it reaches our second storey feeder by doing the reverse. It glides down from the top of a spruce tree, lands on the side wall and climbs to the feeder. Whenever it does arrive it prefers to eat sunflower seeds, suet (a favourite

second) or birdseed.

Though we can usually hear the Red Squirrel chattering or scolding away, the Northern Flying Squirrel has always been silent.

Behavior differed with the weather. When temperatures were above  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  and it was calm, it sat upright with its tail flattened on the feeder. When it was cold or windy it would be almost lying with tail held against its back. In temperatures colder than  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  it must stay in its spruce tree hide-away and sleep for it never paid a visit on such cold nights.

One of the strangest behaviors, with this particular flying squirrel was that it allowed us to reach out the window and pet its back and tail. The fur of the squirrel was very difficult to feel, because our fingers are not sensitive enough to perceive the softness. The squirrel did not seem to be frightened of slow movements but any quick moves and it scurried away. The thrill of touching a 'wild' animal is almost unexplainable. The Northern Flying Squirrel is a mammal that is rarely seen. We were very fortunate that he came to our feeder and we treasure the moments he let us watch him.



*Northern Flying Squirrel.*

*Hans Dommasch*