

# Caring for young squirrels and preparing them for release

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## 1 - What do you do first?

If you have found a young squirrel, you will need to ensure that its immediate well-being is taken care of. See our website and/or other document (Feeding Baby/Young Squirrels). You may decide that you are unable to look after it for very long. Please contact us and either arrange to bring it here, or we will try to find someone in your area who will care for the squirrel.

## 2 - If you decide to look after it yourself

Young squirrels need:

- **food**
- **warmth**
- a **peaceful** and **secure** environment
- to be kept **indoors**

### Food

This is dealt with on our other fact sheet Feeding Baby/Young Squirrels. Squirrels need **milk** until they are at least 10-12 weeks. **Never** feed a cold squirrel. See below for advice as the squirrel grows and its needs change.

### Warmth

Remember that baby squirrels are used to the warmth of their mother and siblings. Even if your house is warm, lone squirrels with their eyes shut will need another source of heat. This also applies if the squirrel is older, but has just been found – it will often be suffering shock and will need warmth.

We use small **electric blankets**. A **hot water bottle** can be used, but only with great care. It must be **very well wrapped** so that the squirrel has no direct access to it. Better still, place it underneath the carrier/cage/box where you are keeping the squirrel, so that the heat gets through but cannot cause harm. We are happy to advise.

### Bedding

Good bedding should provide the baby with a nice cosy nest so it feels secure,

Suggestions:

- cosy fleece
- warm towel
- woolly hat

This should be available at all times, as the squirrel will like to be able to bury itself and hide away.

### **Cages**

At first, something like a cat carrier is suitable, as tiny babies will sleep most of the time. Make sure it cannot climb through any bars, and no other creature can get in.

As they get older and require less sleep, a **cage** is better, to give the squirrel space to exercise and explore. We advise that the squirrel is given a proper home like a wooden nest box containing the woolly hat and other nesting material. A large hamster cage is suitable at first to give more space.

In a larger cage, make sure a specific corner is made over to the bedding/nest box and a large space is left fairly open for the squirrel to explore.

As the squirrel grows, he will want to climb. A large rat or chinchilla cage is ideal – with some height and shelves to climb on.

**BE CAREFUL:** make sure the bottom of the cage is well padded with towels as youngsters may fall and hurt themselves. Do not put a squirrel younger than 8 weeks in a cage taller than 18 inches.

### **Stimulation**

Squirrels also need stimulation to prevent boredom. Some suggestions:

- a pot of soil for them to bury nuts (they love burying things!!!)
- a cardboard tube to run through (they will shred it, but it will be fun!)
- a strong branch to climb/chew
- a rope strung across the cage to hang from/climb across

Use your imagination – but don't spend too much on shop bought toys, as they will only be destroyed... It's also great entertainment for you!

### **Handling**

Do not be afraid to handle your young squirrel. It is in fact the best thing you can do whilst they are still dependant on milk, and it is vital that they get used to being fed. They also need the interaction and stimulation they would normally get from their siblings. Play fighting with your hand or a cuddly toy is excellent exercise.

Squirrels up to the age of about 8 weeks pose absolutely no threat – you are more likely to be 'gummed' than bitten! Over that age and up to about 12 weeks, they are only capable of nipping you. This usually will only happen if they are in severe distress and frightened. If you are worried, just put on a pair of gloves.

Once the squirrel no longer needs milk from you, then you can begin to stop handling in preparation for release.

## **3 - As your squirrel grows**

### **Exercise**

The growing squirrel will need more and more exercise, as it is vital to build up their muscles so that they can climb and run quickly and safely when they return to the wild. They need larger cages or aviaries. If you can build an aviary in your garden, this is ideal – contact us for advice.

Failing this, many people are happy to let the squirrel run around a room in their house for a while every day – just make sure there are no windows/doors open and nothing breakable... Just watch out for the squirrel poo...

### **Changing needs for food**

In the wild squirrels will chew on **soil, funghi, bark** and a host of other things to give them all the nutrition they need. Try to give your squirrel some of these things – small branches, twigs and leaves (from typical deciduous trees, such as oak, birch, beech, sycamore, etc.) will be welcome in the cage.

### **Milk**

Even once they have moved onto solid foods, squirrels **must** continue to receive until about 10-12 weeks (see Feeding Baby Squirrels fact sheet).

Try placing a small bowl of milk, changed regularly, in their cage to encourage them to drink themselves. Do not stop feeding them with the syringe/pipette.

### **Water**

Once your squirrel has started to eat solid food, it is vital that they are encouraged to drink water, otherwise they can suffer dehydration.

Place a small bowl of water in the squirrel's cage, and attach a hamster water bottle. Add a pinch of Stress Powder (see below) to all the squirrel's water.

### **Nuts in Shells**

Once squirrels get to about 10-12 weeks old, **nuts in shells** (walnuts, pecans, hazelnuts, monkey nuts) must be provided as part of the diet as the squirrel must get used to the idea of cracking open shells.

Squirrels are **rodents**, which means their teeth keep growing and need to be ground down – like filing your nails.

Too much soft food and not enough gnawing will cause serious problems. Even a small piece of brick in the cage is a help or a mineral block or better still a piece of deer antler. The calcium helps.

Partially crack the nut shells at first until the squirrel gets the idea that there is food inside and its teeth become stronger and sharper.

### **The dangers of a limited diet**

In captivity, young squirrels are very prone to seizures, bone weakness and other ailments due to a limited diet. Please don't disregard this advice, as we have heard so many tales of seemingly well fed squirrels suddenly developing what looks like epilepsy, and it can even be fatal.

Too many **peanuts** are often the culprit. Peanuts are like Macdonalds – tasty but of little nutritional value. You wouldn't feed a child on Macdonalds all the time...!

### **Stress Powder**

In order to guard against nutritional deficiencies, please add a pinch of Vetzyme (or Philips) **Stress** powder to all of their water. This is available from larger pet stores or online – ask to order it if you can't see it on the shelf. If you still have difficulty, call us. Squirrels are prone to some nasty problems if they don't get a good balance of calcium, phosphorous and magnesium and this ensures that they don't miss out when in captivity.

## 4 - Potential problems

### Exercise

Exercise is vital but make sure it is safe. Shut all doors and windows before opening the cage and make sure all other pets are out of the room. Squirrels are not easy to catch, so make sure you are not in a hurry...

### Falls

Squirrels are hectic creatures once they grow and have plenty of energy. Their instinct is to be as high as possible. This means they are vulnerable to falls, especially when young and not used to running/climbing. Make sure the bottom of the cage is well padded and slowly introduce them to higher places.

### Injuries

If your squirrel has a fall, it may injure itself – if there is nothing obvious, keep an eye out for possible consequences such as fits or sickness resulting from a head injury. They are also prone to back injuries, which may leave the hind quarters paralysed. This may only be temporary – call us or take your squirrel to a sympathetic vet.

### Fits/weakness in back legs

Squirrels are prone to fits and/or weakness in their back legs as a result of lack of appropriate nutrients. Often this happens when a squirrel has been weaned too early.

If your squirrel begins to drag its back legs or shows signs of weakness, or has a fit, immediately begin to feed it milk regularly, and make sure it has Stress powder in its water. Call us for further advice.

### Problems with Teeth - Malocclusion

Squirrels teeth will start to grow around the time their eyes open. As mentioned elsewhere, it is important that they have access to things to chew on – twigs, nuts etc. They will probably also chew the cage...

Some squirrels can suffer problems with their teeth which arise when the top and bottom teeth do not meet properly and therefore do not get worn down when they eat/gnaw – this is called **malocclusion**.

This means the teeth continue to grow – the bottom ones will get very long and eventually protrude from the mouth or dig into the upper jaw. The top teeth will often grow back into the roof of the mouth. This is very dangerous as the squirrel will either die of malnutrition, as it is unable to eat, or from the injury caused by these teeth.

Often this follows an injury when young – falling on or banging their nose can cause their teeth to be knocked askew. If yours had blood around its nose and mouth when you found it, you will need to be aware of this potential problem.

Signs:

- refusing to eat nuts at 8+ weeks - or only eating soft nuts and fruit (pine nuts, etc)
- continuing to prefer milk for much longer than expected
- continual sniffing/sneezing/runny nose

Once the squirrel is old enough to eat nuts – 8+ weeks – it should be doing so. If it refuses, or will only eat very soft nuts or fruit, this may be due to malocclusion.

Often the overgrown teeth will irritate the nerves in the face and cause the squirrel to sneeze and sniff. This is a very characteristic indication of malocclusion.

Squirrels with malocclusion will not survive in the wild. They require regular trimming of their teeth (some rabbits and guinea pigs also require this). A sympathetic vet will be able to do this for you – but it will be necessary every 3-4 weeks. We do this ourselves. Contact us if you are worried.

## **5 - Vets**

A sympathetic vet is worth his/her weight in gold.

All vets sign a pledge to treat all animals, including wildlife. You may wish to remind them of this. However, many will not treat squirrels.

One reason is that they are worried that you will bring in the squirrel and leave it with them. Reassure the vet that you will pay for any treatment and will not just disappear. Failing this, perhaps offer to pay for any medication or equipment used if you cannot afford treatment.

Vets will also frequently simply recommend euthanasia, as it is the easiest solution. In our experience, unless clearly injured beyond help, most poorly orphaned squirrels can be treated successfully. Insist on a second opinion, or call us for advice before being persuaded to agree to this.

## **6 - Release**

If the squirrel is completely weaned, large and strong enough, can break open nuts in shells (such as walnuts and hazels) and it isn't too late in the year, it is probably time for the squirrel to go back to the wild. We do not consider release until the squirrel is at least 14-16 weeks old.

Release must be carried out very carefully, gently and thoughtfully. If you just left the squirrel in a park or a forest to fend for itself, it would not survive for long.

### **Red squirrels**

It would be very wrong to introduce a grey squirrel to an area where red squirrels are prevalent. Grey squirrels do not harm reds directly, but are stronger and hardier and would offer big competition for food and shelter. Many areas which have red squirrels also cull grey squirrels, so your squirrel will be in grave danger. If you are in one of these areas, contact us for advice.

### **Other squirrels**

Ideally, a squirrel should spend a while with other squirrels prior to release as it helps them develop instincts and behaviour for the future. That is why so many people bring a squirrel to us, so we can help with this.

### **Legalities**

Technically, it is illegal to release a grey squirrel into the wild. Our view is that *returning* a grey squirrel to the wild is a different matter.

### **The right environment**

Choose carefully the environment you squirrel will be released into.

#### **Bad things:**

- busy roads
- lots of cats and dogs
- unsympathetic neighbours (farmers and **gamekeepers** in particular)
- lack of trees

### Good things:

- plenty of deciduous woodland & other food sources
- lack of people
- evidence of other grey squirrels (not too many though!)

Busy roads, cats, dogs, unsympathetic people and a lack of trees and food sources are factors which would give the squirrel little chance of survival. If there is an existing colony of squirrels in your area, then your squirrel will probably integrate in time. There may be squabbles at first, but squirrels are not *generally* known for their aggression.

Bear in mind that a hand-reared squirrel will not be as '**streetwise**' as a wild squirrel and may at first be a little too tame. That is why squirrels should be handled very little once they are weaned. Apart from that, they can give you a nasty scratch or nip!

If your garden is not a good release site, it is absolutely vital to find someone who is sympathetic who has a large garden that is not close to a road, and has several mature deciduous trees (that produce some form of food – such as acorns, nuts etc.) Whilst it is ideal if the garden borders woodland, you must ensure that there is no commercial **farming, forestry** or **gamekeeping** going on there or the squirrel would be in some danger.

The squirrel's nest box can then be moved into the large cage or aviary, sited as **high** as possible.

### Aviaries

An **aviary** is the best place for the juvenile squirrel to live prior to release (but please contact us before putting a squirrel in an aviary, as we have some important advice to offer). Release can then be a case of just leaving the door or an escape hatch open allowing the squirrel to come and go (usually for a few days/weeks) until he is ready to fend for himself and find a home in the wild.

Failing that, use as large a **cage** as you can find (chinchilla cage is best). Leave the cage somewhere discreet and safe and let the squirrel get used to the smells and sounds for a day or two when the weather is good. When morning comes, the cage can be opened and the squirrel will come and go for a while until he finds a nest. Leave food out every day for at least a week and maybe longer if you know he is returning for food. The squirrel may continue to visit the garden for a long while.

### 7 - Once your squirrel has been returned to where it belongs

You can then reflect on a job well done and a small life saved. You may even enjoy the experience so much that you'd like to join our growing band of helpers across the UK. We rely on them to take in squirrels at short notice, usually in the two baby seasons around **April** and **September**. We would welcome you!

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