

A Case for the Survival of Tri-City Squirrels

by Rick Reil

In the early 1970s a city of Kennewick employee decided that it would be a good thing to have squirrels in Keewaydin park. He built some nesting boxes, placed them in some of the park's large trees and captured some in Walla Walla. These squirrels were released in the park much to the delight of local squirrel lovers. It took a few years for the furry, bushy-tailed rodents to establish themselves and with no indigenous predators the population soon grew.

The greater part of Benton County receives its electricity from the Benton PUD (Benton County Public Utility District #1). The PUD's electrical system has been a work in progress for 75 years. For the first 50 years of its existence there were no squirrels in the Tri-City area so there was no need to protect the District's electrical system from their activities.

Squirrels like to sit and move about on the tops of pole mounted transformers. Unfortunately for these early transplanted residents, there are high voltage power lines that go in and out of the transformers. While traipsing about on top of these transformers, the squirrels tails would come in contact with these lines, resulting in a short that also sent these creatures back home to their maker, and at the same time blowing the fuses.

Not only were there numerous squirrel fatalities, especially in the older parts of Kennewick near the park, there was also a growing number of power outages. What especially exacerbated these annoying interruptions was growing number of businesses and governmental agencies that were growing increasingly dependent on computers. An outage of only a second would knock the computers off line.

The PUD was faced with the task of "squirrel proofing" its overhead electrical system. The remedy was to install "squirrel guards" on the pole mounted transformers. There are cone shaped plastic devices that would insulate the electrical equipment so that any squirrel activity would not result in power outages or squirrel fatalities. This cost the PUD hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So... what does this mean today? Well, squirrels have spread from Keewaydin park to the entire Tri-City area. Rarely is there a day goes by that I don't see at least one fresh squirrel corpse on the four mile drive from my country home into Kennewick. It seems that this road kill has solved any hunger issues the resident crow and magpie populations may have experienced. Seeing the scavengers was once common. Today it's rare. Obviously they don't have to travel far for a feast.

Lately, as I'm headed east on 27th toward Washington Street, I have seen some squirrels using the overhead phone lines that cross the street as a "bridge." I have become concerned at this new development. In the past it has usually been my experience to have the critters mindlessly dart into my path. The resultant "thump thump" is almost always the sound of another one biting the dust. Observing this new behavior I've come to believe that squirrel brains may be evolving. Could it be that survival of the fittest is showing itself among our squirrel population? If this is the case there is no telling what the future may hold. Could local drivers be mindlessly advancing the squirrel population IQ?

I may not be the sharpest guy in the tool shed but I am smart enough to know that left unchecked we could soon have a population of super squirrels in our community. If you consider that red squirrels

have two litters a year you must conclude that this could happen soon. Oh my! Think of the havoc that may be wrought upon us. Think of the damage if this reaches the point of the primates in *Planet of the Apes*. These super rodents could soon be running over us with their vehicles, leaving our mangled bodies as road kill for the winged scavengers.

My fellow Tri-Citians we only have one course of action. We must foster the survival of dumb squirrels. We must ensure that their genes continue to be present in all squirrels. Our existence depends on dumb squirrels. We need to outwit them. From this day forward I beseech you to slow down, swerve your vehicles (safely of course), do whatever it takes to safeguard their precious lives. We need dumb squirrels. Love them, feed them in your back yard, make warm nesting boxes for them. Name them, befriend them, and most important don't let your friends from Arkansas eat them!