

Trapped

By Peter Makuck

It seems most of the drama that takes place at our house is at the bird feeder. A month ago a mourning dove, spooked by a sharp-shinned hawk, crashed into a reflection of trees on our living room window. More recently, the drama involved squirrels. They often squeeze through the slim openings in the protective cage of our supposedly squirrel-proof feeder and help themselves to sunflower seeds.

One cold rainy morning I was looking out the window and, as usual, saw a gray intruder inside the cage. To roust these unwelcome guys, all I usually need to do is crack the window and yell, "Git!" But this time it didn't work. He just ignored me, an unbearable insult. Irrationally and maybe comically annoyed, I went downstairs, put on my hooded parka and stomped toward the feeder. Suddenly he put on a frantic struggle to squeeze through the narrow space between the cage wires, but couldn't. Finally, he tried to exit through the bottom, but got stuck, half in, half out. For a few minutes, I stood and watched. He kept struggling but was unable to free himself. Before going inside, I treated him to a morsel of wisdom I many times heard from my mother: "You have only yourself to blame. Experience is the best teacher." Hanging upside down, he just looked at me.

Back in the house where it was comfortably warm, I poured myself another cup of coffee and watched at the window. He had put his head and front paws up through an adjacent space so as not to hang upside down. Fairly certain he'd get free, I decided to check on him later. At my next check, the cage was swinging wildly with him hanging upside down again, thrashing and trying to jerk himself loose. It was interesting that all his exertion didn't stop chickadees and titmice from arriving and departing with seeds.

I put on my parka again, walked up to the feeder, and asked him what we were going to do—and told him he might serve as a good example to other squirrels about what can happen when you go where you're not supposed to. His shiny black eye looked right at me, and he was beginning to look a bit pathetic, his tail wet, no longer fluffy.

One thought was to take the feeder down from the crook, rest it on the wall, get hold of him behind the head, and pull him out. Not a good idea, I decided. As a teenager I had trapped mink and muskrats for their pelts and knew too well they could give you a nasty bite. Muskrats and squirrels have the same kind of sharp front teeth. If I still had the thick rubber gloves I used as a trapper, I might have given it a try. The other thought was to just let him hang there until he died, then remove him from the cage. Neither idea was attractive. The squirrel just looked at me as if to say, "Please, I won't bite. I promise." Now he was soaking wet and shivering.

Then I remembered an animal rescue outfit across Bogue Sound. A look through the phone book produced the Outer Banks Wildlife Shelter in Newport. A very friendly woman answered the phone. With some apologies, I explained the situation and said I knew squirrels weren't exactly an endangered species, etc. She said the kind of animal or bird didn't matter. She took my phone number and address and said that if she didn't get back to me within 15 minutes, somebody would be on the way.

Sure enough, half an hour later, a white pickup truck with a covered bed pulled into my drive. A guy with graying hair, glasses and a black bill cap got out. Quiet and soft-spoken, he quickly had the cage down, his gloved hand holding the squirrel just as I had thought of doing. The squirrel was too exhausted to even think about biting. I suggested that we use my wire cutters on the cage, make more room to ease him out. The rescue man said it was a good idea and was glad I had cutters because he didn't. While he held the cage, I did the snipping and out came the squirrel.

First, he stroked the squirrel's head, then gently put him into a cloth sack with a noose, explaining that the little guy was too traumatized and cold to simply let go. They would feed and warm him up for a few days, then release him. He told me that after one of our hurricanes, the shelter had about 30 squirrels to rehabilitate.

We spoke for a few minutes. I told him briefly about my history of hunting and trapping, about the hundreds of animals I'd killed. But now, aside from a few politicians, I had no desire to kill anything. He laughed. "We all change," he said. Then he put the sack with the squirrel into a cardboard box that would ride next to him on the warm front seat.

After he left, I went back inside. My wife and I talked it over and decided to make a donation to Outer Banks Wildlife Shelter, a worthy organization.

Tips for Gardeners

By Jan Corsello

It's Time to Start Thinking Spring.

- ☼ Don't get too excited when we get a warm day here and there and start pulling off winter mulch—unless you plan to put it back if a cold snap is predicted. The same goes for pulling winter weeds. If you do pull them, make sure to water well to settle the roots of your desirable plants and mulch lightly. These weeds are currently acting as mulch and protecting the roots of your plants. When you do pull out these weeds and rake out tree leaves, add them to your compost pile, unless they contain weed seeds. Even hot compost may not kill them.
- ☼ It appears that the Sago Palms around town really suffered in the recent bitter weather, and it's not certain that they can be saved. Once the leaf stems are brown, that's it—they are dead. Normally, the rest of the plant will survive, especially if it's in a protected area, but maybe not this winter. Everything I've read says that they are not hardy below 30 degrees, so they are just barely hardy in our area. Wait for spring and clip off the dead branches. This one is a wait and see. In addition, I often clip off all of the bottom branches in order to stimulate new growth, but again, not until it is much warmer.
- ☼ Early spring is a good time to divide and replant bulbs and clumping perennials. Just be sure to do it on a warm day and water well when you're done. As daffodils are putting up their stems, you can now find them! Get a garden spade or spading fork well under the bulbs and lift the whole clump. Separate the bulbs and replant them; groupings look better than single bulbs here and there. Do this before they get too tall. With clumping perennial plants like hostas, lift the whole clump and gently tease apart the individual plantlets, being careful not to break off too many roots. Replant the babies wherever you like, singly or put them some in pots. With bulbs and perennials, be sure to replant them at the same depth they were growing at before you dug them.
- ☼ I have heard from several sources that a bit of vodka in your plant's water will help stunt the growth of the stems of flowers that grow too tall to stand alone without support. I'm going to try it with some of my amaryllises that are sending up long shoots and buds. One is already about 39" tall!
- ☼ Watch for swelling buds on your spring-blooming shrubs and trees, like spirea, forsythia, dogwood, redbud, flowering quince and pussywillow, to name a few. Wait until the buds are pretty swollen, then cut a few branches to "force" indoors. Bring them in on a warmish day and set them in warm water in a well-lit area and watch them burst into bloom.
- ☼ It's a good time to walk around the garden and see the "bones of the garden," as Tony Avent and the late J.C. Raulston would say. Before deciduous trees and shrubs leaf out, you can prune for shape and to remove crossing branches, etc., while they are still semi-dormant. It's also a good time to see where taller plants are causing shorter ones to grow sideways as they reach for the sun. Make decisions as to which plants need to get more light—and prune for that to happen.
- ☼ It may not seem like it lately, but now is the time to plant cold-season vegetables or seeds like snow peas, beans, broccoli, radishes and carrots. I've recently learned that carrot seeds will germinate all winter long.
- ☼ Now is the time to sharpen your pruning shears and other tools, oil hinges, stock up on potting soil and buy spring and summer blooming bulbs. Some of the suppliers stop shipping around mid-February, but bulbs are still available in garden centers.
- ☼ Get ready; spring's just around the corner. Tender plants like tomatoes and peppers may be started now indoors so they'll be big enough to transplant outside at the proper time. Happy gardening!