

The Space Between

Wildlife biologist Fred Barkalow wrote the following about gray squirrels: "If you can ignore having your furniture chewed to bits, the draperies shredded and droppings scattered willy-nilly about the house, the gray squirrel is the pet for you." Still, Googling *pet squirrel* yields loads of entries with detailed instructions about raising these members of *Rodentia* from babies; obviously fanciers abound. Regardless, at our house we've come to the conclusion that the Eastern Gray squirrel does not a great pet make. It is cute and fluffy, but we prefer animals that can be housebroken, do not bite the hand that feeds them—literally—and do not wreak havoc on the pantry. Squirrels are not tame animals. Citified? Sure. Acclimated to people? Yes. Suited to domestic life as a house pet? Not so much.

Which brings me once again to the little Gray who showed up on our doorstep (and door) a month ago. Currently, she nests in the box we provided her on our back deck. She looks for us each morning and again in the evening. She comes—often running—to the sound of my voice when I talk to the chickens or the dogs. Fearless, she has jumped on me several times, undeterred by my canine company. Now I tend to carry a walking stick or broom when in the yard, not to clobber her, but to discourage her enthusiastic catapulting approach.



petlandia

BY MARY MANDEVILLE, DC

Endearing infant squirrels charm many well-meaning folks. Wide round eyes outlined in white and a twitching nose on a palm-sized, affectionate fuzz-ball are hard to resist. Unfortunately, the adorable babes grow up.

Squirrels are ridiculously cute as babies. I know this because a friend once raised an abandoned baby someone found and brought to her. According to my squirrel handbook as well as a local rehabilitator, endearing infant squirrels charm many well-meaning folks. Wide round eyes outlined in white and a twitching nose on a palm-sized, affectionate fuzz-ball are hard to resist. Unfortunately, the adorable babes grow up. Adult squirrels want to go off in the world and live the life a million years of evolution designed them to live. They long to revel in their freedom, to run, to climb and to engage in, well, procreation. Denied the life they're meant to live they can become anxious, a bit ornery or even aggressive. At this point, they are often

unceremoniously thrown out in the backyard, dumped in the local park or dropped off in another neighborhood. Without squirrelish social skills, nest building acumen, food foraging know-how and suddenly subject to extremes of weather and a host of predators, alone and lost, many die within the year. Too wild to live as a pet, they're too tame to subsist in the wild. This is a story I've heard before.

Several years back a client contacted me about chiropractic services for her dog. The Malamute-Wolf mix she showed up with was an impressive, confident, self-possessed companion. When we were finishing our second or third appointment, the client leaned in and lowered her voice. "I'd like you to see my other ..." she raised her hands to draw air quotes, "dog" ... if you catch my drift. She's from the same breeder and supposedly the same percentage but, well ... you'll see."

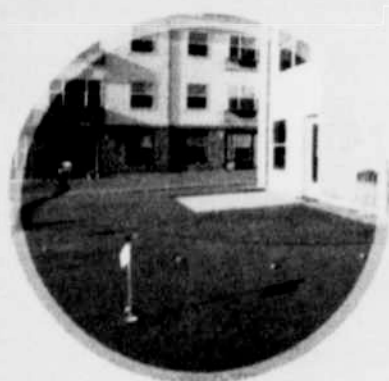
A week later the woman arrived with her "dog." Long-legged and lanky with an elongated snout, gray and white mask, and amber eyes, this striking canine specimen thrilled me in its proximity. "I'll never do it again," the woman told me, her tone firm. "She's from the same line as my other dog but nothing like

him. She hates the house so I keep her in an enclosure, but she just looks for an escape." In my office, the dog paced nervously and her white-rimmed eyes darted around the room. Her breathing was fast and shallow. "She wouldn't survive a week on her own. She's trapped between worlds."

In 2009 the Oregon legislature passed a law banning individuals from owning certain exotic animals as pets. As of January 1 of this year, the law is fully in effect and disallows keeping primates, large cats, canines that are not domestic dogs, bears and crocodilians (it's oddly silent on squirrels). Makes sense to me—lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

Mystery seduces us, whether majestic gray wolf or common city squirrel. But cute as the bugger on the back porch may be (as stately the wolf hybrid, exotic the lion, impressive the tiger or unusual the chimpanzee), the best bet for a good life—for her and for us—is to coax her back to nature. It would have been best not to start down this path in the first place, or to stick with it once the choice was made. Now we're left to manage humanely what someone else started and simply left behind: a life in the space between. ☐

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