

I don't know what kind of mental image that conjures for you, but hopefully, you're not as twisted an individual as me.



I suppose if nothing else, such a headline certainly drew me into the body of the story. As it turns out, it's a pretty good idea, one I've always advocated for most humans as well as for squirrels.

According to the rest of the story, which turned out to be a Clemson University press release, "A gray squirrel contraceptive research project is under way on the Clemson University campus in conjunction with the USDA National Wildlife Research Center. The study is being conducted to reduce the damage the rodents cause to trees and shrubs.

With few predators in urban environments, squirrel numbers increase so that their gnawing and stripping the bark can kill even mature trees. Clemson campus landscape crews have documented more than 100 mature trees killed by squirrels, with an additional 100 trees severely damaged."

Okay, so the article was pretty much what I knew it would be about, but for a minute or so there, I really just had to know if Ph.D. candidates from Clemson, overseen by humorless, clipboard-carrying Federal Cigar Store Indians, were actually walking around city parks with packages of tiny latex condoms in hand. Were they attempting to teach male squirrels how to remove one from the package without damaging it with their little claws? How to properly put it on for maximum effectiveness during use? Could you even teach a squirrel something like that? Would you really want to try?

And for that matter, would squirrels go with boring old standard-issue latex, or would they prefer lambskin? Would some bushy-tailed love demon want the ribbed kind? Or would some truly kinky, tail-twitching bird feeder Lothario demand the ultimate, something like the world-famous "French Tickler," something we might refer to for squirrels -- or Frenchmen, for that matter -- as "The French Toothpick?"

Then the whole thing begs another question: Would the condoms be free, available at the wildlife center, much like they're available for us down at the local health department? Or would they have to learn which gas station bathrooms had the best machines? Could squirrels actually learn to carry quarters with them in case they got lucky? Could they figure out how to make those machines work? And would they have the chutzpah to ask for their money back if the machines were empty?

Maybe I had it all wrong. Maybe they're going to encourage all the lady squirrels go on the pill instead, knowing that they are usually far more responsible than the guys.

At any rate, knowing full well that Clemson wouldn't waste money on stuff like that (I can't say the same about the U.S. Government), and knowing I am, in fact, juvenile, silly, and twisted, I was still intrigued. We are already out there trying like the devil to get people to spay and neuter their pets.

How in the world are we going to spay and neuter wild animals?

As it turns out, they're going to put them on the pill, sort of.

"Most people don't realize the extent of damage gray squirrels can cause," said Greg Yarrow, a Clemson wildlife ecology professor. "This study will evaluate the effectiveness of two different types of contraceptives in preventing reproduction in gray squirrels."

The press release goes on to explain that graduate students will trap, tag, inject the treatment and then release about 40 squirrels. Another 40 squirrels will be trapped, tagged and released

as a control group. The students will note the general health, sex and age range of all the captured squirrels and will monitor their reproduction rate this spring.

Yikes! Maybe it is as weird as I thought: A squirrel peep show...

According to the article, they also will test a second contraceptive in the Clemson Experimental Forest. Called DiazaCon, it is administered through treated feed over a 10-day period and lasts approximately four months. It will be delivered through feeding stations mounted in trees out of reach of other animals. The feeding stations will be capped at dusk to prevent nocturnal flying squirrels from eating the bait.

That, I suppose, is Clemson's way of resorting to the "Give your teenage daughter's date a glass of iced tea laced with saltpeter," method of bringing down the squirrel population. Also, it must be assumed that a squirrel responsible enough to fly is also responsible enough to practice safe sex.

Then again, I've found over the years that squirrels do a pretty good job of culling their own numbers by playing in heavy traffic, wandering too close to big dogs, and occasionally doing a half-gainer into the nearest power transformer. It certainly removes the dumb ones from the gene pool, which is good.

On the other hand, dumb humans do the same thing, yet the Darwin Awards are still going strong. Maybe if we lace a keg or two of beer with DiazaCon and leave them in strategic places...