



I am in the habit of picking up dead animals from the road, and moving them to what I believe to be more suitable locations – under a shrub, into the tall grass – a place less susceptible to traffic, a kind of informal wake. Cats. Dogs. Once, I hoisted a deer to the sidewalk; always wondering why I have this compulsion to relocate the deceased.

It may have begun with my discovery of a half-dead raccoon in St. Louis who later became a poster child for jaw reconstruction, and headlines in the local wildlife newsletter. Maybe my habit is rooted in my dog Toby's miraculous recovery from a twice-broken hip after a hit and run accident on Highway 21. Or maybe, it is rooted in my guilt for having noticed a small black dog wandering the side of the road after midnight and not stopping, only to find the lifeless animal in the same vicinity the next morning – a carcass I moved, and apologized to, in the foggy dawn.

What I don't do is move the dead bodies of squirrels. If I did, I would never finish my daily errands in a timely manner.

What is it with our Lowcountry squirrels? If a census taker were assigned to quantify this varmint's population in northern Beaufort County, I believe we would quickly learn that they outnumber their human neighbors. Of course I exaggerate, but I challenge you to count the squirrels you see on a daily basis, and keep a record for one-week. The numbers may surprise you. (Of course, I have not performed this exercise myself. I am just making an assumption. I am too busy being weird, dodging traffic to move mortally wounded cats from the middle of the road!)

There are different roadside behaviors associated with the squirrel family. Some squirrels saunter from one side of the road to the other, oblivious to on-coming traffic. Others are "darters," squirrels that bolt out from behind mailbox posts into the middle of the road, quickly note the black tires steadily moving in their direction, and dart back to their grassy bunker. There are squirrels that seem to hop across the road, pausing to stand up on their hind legs, noting the speeds of mini-vans and landscaping crews rumbling toward them with no regard for

squirrel-life. After what must be split-second consideration, the small gray creature scampers toward the other side of the road in what seems like a fit of surprise over the fact that soccer moms and tanned weed wackers have no time for casual afternoon squirrel encounters. I have since learned that the "squirrel's erratic path while crossing a street is an attempt to confuse the oncoming vehicle... thereby causing it to change direction. This is obviously the squirrels biggest, and often last mistake." (www.squirrels.org)

I hit my brakes at least once each week in an effort to avoid killing a squirrel. Most times, I come to a complete stop, either to watch a darter bounce into the street and run back to the curb, frantic to avoid bodily collision, or I watch the slow crossing of the nonchalant squirrel, the rodent who could care less. "Hit me," he says. "I have better things to do than worry about stressed-out humans consumed by their need to 'get somewhere.'"

There is no need to dwell on the suicidal squirrel, but they are out there, nervously gnawing on last year's acorns. They wait for a car or truck, or the Lance's snack van, traveling at a constant speed, the driver not wanting to be the cause of a traffic accident, meeting the squirrel hell-bent on ending it all, a furry mental case run straight for the center of the spinning whitewall. They become leathery Frisbees, pressure and heat working together to create something untouchable, even by the most loathsome of turkey vultures.

Of course, there are the contented yard squirrels that chase after one another, taunt my dogs, dig up newly planted annuals, and raid the bird feeder. The same squirrels send screeching signals to their buddies to alert them to the occasional red hawk perched high in a water oak, or to share their annoyance at my presence in their garden paradise. There was the anonymous vandal that gnawed through the rubber molding around my garage door in an effort make a raid on the bird food container, and one that left teeth marks on the splintered corners of my deck.

What recently struck me are the characteristics I share with the woodland creature. I, too, run around in what might seem like a fit of lunacy, stressed by work and family life. I dart from the ATM into the grocery store, storing my purchases in the freezer. I demand same-day service at the dry cleaners so that I can travel in the realm of flying squirrels, gliding from city to city to make a living. I munch fast food and down coffee like a ravenous rodent, unconscious to the food, looking somewhere else.

Like squirrels in the summertime, I am most active two hours after sunrise and two hours before sunset. I sit at a desk in between those intervals combing through emails, and returning phone

calls unlike the smarter squirrel that chooses to rest midday in his nest. I watch as forces greater than myself claim the lives of my fellows, similar to the squirrel witnessing a hit and run, or the swooping down and killing of a comrade by a perceived enemy. Most days I am curious, and although my brain is bigger than the walnut-sized squirrel brain, I probably utilize comparable capacity.

According to Squirrels.org, "In the United States the largest concentration of squirrels is in Washington, D.C. Specifically, in Lafayette Park across from the White House. Some call it the "Squirrel Capital" of the World. Squirrels roam free and are well feed by the thousands of Government employees and visitors that tour the park daily." Need I say more?

My ridiculous point is that there are a helluva lot of squirrels around here. Generally, I like them. I just hate seeing so many squished or bloodied in the middle of the road. Many days, their larger compatriot, the raccoon, loses a few of their numbers to our fueled pursuits. Once in awhile, an armadillo lies feet up on the side of the road. And then, there is the wide-eyed possum, a regular victim of nocturnal paralysis caused by the unexpected sighting of hi-beams.

I pick up dead animals, but I do not slow down to move the bodies of lifeless squirrels. I wish I would. The lessons of compassion, and a less frantic pace of life, are waiting for me in the middle of the road.

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