



Yes, they are adorable and oh-so-cute, but they are much better off in the wild

They Prefer Their Own Kind

Why tree squirrels do not make good pets

Sadly people continue to take animals such as tree squirrels from the wild, hand-raise them and sell them as pets. Most of these unfortunate creatures end up being abandoned, abused or in a very unpleasant situation. Many tree squirrels in captivity resort to self-mutilation – as bad as chewing off their own feet – but still people do not take notice. Here is the story of Cody, one of the luckier ones. He was eventually accepted by a wild group, where he is still enjoying the social interaction these little animals so desperately need.

A recent Internet advert listed two hand-raised tree squirrels of eight weeks old for R1 000 each, but included nothing about their backgrounds. One can only wonder where they came from, how they were raised and why they were not handed to an animal welfare organisation for rehabilitation and eventual release back into the wild.

They were most likely taken from the wild as tiny babies and hand-raised for the 'pet' market; an unfortunate situation indeed. To take such highly sociable creatures from the wild and condemn them to a life of captivity is wrong! We can only hope these two young animals somehow manage to make it back to where they belong.

An injustice

SanWild has over the years received a number of orphaned and injured tree squirrels. We have also acted to confiscate 'pets' from owners who were keeping these little animals in captivity and refused to set them free, even after being informed about the injustices they were doing to the animals.

Tree squirrels are incredibly cute and this is probably why people are prepared to pay R1000 for a pet squirrel. But before you do so, please consider the repercussions.

Highly sociable

Tree squirrels are highly sociable animals and live in groups consisting of males,

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females and their offspring. They are essential arboreal animals but spend a great deal of time on the ground foraging for food. When disturbed, they will always seek refuge in trees. At night, the family nests together for warmth and comfort in holes in trees. The males are mainly responsible for territorial defence, but females will also chase off intruders, especially when they have dependent pups. To promote group cohesion, the animals spread their scent by mutual grooming, which is an important facet of their social interaction and fibre.

At SanWild, we have often witnessed what happens to squirrels that are kept in captivity, deprived of this social interaction and company. On a number of occasions, aggressive squirrels were handed over to us for rehabilitation and release and in some cases these squirrels resorted to self-mutila-



Above: Computer squirrel - before Cody was fully accepted by the wild tree squirrels, he had the run of the office. Below: Cody as a tiny baby, shortly after he was rescued

tion. In addition to becoming very aggressive, they start chewing off their tails, toes or fingers. In severe cases they start chewing their own chests or stomachs. The message to us humans is loud and clear: "Please, please set me free. I hate this daily misery and desperately need my own kind!" Why are we then sometimes so deaf and unwilling to see and hear?

Others suffered from malnutrition and some arrivals at the centre had to be put to sleep as the damage done was simply too much and they could never live a normal life.

Tip

Tree squirrels are often attacked by cats, especially when feeding at bird feeders in urban gardens. Make sure to place your bird feeder where your cat cannot reach – hang it high in a tree, but away from thicker branches from which a cat can launch an attack.



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As a result of loneliness and frustration, tree squirrels kept in captivity often resort to self-mutilation. Here such an animal receives veterinary attention

Cody's story

There are occasions, though, when mankind's only objective is to help. Take young Cody for example. He was picked up by a construction worker who found him alongside a tree that had been cut down to make way for a new road. Sadly, Cody's sibling had been crushed by the falling tree. The little squirrel was tiny and only a couple of days old on arrival. He thrived on a diet of a popular baby milk formula and soon became the favourite around our office.

During the day, he spent many hours in a small bird cage under a huge Jackalberry tree, growing stronger by the day. His presence was soon discovered by the resident group of tree squirrels living in the tree and, as he grew older, they visited him more often. The resident group's young squirrels were quite happy to play and interact with Cody through the bars of the bird cage, and we hoped that this controlled interaction would result in him being accepted into this group eventually.

When Cody got bigger, he had the run of our office and could get away from his wild neighbours if he wanted to by running into the office for our protection. However, he hardly ever needed to, as they already knew and liked him. Slowly but surely he earned a right to be part of the group, and eventually became a full member. He is still living with them and we are confident that he is no longer a newcomer and has taken up his rightful place.

How different his life could have turned out if he had not been brought into a centre where he was raised to be released into a wild group. Cody too could have been a miserable and lonely pet squirrel somewhere in South Africa.

No easy matter

Cody's rehabilitation was easy, but we have also experienced and seen the difficulty of putting hand-raised, injured or rescued tree squirrels back into unfamiliar territory in the wild. If such a squirrel is simply released, chances are very good that he'll end up being viciously attacked or even killed by territorial squirrels. It is not an easy rehabilitation programme and unless an individual squirrel can be introduced over a period of time, it might be better to start a new territorial group in captivity. Such a group can then be released in an area without resident squirrels.

Getting tree squirrels back to the wild can be done, but only with the correct methods and expertise. The joy of seeing a rehabilitation programme come to a successful conclusion is very special indeed, and one only then realises just how intelligent these little creatures are.

Please do not support the wild pet trade; be the RightKind for WildKind and let tree squirrels remain in the wild where they belong. If you enjoy having them around, please try and protect them against your pets. In return, you will get hours of pleasure observing them in a natural environment like your garden. □

Tree Squirrel Fact File



Scientific name: *Paraxerus cepapi*

Afrikaans: Boomeekhorring

Description: Smallish squirrels weighing between 76 and 265 g. Upper parts vary from speckled grey with a tinge of buff to a speckled light colour. The flanks are yellowish and the under parts vary from white to buff. The tail is long and bushy.

Habitat: Mixed thornveld and Mopani woodland of northern Mpumalanga and the Limpopo province

Life expectancy: Eight years

Natural enemies: Leopard, lion, caracal and martial eagle

Food: Seeds, berries, fruit, flowers, leaves, bark and occasionally insects