

Impy

by Hope Sawyer



Buyukmihci

Photo by Alfred A. Francesconi

A tale of a little gray squirrel

Impy was a gray squirrel raised by two friends who had found him one summer when he was the size to fit in the palm of a hand. These women worked all day and so left Impy in the bathroom, where he made a fluffy nest of toilet paper in a box.

In September they brought Impy to us. We made a big cage and installed him in the kitchen, planning to release him when he could take care of himself. He was free during the day, but confined to his cage at night. For daytime shelter Impy chose a pile of dish towels high on a shelf. Here he burrowed out a nest.

His kittenish play was enlivened by his long graceful tail. With a series of jolt-legged hops he attacked a hand, boxing fingers from a standing position. Or he turned onto his back and mauled them with all four feet and his teeth. On these occasions he muffled his bite like a friendly puppy. He raced back and forth across people's backs or twirled up and down human bodies as if they were trees. His favorite maneuver was cavorting in and out the rails of the music stand, ending with a slide down its stem.

At night when I went to put Impy in his cage he wrestled my fingers and sometimes chirred resentment. Only our son Ned could handle him without protest.

Ned carried him upside down, nestled in his big teenage hand. Impy liked to play around Ned's desk, but his passion for balsa would eventually banish him from the room, which was cluttered with model planes.

Impy was always interested in nuts, and could find them with uncanny speed. If he spied a bowl of walnuts on a table he would make a flying leap, or zip down a vertical path, climb the table leg and get to the bowl. Taking a nut he would examine it with fingers and mouth, then high-tail away to hide it in a corner, under a pile of papers, or under a rug. He also stored nuts in my typewriter, in the wastebasket or in the toes of slippers. The place he liked best, however, was the space between a person's neck and collar. He pushed the nut in, then drew the collar up over it, unaware of how his keen claws scratched the person's neck.

About eight o'clock in the evening Impy went to sleep. He filled his mouth with fresh bedding before retiring, like a person taking an extra blanket to bed. He never emerged during the evening unless there was unusual excitement. Mornings, however, he was up early, yawning and stretching sleepily.

We let Impy go at the refuge the first of November, as the weather

was pleasant and we thought he had a good chance of survival. Wild squirrels were still burying nuts. But the next day the weather turned cold, with high winds, rain and frost. We had to bring Impy home, where he spent the winter in the cage, furnished with a hollow log, dry leaves and several runways for exercise. By the middle of March the weather was mild and we freed him again. A few days later I was delighted to see Impy in the refuge yard where I had gone to build birdhouses. I tossed him some nuts and he began to eat. Then he ran up onto a birdhouse close beside me and gave his warning chatter. Next he jumped on me and buried his teeth in my wrist. I took off my coat and threw it over him, but he wriggled free and made for my hands. It was a wild struggle, in which my coat became soaked with blood—mine. Finally I waved him off with the coat and escaped into the cabin. Later we caught Impy in a box trap and released him deep in the woods.

I related the incident to a friend who has had long experience with squirrels. He told me that of the dozen or so gray squirrels he has raised, several bit him severely after he had released them. I assume that wild instincts coupled with unnatural upbringing result in these unfortunate attacks. ☐ ☐