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Gnawing problem: Campus squirrels go nuts for employees' cars

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Gnawing problem: Campus squirrels go nuts for employees' cars

The folks in the Alumni Office had been trying to warn the campus for months.

At first, they couldn't figure out what those strange, toothy markings on their car bumpers were. All they knew was that something was messing with their vehicles.

Then one day, to their dismay, they caught the scoundrels in action. Squirrels were feasting on their bumpers, in some cases chewing right through them.

Despite setting traps, banging on windows, sprinkling hot sauce around their parking spaces and trying other assorted remedies, the Cherrydale crowd could not deter the attacks of the bushy-tailed vandals. When they sought help, they got little sympathy from colleagues in the central living and learning area of the campus. One administrator mocked their claims by laughing in their faces.

Eventually, construction on the Younts Center, located next to Cherrydale, apparently disrupted the squirrels' wooded environs and sent them looking for greener pastures — and fresh meat. They found it just down the road, in a parking lot opposite James C. Furman Hall.

As long as the squirrels had operated on the outskirts of campus, their mischief went unheeded. But once they moved their activities "down the hill," where most university personnel work — and park — the authorities took notice. Especially when people began squawking.

It turned out that the squirrels seemed most interested in German and Japanese cuisine, particularly if it belonged to a bookish sort. The cars of three members of the library staff — two Toyota Camrys and a Volkswagen Passat — were principle victims of the assaults.

The evidence was clearly incontrovertible. The skeptics were silenced, and a sense of unease settled over the campus. Was this "Revenge of the Squirrels?" Or a furry version of "The Birds?" After 10 years of constant construction at Furman — with no end



in sight — had the university's most populous form of wildlife finally decided to fight back?

Call Public Safety, came the cry! But even all-knowing Public Safety was flummoxed.

"I had never heard of squirrels eating bumpers," says Bob Miller, the department director. And since it would be difficult to positively identify the specific perpetrator(s), the authorities' hands seemed tied.

Fortunately for the university work force, the bumper-gnawing miscreants' mischief appeared to be limited to one parking lot. And eventually, some foraging by Bernie Stanton, manager of environmental health and safety, unearthed the nut of the problem.

Like rats, mice and other similar creatures, squirrels have four sturdy incisors that never stop growing. Constant nibbling on nuts and acorns keeps the teeth a comfortable length.

But on rare occasions, squirrels have been known to chew on car parts — plastic bumpers, pipes and even tires — in an effort to keep their choppers groomed.

With this knowledge in hand, Public Safety offered a simple solution: Since squirrels, which have an average height of 18 inches, must stand on a curb to reach a car bumper, Miller suggested that motorists simply park farther away from the curb. To date, this technique seems to be working — although the Alumni Office, still crying in the wilderness, would dispute it. For insurance, squirrel-deflecting granules were sprinkled in the area.

The other option, outside of cutting down even more trees and eliminating the favored squirrel habitats, was to remove the speed limit signs on campus and declare open season. As Miller says, "The only real enemy to squirrels around here is speeding vehicles."