

# Squirrels gone nuts on campus

□ *These cute critters may bite off more than they can chew.*

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It was not long ago that a fierce predator stalked students and professors walking near McCarty Hall.

The predator was the Ninja Squirrel.

The female gray squirrel started her reign of terror by taking hand-outs from people eating their lunches outside McCarty A. She became accustomed to people feeding her and then turned aggressive.

"She used to lie on top of the brick wall and jump on people with brown paper bags to make them drop their lunches," said Dr. William H. Kern Jr. "She went as far as biting people that wouldn't give up their lunches."

Kern, assistant professor of entomology at the Ft. Lauderdale Research Center and an expert on urban wildlife, said the ninja squirrel was humanely trapped and taken to



Photo illustration: William C. Tarver

**Do not let campus squirrels fool you with their innocent appearance. There have been numerous reports of aggression toward students from these critters.**

a remote area of campus where she would not be a threat.

"If she hadn't been fed by well-meaning people, she never would have become a threat to public health," Kern said. "She would have lived her life as a welcome part of the campus environment."

Kern suggests that human interaction with wildlife not only endan-

gers the animal's welfare, but it could be dangerous to the human as well.

The Ninja Squirrel of McCarty Hall was not the only campus squirrel to become aggressive and attack for food.

Ken Glover, coordinator of environmental health and safety for University Pest Control, said a UF

student was bitten by a squirrel several years ago while having lunch near the law school.

The student had to undergo a series of precautionary rabies and tetanus shots as a result of the bite.

The attack was a direct effect of people interacting with wildlife.

Glover suggests that students probably had fed the squirrel before, causing it to become aggressive.

No matter how tempting it may be to share the crust from your peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a cute critter, Glover recommends that you let squirrels find their own lunch.

"Don't feed the squirrels," Glover said. "There is plenty of food for them."

Mark Hostetler, assistant professor and extension wildlife specialist at the department of wildlife ecology and conservation, said there is an abundance of food for squirrels on the UF campus.

"Between the oaks and elms that produce nuts and the fast food thrown into the garbage cans every day, our squirrels get plenty to eat,"

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Hostetler said.

While squirrel attacks rarely happen, and it may seem harmless to feed one, Kern advises students to observe squirrels passively and not to interfere with them.

"Feeding wildlife causes them to lose their natural fear and caution," Kern said. "They come to recognize humans as a source of food."

While squirrel attacks pose little threat to UF students, the critters can cause a variety of problems that affect our campus.

Squirrels can cause electrical problems in campus buildings by chewing through wires and cables. Fortunately, UF computer specialists have prepared for this problem by adding a safe-rodent repellent to cables and wires that squirrels could access.

Squirrels often irritate maintenance staff because they dig holes in search of bulbs and mushrooms, leaving holes in the ground that

have to be filled.

Kern suggests helping make campus safer for squirrels and people, without directly interacting with them.

For students who want to help the furry gray squirrel without feeding it, Kern suggests sweeping acorns and pecans off the road so squirrels do not get hit by cars. When riding a bike, Kern suggests being aware of squirrels because they can startle easily and run into your path.

"Hitting a squirrel with your bike can make you lose control, and it definitely ruins his day," Kern said.

While squirrels do have some troublesome habits, they can also be quite fun to watch.

"Squirrels have all kinds of great and entertaining behaviors," Kern said. "Enjoy them at a distance."

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Photo: William C. Tarver

**Beware! This squirrel, though cute at most times, is not something to be tampered with.**