



AN EARLY SNOW

I've been a rehabilitator for about 14 years and, during that time, I have cared for somewhere in the vicinity of 10,000 animals. We have received a number of unusual animals ranging from cormorants and loons to muskrats and otters. In fact, one of the most enjoyable aspects of this job is never knowing what kind of creature may arrive at our door. One particular animal, however, has always eluded me, until this year.

I arrived at the Center on Friday, September 14 to begin my afternoon shift. I had barely stepped into the building when my assistant excitedly told me I had to see what had been admitted. She showed me a small plastic bin, the kind we use for baby squirrels, and there, nestled among the soft bedding, was a squirrel. Now, considering that we receive about 400 squirrels per year, you might think this was the last thing I would want to see. This was, however, no ordinary squirrel; it was an albino complete, with red eyes.

The color of our familiar gray squirrel actually ranges from pure white to pure black. The gene that produces the black, or melanistic, squirrels is recessive; thus, gray is the most common color. A pure albino squirrel is even more rare than the melanistic variety. This little guy, only about five weeks old, presented me with something of a problem; what should we do with him? Lacking camouflage coloring, albinos of any species have a tough time surviving in the wild. Rather than blending in with their surroundings, they tend to glow like a beacon day and night. In addition, with no pigmentation in their eyes, albinos often do not have very good vision. We kept Snow isolated from the other squirrels until we could decide whether he would need to be kept in captivity. If he were going to be used as an educational animal, we would want him to bond to people so he could be handled. If he grew up with other squirrels, he would bond with them and would behave like any other wild animal.

Snow had been found in an alley in northwest Washington, hiding under some leaves. Though he appeared uninjured, he did have a runny nose and raspy breath noises so we started him on a course of antibiotics. The person that brought him to us said there were a couple of adult albinos in his neighborhood that had been there for several years. He was hoping that Snow could be returned to his yard for release but, because of our concerns, we cautioned him that the squirrel might not be releasable.

My next step was to hit the Internet for advice from other rehabilitators. Many people check the Internet to get information on a variety of subjects. Unfortunately, the Internet is anonymous; you have no way of knowing if the person advising you knows what he or she is talking about. Often, the information you receive is totally inaccurate and the animal suffers as a result. When a person brings us an animal and says they found out how to take care of it on the Internet, I cringe. Being a member of the rehab community, I am careful to seek advice and information only from qualified rehabbers. I addressed a question to the wildlife list asking what experience other rehabbers have had releasing albino squirrels. Several people responded to my query and they all said the same thing; release him! Apparently, albino squirrels seem to understand that they are more vulnerable than normal squirrels and they become far more wary than usual. Once the antibiotics were finished, little Snow was given three foster siblings to grow up with.

True to the advice I had received, Snow became a holy terror during the ensuing weeks. While his gray siblings would happily continue eating, Snow would leap at the side of the cage and growl angrily when anyone got too close. Cleaning his cage became a risky business. On November 18, we were delighted to transfer Snow and his family to one of our outdoor cages and, on November 30, all four youngsters went to live in Snow's old neighborhood. Snow was a good example of the old warning: "Be careful what you wish for; you might get it!"

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