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~~THE~~ SQUIRREL OF THE GOLDEN FOREST

by

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The car was loitering along a road under the enveloping glow of yellow aspens backed by the dark green of tall ponderosa pines. So soft and mellow was it that it was like being in a golden room. The motor idled, and stopped. We must stay a bit and drink in the good warmth, the cleansed clearness of it all up here on the top of the world. There was a hush, a surcease from the blatant sounds that we had left far behind. We were traveling through the Kaibab Forest on the rim of the Grand Canyon, over seven thousand feet up under the blue sky. The aloneness was satisfying.

Alone? From somewhere above our heads came a grating "Cluck! Cluck!"; then a scolding "Chur-r-r-r." It sounded to us like "Whose house do you think this is? What are you here for?" Eyes turned up to search the trees, but they seemed lifeless except for the wimpling of the yellow aspen leaves. There must be somebody up there. "Wuh! Wuh! Wuh!" came a guttural barking, as if to say "I'll scare you away this time."

Looking across into the branches of a pine, we caught the flash of something white as the sun struck it. Flattened out on a limb, we made out the form of a big squirrel with his tail curved over his back. We sat perfectly still on the running-board and waited. He waited, and we waited. It didn't matter, we were basking in the sun. It became a game of who could out-wait the other. Finally he lifted himself on the limb and flirited a great white plume of a tail. It was he, the one we had come into this forest to see, the Kaibab squirrel, *Sciurus Kaibabensis*.

We lifted the field glasses gingerly, and almost held our breaths at the beauty of this big dark squirrel. He was a trim, aggressive individual, dark grayish on the back with an ochreous patch in the middle, snow white underparts running even down to his finger-tips, very long strong hind feet and all four gray; but the high-lights of his whole composition were the high, pointed ears tufted in black, and his broad flat tail pure white underneath.

and shiny black on top. His tail was his emotional rudder, and worked nervously. His ears were lined with ochreous to match his back patch. Behold one of the most colorful and dramatic mammals in the United States. He knew it, and we were to learn that his temperament matched his looks.

Kaibabensis soon disappeared into the refuge of the thick pine tops. We said goodbye to the yellow aspens and turned out steed back toward David's Lake Lodge, with the mere gratification of glimpsing this unique squirrel, but with no pictures. In the morning the sun shone through the tall pines that surrounded the Lodge, and as a surprise, whom should we see but our forest friend scampering about the yard under the trees, his tail carried jauntily over his back like a white scarf. When he walked he had a jerky, waddling gait, and when he decided to move away he loped along in rolling bounds. Sometimes he scratched his way up the trunk of a tree, peeked around it with his nose stuck out, his spear-like ears bent forward, and his black eyes bold. He stamped his feet on the bark and churred lustily, ending with his bluff of a "Wuh! Wuh! Wuh!"

We lingered several days at the Lodge, taking short trips out to see where the Kaibab deer had eaten all their browse. The trees that they feed on were shorn as high as they could reach and looked like spindle legs with short petticoats. This island-like area some seventy miles long and thirty-five miles wide is the range of the Kaibab squirrel also, lying on the northern rim of the Grand Canyon, while only fifteen miles across the great chasm of the Canyon lives his relative, the Abert squirrel, he of the all-gray coat, ochreous pointed ears with black tips, and the wondrous white tail. One scientist lays the variation in color of the two squirrels to the change of environment and isolation, "that powerful factor in evolution." The two species live under practically identical conditions as to vegetation and climate. They are the only American squirrels with conspicuous ear tufts.

In winter the haunts of the Kaibab squirrel are buried in snow, but in summer everywhere there are entrancing vistas through the great pines and lovely little parks. The ground is soft with grass and on every hand the wild

flowers make a colorful carpet. Remote parts of this wilderness once harbored cougars, wolves, deer, bears, and wild turkeys, and deer are still found here in too great an abundance for forage, and the turkeys still roam the deep nooks. On the plain below this forested ridge a herd of buffalo feed in contentment, and not far away the Navajo Indians still live their primitive lives, herding their sheep along the dry hillsides and lonely draws.

The Kaibab squirrels ^{may nest} in hollows of old trees, and as often they may build high up in the pine branches bulky nests of leaves, pine needles, and twigs, lining them with soft grass and shredded bark. They are active during the whole year, but take shelter in their nests during storms. It seems probable that they have two litters of from three to four young each season. The seeds and the tender bark from the young tips of the yellow pine are their principal food. Very frequently they nip off the ends of these pine limbs letting the tips fall to the ground, while they strip the stems for food. It is not uncommon to find the ground under the trees covered with freshly cut tips and leaves.

Walking back of the Lodge one day, we found a large octagonal wire pen. It had a slanted over-hang and looked like a cage for pets of some kind. Dwarfed evergreens grew here and there and the skeletons of several trees that had been denuded of bark. A pan of water and an empty food tray were under them. Up in one tree was what looked like a bird house. Standing there, we saw a black nose and tufted ears appear at the entrance of the bird house--our foxy friend again. This was our third meeting. We stepped inside the wire gate, closed it, and stood watching. He watched us with a half quizzical, half belligerent expression.

"You go in the Lodge and buy a bag of piñon nuts," said my partner, "and I'll fix a place to set up the camera."

"Do you think that jumping-jack will ever stand still enough for us to get a colored picture?" I asked. "You know that is more exacting and takes longer than a black-and-white."

"Maybe he won't come up to the feed at all," he said. "Put down a few nuts near the focus point. We'll try it anyway."

The diminutive colored camera was fixed on the little metal tripod, which was set very low to the ground with its legs spread out. Altogether, it looked like a big black spider ready to spring. I dropped the nuts on the focus spot in front of the little evergreen and stepped back. The squirrel circled skittishly around it, eyeing us, then came slowly up with his tail dragging at an uncertain angle. He seemed undecided whether to try it, or bolt.

The cameraman made last adjustments with as few movements as possible, then said, "Ready--quiet." The squirrel by this time had become engrossed with peeling pinon nuts and ^{was} sitting up, his bushy tail flowing over his back, his knobby paws stuffing the meats into his mouth. Dead stillness for an instant. The shutter clicked. There was a flare of white--our quarry was gone.

"There goes eighty-seven cents to the dogs," said the cameraman. "He's quicker than the camera. Well, let's commence again."

We moved to another position and set up, but it took some time to reassure the squirrel and draw him back. Things went better, and we got a good shot.

"Put some nuts in the crotch of that little green tree," suggested the cameraman. "I think he'll come up there and we'll get a black-and-white this time." Ready--quiet."

I moved carefully and reached my hand into the tree, when flash--the timid squirrel flew up like a streak, scratched and bit my hand in a half dozen places. They were deep gouges, an intentional assault. Drops of blood rolled off.

Kaibabensis wasn't a bluffer.