

# Here's why there are dead squirrels all over the place

By [Dugan Arnett](#) Globe Staff, September 24, 2018, 9:09 p.m.



Scores of squirrels have been killed on the roads of New England this summer and fall, including one in Epping, N.H.  
JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Even for an agency well-versed in handling a range of complex issues, the newest quagmire facing the New Hampshire Department of Transportation stands out as an unusual one:

Why are so many squirrel carcasses suddenly dotting the state's highways?

"I don't have any body counts, so to speak," says Bill Boynton, a department spokesman. "But our maintenance forces have been kept pretty busy."

The reason, wildlife experts say, is an unprecedented boom in squirrel populations throughout New England, most particularly in New Hampshire. Fueled by a recent abundance of acorns, the bushy-tailed creatures have been ubiquitous this year, filling forests, eradicating fruit trees of apples and peaches, running rampant through residential neighborhoods.

But perhaps nowhere has the animal's presence been more notable — or eerily bizarre — than on the region's roads and highways, where a seemingly endless number have met their demise.

A video posted to Facebook resembled something out of an M. Night Shyamalan movie. Shot from a moving car, it shows a road full of dead squirrel carcasses blurring past in shocking succession. Confused motorists in New Hampshire, meanwhile, have taken to Twitter.

Wildlife experts have been inundated in recent weeks with reports of both the scattered carcasses and the sheer number of squirrels wandering the region.

Call up Mark Ellingwood, a wildlife biologist with New Hampshire Fish and Game, and he'll tell you

why you're calling before you've gotten the question out.

"Squirrel-nado," he says.

Indeed, in recent weeks, the volume has been staggering. In Manchester, one New Hampshire resident told WMUR News 9 that he had observed at least 100 dead squirrels along a short stretch of Route 125 one day last month. Up the road in Maine, reports have been even more eye-popping. One motorist reported seeing 320 squirrel carcasses between Freeport and Bangor on the Maine Turnpike, says Scott Lindsay, a wildlife biologist with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; another counted an astonishing 508.



"It's not unusual to have up years for squirrels," Lindsay says in a phone interview. "But I don't think I've ever seen a population this high."

The seeds of this curious phenomenon were sown last year, experts say, when an unusually robust acorn crop allowed squirrels to feast heartily through the fall and enter the typically barren winter months in robust and girthy shape.

As a result, a greater percentage of squirrels survived the winter, and those that emerged in the spring did so in promising physical condition — and ready to get down to business, reproductively speaking. Now, they're everywhere.

Recently, Ellingwood, of New Hampshire Fish and Game, said he has heard several accounts of backyard peach and apple trees stripped of fruit by eastern gray squirrels.

Earlier in the month in Massachusetts, hundreds of residents in Wilmington were left without power after squirrels — and, apparently, mice — damaged power lines.

"Those squirrels," grumbles Joyce Mulvaney, a spokeswoman for the Reading Municipal Light Department, which serves Wilmington and other towns. "I'm telling you."

Already this year, George Hamilton, a field specialist with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, says he has received 20 complaints from farmers about the troublesome rodents, up from the one or two he typically receives annually.

He saw the phenomenon for himself last month, when, during a visit to an orchard in Farmington, he watched as a squirrel repeatedly carried peaches and apples up a tree and into a nest.

As Hamilton put it, “They’re being very blatant.”

The good news, at least for those up in arms over the critters, is that an ecological reckoning is probably on the way.

Winter’s arrival, along with an acorn crop this year that has been substantially lower than in years past, is likely to bring a natural recalibration of the squirrel population, experts say.

“Most things in nature are dynamic, and most times you’re going to get back to equilibrium,” says Lindsay, the Maine-based wildlife biologist. “I suspect that’s going to happen over the next year.”

In the meantime, Boynton and the New Hampshire road crews are staying busy.

To this point, Boynton says, there have been no plans to institute an official Squirrel Carcass Removal Task Force, though, on a recent afternoon, he did pause to consider potential alternatives to the department’s unusual issue.

“Maybe,” he said, “we just need more birds of prey here or something.”

---

Dugan Arnett can be reached at [dugan.arnett@globe.com](mailto:dugan.arnett@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@duganarnett](https://twitter.com/duganarnett).