

**HUGHES'S ILLUSTRATED  
ANECDOTAL NATURAL  
HISTORY, PP. 6-194**

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# HUGHES'S

ILLUSTRATED

## Anecdotal Natural History.



BY

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Our Australian colonists talk and write with marvellous composure of wolves, bears, monkeys, bats, cats, squirrels, rats, and mice as inhabiting the country. Similarly, American writers sadly bewilder the tyro in zoology by mentioning American buffaloes, lions, tigers, and panthers, all these creatures being strictly confined to the old world. The 'Robin' again, so often mentioned in American literature, is not our English redbreast, as is usually assumed, but an erroneous name for the migratory thrush, a bird far larger than the redbreast and belonging to a totally different group.

The squirrels belong to the great division of the rodents, which comprise nearly a third of all the known mammalia. The animals of this group are distinguished by the possession of two powerful chisel-edged incisor teeth in each jaw, formed for cutting or gnawing away hard substances, and which are replaced by fresh material as fast as they are worn away. The power of these incisor teeth is strikingly exemplified in the beaver, which has been known to gnaw its way through logs no less than eighteen inches in diameter.

Were there not some means of replacing these teeth as quickly as they are worn down, the death of the animals would speedily follow, as they would shortly starve from their inability to procure food. In order to avoid this, the teeth are continually forced forward from the jaw by the formation of fresh substance at the base, which is secreted by a pulpy substance at the root of the tooth. Now, as this growth takes place whether the teeth are used or not, it follows that, unless they were in constant use, they would soon increase to an inordinate length, and before very long would project from the mouth. Such an event does occasionally occur, when by some

accident one of the incisor teeth has been broken short off. The corresponding tooth in the other jaw, finding no resistance to its growth, continues to increase until it sometimes forms a perfect circle outside the mouth, usually resulting in the death of its owner by preventing it from feeding.

Without some means, however, of preserving the chisel-like sharpness of these teeth, the mere replacement of wasted substance would be of little use. In order to obtain the desired result, the teeth are constructed after a very singular fashion.

The body of the tooth is composed of pure ivory, coated on the outer surface with a thin layer of enamel, which being of a very much harder nature, is not worn away with the same rapidity. Besides this, the ivory nearest the enamel is harder than the rest, and the softer parts being easiest worn down, the edge of the tooth always keeps the same proportions, the actual cutting being performed with the edge of the enamel.

Our carpenter's chisels are constructed on exactly the same principle, the chief portion of them being composed of soft iron, while a very thin plate of steel is laid along the back and forms the cutting edge of the tool.

So much for the characteristics of the rodents as a whole. Now for those of that group which are known as squirrels.

The true squirrels are scientifically known as *Sciuridae*, or shadow-tails, a title derived from two Greek words, the former signifying a shade and the latter a tail. This refers to the habit in these animals of carrying the tail over the back, as though to protect the body from the rays of the sun, a position always adopted except when running or leaping. They are remarkable among the rodents as possessing particu-

larly perfect clavicles or collar-bones, which enable them to use the fore-paws to a certain extent after the manner of hands. This is especially the case in carrying food to the mouth, when the paws are managed with extraordinary dexterity. In eating a nut, for example, a squirrel, by the aid of its fore-paws and teeth alone, will break the shell and peel the kernel to the full as successfully as a skilful human being furnished with crackers and penknife. And it does so as follows. Holding the nut close to the teeth, it gnaws away at the point of the fruit until it fairly pierces the outer shell. It then dexterously inserts the edge of the upper teeth into the aperture, and splits away the shell just as an idle boy does with his knife when opening nuts in school hours. By means of its hand-like paws, it then holds the kernel against its upper teeth, and rapidly turning it round and round, strips off the whole of the peel before beginning to devour it.

With the exception of the jaws and the adjacent parts of the head, the skeleton is exceedingly light and slender in order to suit it to the rapid movements of the animal.

To furnish the squirrels with the means of ascending the trees in which they spend the greater portion of their existence, the long toes are provided with sharp, curved claws, which can be inserted into the smallest crevices of the bark, and thus secure a firm foothold.

The rapidity and ease of their aerial motions is something astounding. A squirrel will gallop up a perpendicular tree trunk fully as fast as a cat can run on level ground, and will throw itself from branch to branch with the most perfect recklessness. And even if it misses its mark, it simply extends its limbs and allows itself to fall to the ground from most alarming heights, never seeming to be in the least damaged by its





Squirrel's Summer Nest.

rapid descent. One would imagine that the creature must infallibly be dashed to pieces, but, almost before one can look round, the squirrel is off to the nearest tree trunk, where it is quickly lost to sight amongst the foliage.

As a refuge both by day and night, and also as a place wherein to rear their young, the squirrels always construct a large and comfortable nest, generally in the fork of some lofty branch, and always carefully concealed from sight. The materials are chiefly leaves, grass, and moss, woven together in a most beautiful manner, and forming a perfect protection against the rain. The old nests may sometimes be seen in winter when they are no longer surrounded by foliage, and stand out boldly among the naked boughs.

In these nests the young, three or four at a litter, are brought up, and remain until they are old enough to shift for themselves.

At the approach of winter the squirrels, not being able to find their food during the cold months, lay up stores for use during that period. Their provisions consist generally of nuts of various sorts, grain, beech-mast, and so on, and are hidden away as a rule in holes at the roots of trees in the neighbourhood of their winter habitation. It is a somewhat curious fact that the squirrel never includes a bad nut in these hoards.

This winter retreat is also a nest of much the same character as the former, but hidden away in holes in trees, the junctions of large branches with the trunk, and similar localities. As soon as the cold weather fairly arrives, the squirrels, having previously laid up their winter stores, repair to this hiding-place, and there pass the time until spring, when they again return to their summer haunts. For the greater portion of the interven-



Squirrel's Winter Nest.