

North Hudson's 'squirrel whisperer' rescues orphaned babies

By [Chuck Nowlen](#) on Jan 5, 2015 at 4:48 p.m./Hudson Star-Observer



Dan O'Connor with two of the baby squirrels he has saved since 2011. (Star-Observer photo by Chuck Nowlen)

When they're nursed back from death's door and can finally sleep soundly, they purr like tiny kittens. Their tails are thin and stubbier than you might expect. Their fur smells a little like maple syrup.

"True. All my friends agree. Maple syrup," says railroad welder Dan O'Connor, who ought to know.

O'Connor has saved the lives of 11 motherless baby squirrels at his Michaelson Street home since 2011, when the first one — named “Squirrely” - - showed up in his yard one rainy spring night, barely alive.

Most of the others were brought over by neighbors and friends — always in the spring or late summer. He found four orphaned babies in a cardboard box on his deck one year, accompanied by a note that said, “Good luck.”

“That was tough. I lost a lot of sleep with them because four is a handful. I’ve never smelled more like spoiled milk in my life,” O'Connor says.

All of O'Connor’s baby squirrels had lost their mothers too early in their lives – - to cats, dogs, power lines, tree removal or other squirrel menaces.

He kept all of them safe in a small cage in his garage and bottle fed them five times a day at the beginning, even when he was pulling 12-hour shifts at work.

Then he got them on solid food and coaxed them back into the wild when they were old enough to make it on their own. For three of them, he built squirrel-sized treehouses in his yard for them to live in.

He’s never lost one while it was in his care.

And, yes, of course O'Connor bonded with all of his baby squirrels over the three weeks or so he was their foster mom.

He didn’t give names to the ones that came after Squirrely, though — they were known only by the numbers 2-11. But he can still recognize some of them when he visits the locations they were released to.

“After a week or so of being on their own, they’re completely wild. They’re like ‘who are you?’ when they see me,” O'Connor explains.

“It’s a feel-good story, and it makes me feel good. ... The first one, Squirrely - – the day I let him go, he was so scared, and I was so sad. So it’s stressful sometimes, but it’s also rewarding. I know I’ve done the right thing.”

He emphasizes that for most people, saving baby squirrels -- or any wild animal -- is a “don’t do this yourself” proposition. O’Connor didn’t feel like he had a choice.

There they were all of a sudden, helpless and starving, right in front of him. Without action -- and fast -- the babies didn’t stand a chance.

“I wasn’t just going to let them die. I don’t collect squirrels, and I don’t have squirrels for pets. I don’t want anybody having squirrels for pets, and I don’t want anybody taking baby squirrels out of their nest,” he says.

“The only thing I did was save their lives. Every baby squirrel I’ve ever had was motherless and headed for the tunnel of light. Every one of them would have died; I’m 100 percent sure of it. ... The whole idea was to get them out the door.”

Step by step

According to a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources primer on orphaned wild animals -- <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/orphan.html> -- untrained people who find them should never try to rehabilitate them on their own due to the risk of disease or injury, and for the animals’ own good.

Instead, the untrained should call the DNR or a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately, the primer notes, adding that “rehabilitating wildlife without a license is against the law in Wisconsin.”

O’Connor didn’t know that until recently -- well after his last orphan, Number 11, was back in the wild. Frankly, it never occurred to him on the spot in an emergency.

“This whole thing ain’t a job. It’s not even a hobby,” he texts the Hudson Star-Observer shortly after a Dec. 23 interview at his North Hudson home. “To me, it was just orphans whose lives needed to be saved -- right now.”

After reviewing the DNR’s requirements, O’Connor is ready to begin the licensing process.

“This is something I can do. I’ll dig into it,” he adds in another text message. “The licensing thing sounds cool. A lot of work and hoops to jump through, but it’ll be neat to be official. I’m in.”

Meanwhile, O’Connor remembers Squirrely’s arrival as if it were yesterday. The basic process that followed has been repeated five times since over the last three years.

“I was just out with two buddies -- it was a cold and rainy spring night -- and when I pulled into the driveway and got out, I felt something on my shoe,” he says. “So I look down, and there was this little, tiny squirrel on my right shoe.

“He’s kind of hugging my leg and looking up at me -- he was really, really small. So I reach down and pick him up -- and that’s how it all started.”

The reaction from one of O’Connor’s friends at the time: “‘Oh my God, you’re going to get rabies!’ -- I must’ve heard that a hundred times by now. I told him, ‘I don’t know what’s going to kill me, man, but it’s not going to be baby squirrel spit.’

O’Connor continues: “I said, ‘I think he’s just too small to be out on his own.’ Anyway, there he was, and it was raining. So I put a little peanut butter on my finger, and he sniffed it and gave it a little lick. I knew he needed milk, though. I could tell he wasn’t weaned yet. But all I had in the house was skim milk.”

Tragedy looms

O'Connor dashed to the nearest convenience store and bought some half-and-half, then microwaved some and put it into an eye dropper he happened to have on hand.

"Boom. He ate the whole dropper," he recalls with a proud smile. "Then he had another. They drink until they're full, then they sleep."

Squirrely graduated quickly to bottle feeding, then to a mush of ground oatmeal, half-and-half and peanut butter, which O'Connor fed the animal with a plastic spoon.

Eventually, he added walnuts and little chunks of apple, and Squirrely ate from a bowl. He learned how to drink water from another bowl as well.

"He really started to grow -- it's amazing how fast they grow," O'Connor notes.

Soon the little guy "started to get some puff on his tail." That's when O'Connor knew it was time for one last important task: He had to figure out how to get Squirrely safely back out into the wild.

"I built a little birdhouse with a wide entry for him in a tree outside, and I made a curtain for the entry out of a red flannel shirt, an old, crappy flannel shirt that I wore every time I fed him," he recalls.

"I put him in the birdhouse, but he ran back down the tree and climbed up my leg at first. This went on and on for the next week or so ... and finally he stayed outside, thank God."

When two more orphaned baby squirrels came his way the next spring, he built another, duplex-style treehouse for them, which he now calls "The Townhouse." Numbers 2 and 3 were released elsewhere.

Although O'Connor's most recent orphan, Number 11, survived his rescue with flying colors and did fine when he was released, he would later become the only tragedy.

"He got run over in the road out front. For some reason, he always wanted to cross that road," he remembers.

"I knew it was him, so I went out and picked him up with a shovel. And when I looked up, there were Numbers 7, 8, 9 and 10 all lined up on my porch, watching me. They were wild by then, but they still knew something was up. I said to them, 'See what happens when you go out into the street?'"

O'Connor adds of his last orphan: "It was so sad mourning him afterwards. But I know he lived a good life. He lived a great summer anyway."