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City's very earliest residents faced a unique challenge

BY CONNIE ZEIGLER

IN 1822, A YEAR AFTER ALEXANDER Ralston platted Indianapolis near what had been a Delaware Indian settlement surrounded by forests, the new town and the farms that surrounded it were attacked by marauding invaders. The settlers fought back. According to Indianapolis diarist, Calvin Fletcher, one man killed 248 raiders in three days at his home near the capital city.

Although these attacks devastated some farms near the town and made life miserable for almost every citizen, their story has not become a part of the city's commonly known history – perhaps because the culprits were a bit squirrely.

Actually, they *were* squirrels.

The attack of the squirrels that came to be called the “Great Squirrel Invasion” destroyed the corn crop grown in the first year of significant settlement in Marion County. Calvin Fletcher said that 12 squirrels could eat as much as a hog; and there were tens of thousands of squirrels making pigs of themselves in and around the capital.

The squirrel numbers of 1822 are incomprehensible in the mind of a modern city dweller. And the Indianapolis squirrels in Fletcher's time were black-and-grey squirrels – not the cute little red fellows we see in our yards today.

The wildlife in and around the early city was remarkable even in the eyes of early 19th century inhabitants. Fletcher mentions thousands of deer in the woods. He also recorded that flies were so dense settlers built fires to keep them and the “musketoes” at bay. In fact, the flies were so bad that cattle couldn't tolerate their biting attacks and worried themselves skinny. Hogs proved a match for the pesky bugs, however, and thrived, roaming the uncleared woods until their owners collected them up and drove them to market.

Modern Indianapolis dwellers might have a hard time imagining an invasion of squirrels so devastating that it

stripped the city's trees and farmers fields. But, that doesn't mean the modern city is devoid of wildlife. It just means we might have to tune in, like Calvin Fletcher did, to the critters that surround us.

Red squirrels populate our trees even today. Nowadays they are more likely to invade our attics, wreaking havoc in a more modern way.

In my neighborhood just south of the spaghetti bowl there is an amazing array of urban wildlife. This summer a mockingbird spent several months making his duck, and



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cricket, and cardinal calls while jumping up and down on a telephone pole, which sits in Indiana Dept. of Transportation right-of-way along the interstate. Apparently, this constant singing goes on until the male finds a mate. As spring passed to summer, our mockingbird remained a bachelor, but he never gave up hope, singing and leaping up and down on his perch from before dawn to after midnight. Apparently mockingbirds don't need a lot of sleep.

My backyard has variously hosted hummingbirds tasting the hollyhocks in midsummer and flocks of 10 or more goldfinches at a time snacking on coneflower seed heads as the season turns to fall.

A red-tail hawk is a frequent visitor to the 'hood, hoping for a nice mousey breakfast, and undoubtedly finding one easily enough. A Cooper's hawk drops by occasionally to pick up a juicy morsel out of the interstate median and snack on it atop the mockingbird's telephone pole.

Peregrine falcons and their smaller, sharper-dressed brothers – the kestrels – are Downtown regulars. A kestrel

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family made a home on the Athenaeum roof for many years and we all know the peregrines live on the Circle.

Neighbors complain of raccoons in their compost and opossums under their decks. A cute little rat lived under the bushes along Mass Ave for a season. After that he probably grew up into a not-so-cute large rat and got a place with a roof over his head.

Late one Christmas night, as a group of friends filtered out of my house, we were all astounded to see a fox sauntering along the fence beside the highway, making his way home at the end of a long day with family, no doubt.

Recently, one Downtown bar experienced its own version of an animal invasion when a mommie possum decided to have her babies upstairs in the building. Their migration into the bar was the cause of more than a little consternation for owners and customers alike.

Still, a parade of eight little possum joeys (that's right, a baby opossum is a joey) doesn't really compare with tens of thousands of squirrels eating your corn and nuts. Although this sounds like the set up for an "a possum and a squirrel walk into a bar" joke, it's not. If he were still around you could ask Calvin Fletcher – the Great Squirrel Invasion was no laughing matter. ■

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