

Checking in with arboreal mammals

Late summer is when I have to walk across my front yard wearing a hard hat. There are two mature pine trees just outside my front door, and every summer they attempt to beget offspring by producing lots of heavy, sticky cones.

In what is either a great natural conflict or a cosmic balancing of life on earth, the squirrels impede the pine trees' reproductive urge by chowing down on the seeds in the cones.

In doing so, these furry feasters discard the shells and stems of the cones and knock loose many of the intact cones, letting another great natural phenomenon, gravity, guide the arboreal garbage onto the head of any earth-bound biped walking below.

As I was trying to escape the coniferous fall-out one day, I began to think more about tree-dwelling critters and how they all fit into the Great Scheme of Things.

Perhaps because we humans once lived in trees but moved out and now don't like animals who still live in trees, we have adopted idioms into our language that display our contempt for them. For example, we say someone is "up a tree" to described frustration or confusion.

Consider the squirrel. This pleasant little animal (except when it bombs my head) is transformed into the insulting word "squirrely" when used to described someone who is acting crazy. And an eccentric person who hides real or imagined treasures in his house is said to have "squirreled" the stuff away.

The late, great cartoon character Pogo Possum notwithstanding, when we say someone is "playing possum," we mean that he or she is faking sleep, being deceitful and possibly eavesdropping on a conversation not intended for the possum-player's ears.

Bats need a publicity agent. Not only do they have to put up with the enduring vampire/Dracula/blood-sucker image, but they're used to described deranged people, those with "bats in the belfry." Meanwhile, bats are very helpful animals. During the day they hang out, literally, in

trees and fly off at twilight for a night of feasting on mosquitoes and other bugs that would otherwise feast on us.

How would you like it if you were named for one of the Seven Deadly Sins? That is what happened to the sloth. This poor creature, like its arboreal colleagues the bat and the possum, likes to hang upside down from trees in the jungle.

It minds its own business, nibbling leaves and sprouts, moving ever-so-slowly. It's ugly, too. So we English-speakers condemn it by putting it in the same class with Pride, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, etc.

Then there are the monkeys. Everybody likes monkeys, right? Why, then, do we speak ill of them, saying that those who engage in inappropriate behavior are "monkeying around"? Interfering with normal progress or stopping something from taking place is "throwing a monkey wrench into the machinery."

And we all know what "monkey business" means. Just ask former presidential candidate Gary Hart, whose tryst with a high-mileage party girl aboard the yacht "Monkey Business" threw a monkey wrench into the machinery of his political campaign because he denied, which no one believed, that he and the lady were monkeying around.

At least the happy-faced, lovable koalas don't seem to get the verbal abuse of other tree-dwellers. But there are stories about them. For instance, there was this guy named Murphy who ran a restaurant in Australia where he served an exotic tea brewed from the hair of the koalas.

One customer was turned off by the hairs floating around in his teacup. "Hey, mate," he called to the proprietor. "Can you take this hair outta my cup so I can drink it?" The proprietor looked at the customer with disdain and announced loudly, "Certainly not! The Koala-tea of Murphy is not strained!"

With apologies to Will Shakespeare and Shylock, his Merchant of Venice ("The quality of mercy is not

strained"), I will go out on a limb, retreat to my treehouse, and quit writing this squirrely stuff. Δ

— Earl Higgins



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