

BOREAL BITS

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THE BEAST WITHIN

“What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature.” Charles Darwin

The chipmunk is one of the first animals a child learns, right after the cow, dog, sheep, and squirrel. It is small, cute, and so popular that the Disney artists gave them their own cartoon. People will encourage the chipmunk to visit their feeder at the same time chasing away squirrels. They may be hand fed, gently taking peanuts or sunflower seeds from a generous hand. Some will even climb a person’s leg and perch on an outstretched arm while stuffing food into its cheek pouches. Yes, the chipmunk is one of our more popular furry residents. But there is another side to our favourite rodent, a dark and sinister side that many chipmunk fans are unaware of.

On May 28 a few of the participants in a nature/history walking tour on Tunnel Island witnessed a spectacle that most people will never see in their lifetime. Before their eyes, a slim 45 cm (18 inch) garter snake was attacked by a chipmunk, killed and partially consumed.

A search of the Internet uncovered the following somewhat dramatic report from an observer in New Hampshire. "I will never forget the sight that met my eyes! ...I saw (the bird), slumped halfway out of the handhold of a milk crate. Her wings were splayed out and she was dead, but most disturbing was the striped form leaning over her... A CHIPMUNK! A CHIPMUNK?!? I considered detaining him, but the closer I got the more it became evident that this was no ordinary chippie. For one thing, why wasn't he running away? Well, I thought, if he is innocent, then he has nothing to hide, right? Then he bent down to take another bite... I screamed, I ran!"



Photo Phil Burke

It appears that chipmunks are like red squirrels in their penchant for animal protein. Some years ago we heard a terrible ruckus from a family of robins that chose the supporting structure of a sunflower feeder in which to build a nest. The squirrel didn't realize that the nest was there until four eggs had been laid. We tried to help out the screaming parents but eventually the squirrel (and nature) had its way. The squirrel destroyed two of the four eggs and it must have consumed most of the contents from the small amount of yolk and albumen present. The robins eventually, and wisely, abandoned the site to bad planning.

During another spring I saw a red squirrel gnawing on an object and then hide it in the vines on a trellis. I was mortified to find it was a skull of a young bird. Research told me that red squirrels are opportunists that have a taste for meat if the opportunity arises. This means that the squirrel won't actively hunt birds, for example, but should it come across a nest, it is likely to drop in for a bite. Chipmunks are pretty well the same. They will eat nuts and other forest fruits but they also eat insects, bird eggs, and sometimes small vertebrates such as young mice, and amphibians. So much for the cute Chip and Dale chipmunks that dine on nothing but acorns. Disney wouldn't dare show the cartoon characters frying up a garter snake.



The lesson in all this is that our preconceived ideas about all manner of nature's children can be challenged at any time. And for those skeptics who cannot believe that a chipmunk would eat a mouse, a bird or a snake, all they have to do is experience what these five tourists witnessed during that walk on Tunnel Island. Snakes eat little chipmunks, but when the tables turn, the truth is hard to fathom.

If anything my own experiences with nature had led me to conclude that what I know about nature's residents is correct until something else comes along.