

### Squirrels are fun, but they're a challenge as pets



una Star Café in North Miami has owners with big hearts.

Over the past decade, Alexis Sanfield and her husband, Keith Rouse, have opened up their home to three abandoned Eastern gray squirrels. They know all too well that you've got to have extra room in your heart *and* your house for them.

"Just look at those toofers," Sanfield coos to her toothy nine-year-old male Leo, the first squirrel she raised as a rescue after a tree trimmer found the tiny pink baby on the grass while thinning out branches on her property.

In the wild, it's common for newborn squirrels to fall from their tree nests. In 2016, Pelican Harbor Seabird Station in Miami rescued 127 orphaned gray squirrels -- a plan B strategy, as the babies' best chances for survival are with their mothers.

Newborn squirrels are naked, weighing only 13-18 grams (adults weigh 400-600 grams). Sanfield wrapped up Leo in a wool blanket and placed him on a heating pad. For the next seven weeks until he was weaned, she bottle-fed him kitten formula every two hours. Few people,

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even among animal lovers, would sacrifice sleep for a squirrel.

In a recent interview with the *BT*, Sanfield blames her upbringing for her passion for critters: she literally grew up among circus animals. Her father owned the International Circus, which hired troupes of performers and animals to participate in big-top events in New York and Miami in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There were lions, chimpanzees, and tigers. “One year I rode elephants in the parking lot of the Coconut Grove Convention Center,” she recalls.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission doesn’t require permits for personal possession of squirrels as pets. Sanfield has owned iguanas and a capuchin monkey, so squirrels fit right into her lifestyle. Even though she and her husband admit they aren’t the easiest pets to care for, they do it with patience and a sense of humor.

Sanfield also owns five-year-old male squirrels Skippy and Pee Wee, which she also rescued as newborns. They have separate, two-tiered steel enclosures that are mounted on wheels. One enclosure is located in the living room, one is just off the kitchen, and one is in the bedroom. Taking up each cage’s ground floor is a cardboard box full of alfalfa hay, a bowl brimming with fresh veggies, and a bowl of bird kibble, while the penthouse is where the squirrels make nests and sleep in hanging cloth ferret hammocks.

In the morning, Sanfield cuts up raw carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, squash, and sugar snaps for her animals, and adds a little fruit, like apples or grapes, to their diet. “Squirrels eat all day long,” she says. When Skippy developed mouth sores, Sanfield’s vet recommended fewer nuts and more protein by feeding him mealworms and eggs, although the squirrel turns up his nose at the latter. Now each squirrel is given a daily ration of one peanut.

With all that roughage, daily condo cleaning is necessary. Sanfield and her husband wheel the cages outside to their patio for spraying. She explains that Leo also gets a scrub-down. “He doesn’t clean himself well because he’s old, so I give him a sponge bath every couple of weeks. Squirrels like the water.”

Although the squirrels aren’t housebroken, the couple makes sure they get time out of their cages. “They sometimes run around the house,” Sanfield says. “They’ve never been in the wild, but they instinctively want to hide nuts. We find peanuts in pillowcases, under the couch, in my

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shoes.”

Happily chirping during our interview, Leo sat by Sanfield’s side, but unlike a lap dog, he wasn’t content for long. “He won’t sit there -- he’ll run all over the place,” she laughs. But outside of the house, his behavior is different. “Leo goes out with me,” she explains, “just me holding him or with him sitting on my shoulder. He’ll wander around on me, but he doesn’t like going far away from me -- he’s very attached. Once a week we also take cages outside so the squirrels can get some sunlight.”

Pee Wee, on the other hand, is very emotional ever since a recent house termite-tenting experience. “He’s a little freaked out and traumatized because we had to put them in smaller cages while living with us in our van during the tenting,” Sanfield recalls. Their two cats stayed with next-door neighbors while their huge fish tank was transported two blocks away.

“The vet said when my squirrels get older, they’ll get vicious. But they’ve never gotten vicious. They’re pets now,” says Sanfield.

And with that, she plops Leo on the broad back of her easy-going tabby cat named Trick. “Notice how worried that cat is,” she jokes, proving that her “wild kingdom” is really one big happy family.

*Feedback:* [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)