

NATURE STUDY—CLASS VII.

By WM. H. MOORE.

Our Squirrels.

For this month I will deal with some of our common wild neighbours. First, let us observe the common red squirrel. I can touch upon just a few of his peculiarities at this time, so do not be surprised if many of you know interesting facts about him in addition to what may be told here.

About this time of the year the red squirrels are beginning to lay up their supply of food for the winter. The first supplies consist of the seeds of the spruces, and to obtain these the squirrels work about on the limbs of the spruces, clipping with their sharp incisor teeth the stems of the cones, allowing the latter to fall to the ground, to be gathered into piles when a goodly supply has been dropped. Sometimes they are gathered into holes in the ground, into hollow logs or stumps, and are often just piled upon the ground and covered with leaves. Which end of the cone does the squirrel begin to eat from?

After the cones are stored up the nut season comes on. The hazel nuts are not laid away for winter use by the red squirrel, but beech nuts are gathered into small piles in the same manner as are the cones. The hazel nuts are eaten from the bushes, and it is a peculiar fact that only the nuts containing good meat are taken. Squirrels and jays are either possessed of an X-ray vision or have an acute sense for determining the sound nuts from the unsound. Have you ever thought what a knowledge some of the so-called lower animals have of the things about them? How they learn to distinguish between edible and poisonous mushrooms, and many other little "wrinkles" that we are apt to overlook? The squirrels, although rodents, are omnivorous, and are thus capable of getting their living in almost any bit of woods. Berries of many kinds, varieties of fungi growing either upon decayed trees or upon the ground, insects, eggs and young birds are all eaten in their season.

What seemed to the writer to be a most repulsive kind of food was plant lice, especially for such a clean dapper little fellow as the squirrel, but they were seen to be greedily devoured, as well as the gnarled, contorted leaves upon which they were feeding. Your rustic friend was so mystified with such a depraved appetite on the part of the squirrel that he decided to make a closer observation, and,

climbing to the limb where the little rodent had been feeding, he found that his guesses were only too true. Yet the mystery was unsolved, except by the squirrel. Years afterwards a lecture upon honey-secreting insects was heard, and the speaker mentioned plant lice as capable at times of putting forth a liquid known as honey dew. This honey dew was what the squirrel was obtaining, and to make sure that he got everything in sight he was eating leaves, insects and all. But these are not the only "sweets" the red squirrel longs for. He will bite through the bark of limbs of the maples and suck the sweet sap in the spring of the year.*

The nests of the red squirrel are often bulky affairs, being fully a foot in diameter. They are composed of leaves, grasses and shreds of bark, and are placed either in cavities of trees or upon the limbs of conifers. The bark of the cedar is a favorite material used in making their nests. Possibly the odour of the bark helps to keep away insect pests. We know that cedar twigs rolled up with our fur goods will protect, to a certain extent, against moths. Yet it is probably not his fur that the squirrel wishes to protect, but what is within the fur.

The young are from four to six in a litter, and are born throughout the warmer months.

Squirrels have so many enemies to contend with that they are ever on the lookout for danger. Not only are they preyed upon during the day, but at night owls will tear open the nests and get at the occupants.

Squirrels are very determined in some of their actions, and have been known to start boldly out to swim across bodies of water a mile in extent. They have been seen to clamber up the side of a canoe that was being paddled along, cross it, plunge into the water on the other side and continue their journey.

The red squirrel may be looked upon as one of our hardy mammals, but the striped squirrel or chipmunk must fall short and be listed among our half hardy animals. (This idea of hardy and half hardy mammals is original. Does the term not apply?) Ground squirrel is another name applied to our striped species, for the reason that it burrows in the ground and there stores up food, consisting of nuts, grains, cherry stones, apple seeds, etc. In its cozy retreat it spends the entire winter

* A correspondent in Westmorland County and another in Charlotte County speak of this habit of the squirrel.—EDITOR.