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May 5, 2009 5:40 pm US/Central

Scientist Asks Chicagoans To Count Squirrels

Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum Says Midwest Is 'Squirrel Hot Spot'



Reporting **Vince Gerasole**

CHICAGO (CBS) — A Chicago researcher wants your help counting squirrels! At first glance, the consensus on this census may be - it's a little nutty. But as CBS 2's Vince Gerasole reports these animals can tell a lot about your neighborhood.

Come on, you have to admit they're cute, and when it comes to squirrels, Steve Sullivan of the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum is a

real nut.

"We use the adjective 'squirrely' for a reason," Sullivan said. "I love to watch squirrels fake out other animals or even people."

And that's actually what he gets paid to do.

"Sometimes you'll see a squirrel pretend to stash a nut and he'll hide it up in his armpit and run somewhere else and then stash it," Sullivan said. "That's because crows or Blue Jays are watching. I've witnessed firsthand on myself the damage that squirrels can do to a human."

Sullivan, a scientist at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, has counted thousands of squirrels in his career, and now he wants our help. He's asking people to log onto his website, [Project Squirrel](#), and record daily the number of squirrels we see in our neighborhood.

"Due to some of the statistics that we use, that will help us understand squirrel demographics across the whole region," Sullivan said.

In other words, areas with more squirrels may have more vegetation than urbanized areas, and they may be better preserving man's relationship with nature.

Rob Thomas is really a bird watcher, but he's also one of 500 folks who've counted squirrels for Sullivan since March.

When asked how he knows he's not counting the same squirrel twice, Thomas said, "You don't."

CBS 2's Vince Gerasole had a squirrel encounter this past weekend and captured it on camera. All of a sudden a baby squirrel appeared on the patio table, posed for pictures and was calm enough to



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climb on his daughter's shoe.

Sullivan analyzed the encounter.

"That's pretty crazy he climbed up on the shoe there," Sullivan said. "He's a really young squirrel. He simply wants to cuddle up," Sullivan said.

But when it comes to getting close to Mother Earth, this squirrel counts.

"What we hope is that everybody will become habitual squirrel watchers," Sullivan said. "When they wake up in the morning, look at squirrels; when you go on your lunch break at work, look at squirrels in a different place."

The bottom line is: any time you can squirrel away will help Sullivan with his research.

If you'd like to participate, visit [Project Squirrel](#).
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