

GRAY SQUIRREL

Real Animal Stories

by Joseph Wharton Lippincott

Bun: A Wild Rabbit

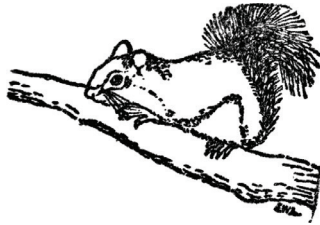
Red Ben: The Fox of Oak Ridge

Striped Coat: The Skunk

Persimmon Jim: the 'Possum

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The Story of
GRAY SQUIRREL



by
Joseph Wharton Lippincott
with illustrations by the author

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TO MY MOTHER

INTRODUCTION

THERE is one, and only one, creature of the woods who is able to be really friendly with us and still survive. It is the gray squirrel. He may still be glimpsed in almost every park, along almost every road, on almost every lawn.

Because he can climb trees, and we cannot, because he is small and quick and very clever, and because he is such an amusing, frolicsome, happy little fellow, full of the spirit of the wild, yet so trustful as to touch our hearts—for these and innumerable other reasons he is not stamped out in our relentless advance into his woodlands.

Wonderingly we watch him run up and down the highest trees; we hold our breaths as at dizzy heights, he leaps from one limb to another or

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dashes madly in pursuit of one of his kind; but do we know much or anything about his home life? Do we who hand him nut kernels from our parlor windows ever learn how the little fellow fares in the woods, who among the wild creatures are his friends or his enemies, how he raises a family fifty feet or perhaps more, above the ground, and how he protects himself from cold and hunger in winter, without lazily hibernating like the coon, the skunk, the woodchuck and others? If we do not, we miss one of the most fascinating romances in the realm of the furry ones. His story will lead us to the very heart of nature; for a little while we must even travel in the tree tops, near the airy haunts of the birds.

First, however, we should try to feel that we too are of the woods, that we *belong* there with the woodfolk. We must forget what we know of the poor distorted wild creatures seen in the zoos and circuses, on chains and in cages. They and their

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sad lives have nothing to do with what we may expect to learn in the woods, where everything is free, watchful, happy, intensely alive. Where the flick of a brown ear, the soft tap of a furry foot, even the merest rustle, mean something and are indeed part of the strange language of the wild.

Where Gray Squirrel was born is not very far from the farm on which Bun, the rabbit, grew up and lived for many years; and across the near-by river lies Oak Ridge on whose sunny slope Red Ben, the fox, so often outwitted his sly neighbors of the Pine Barrens.

J.W.L., BETHAYRES, PA.

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The Story of GRAY SQUIRREL

CHAPTER I

OLD GEORGE INTERFERES JUST IN TIME

BACK of the barn on James Briggs' place stretched a wood such as few other farms can boast of today. There were great weather scarred trees by the score, under which old limbs lay in mossy heaps; there was a swampy hollow, overgrown with ferns and giant weeds; there was a shallow pool full of tadpoles, and a brook about which clustered bramble thickets, grapevine tangles and masses of scented bushes. It was, altogether, the kind of a wood

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which the modern farmers looked upon with disgust, but which boys loved, and the little wild furry creatures fairly delighted in.

There were no paths, at least none that the ordinary eye could see, but somewhere, undercover of all the matted greenery, the rabbits had their narrow runways, the coons their trails, the foxes, skunks, possums and other woods creatures—all the way down to the little brown deer mouse—their lunch routes and roads, just as if the wood were to them a big city full of well paved streets.

Nor was this all. Overhead were the paths of the most nimble footed of all the furry folk—the squirrels. From one end of the wood to the other these little nut eaters could run at top speed with-

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out so much as touching the earth.

Under the ground were more paths—those of the mole, the fierce little shrew and the shy pine mouse. These creatures too enjoyed the wood, but what were their black galleries when compared with the aerial roads of the squirrels? How little they saw of the real world!

There was another reason why the wood was interesting. In one corner, where the Briggs lane joined the County road, stood the biggest tree in that part of the country. Squirrel Oak, it was called, because as long as anyone could remember, there had always been families of gray squirrels in its hollow trunk.

Old George, who lived in a little brown shanty just across the road, had

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seen squirrels there nearly every day of his life, and he was now so old that he could scarcely remember the time when as a little colored boy he first took the job of tending the Briggs Farm cows. Travellers used Squirrel Oak as a landmark and Old George as a kind of walking signpost to tell them about the roads.

One day, the old man, seated as usual on a bench beside the shanty, warming his bald head in the June sunshine, heard a commotion in the wood and saw Jim Crow and his mate swooping at an animal which was trying to climb up the trunk of the big oak.

The creature, whatever it was, seemed to be dragging something heavy which it was unable to defend from the big beaked birds, and so was

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soon forced to drop. Down shot one of the crows in pursuit, but not quickly enough to reach the ground ahead of the nimble animal which at once picked up its bulky burden and again began to climb with it.

The stealthy crows were scarcely making a sound, but two king birds who had a nest full of eggs nearby to protect, fluttered above them with shrill cries and did their best to awaken the wood.

Old George put on his spectacles and at once could see that the animal was a gray squirrel which was trying to carry up a smaller squirrel in its mouth. Then Jim Crow's mate suddenly swooped, and down went the poor squirrels again.

The old man did not often interfere

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with the wild things, but the efforts of this mother squirrel to save a young one which had probably fallen out of its nest, aroused his pity.

“You quit that, you black rascals: Get out of there!” he shouted. Helping his rheumatic old legs along with a hickory cane, he shuffled across the road and sent Jim Crow and his mate, angrily cawing, further into the wood. All this time he kept on scolding them, and they scolded back from a high tree, and the king birds, still much excited, flew around and around their nest.

The other animals in the wood, who did not happen to be hidden in their dens for the day, of course had heard the fuss. Each rushed to the nearest safe place and listened with eyes wide. A brawl like that, disturbing the

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wood, was dangerous to all; it not only showed that enemies were about, but also was likely to draw other enemies to the place.

The chipmunks watched from the entrances of their underground dens, the other squirrels and the larger birds took shelter in the trees. The frogs stopped croaking in the pool. All waited.

At last the king birds' cries calmed down and the silent watchers saw first Jim Crow, then his mate, fly over the wood, carelessly low, and without looking to right or left. This was a good sign that the danger had gone, so it seemed safe for them to feed and play once more, always cautiously, however, with a watchful eye on the road to the nearest tree or hole.