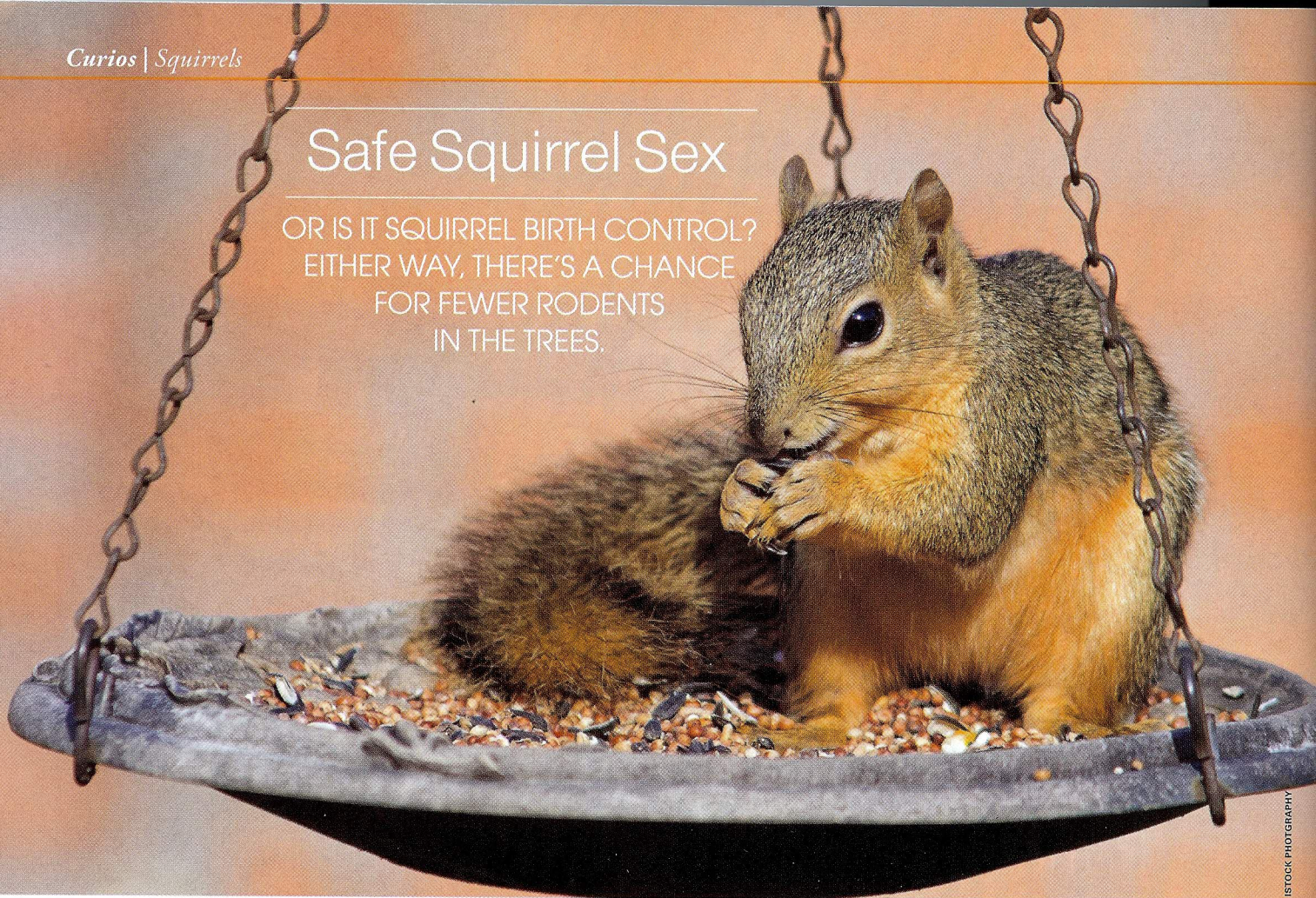


Safe Squirrel Sex

OR IS IT SQUIRREL BIRTH CONTROL?
EITHER WAY, THERE'S A CHANCE
FOR FEWER RODENTS
IN THE TREES.



ISTOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

by Kimberly Button

Clemson University is at work on mitigating squirrel tree damage at the school via hormones and birth control.

THERE IS NOT A BACKYARD BIRDER anywhere who can't attest to the destructiveness of squirrels. The pint-sized powerhouses chew through bird feeders, gobble down bird seed and gnaw on houses. Homeowners are not the only ones frustrated with these nibblers, though. When more than 100 trees were found to be damaged on the grounds of South Carolina's Clemson University due to an overabundance of squirrels, the school's Division of Natural Resources was only too happy to be a part of a study finding ways to squelch their reproduction.

Squirrels are not likely to ever consider contraceptive options, but researchers at the USDA National Wildlife Research Center are doing the research for them. The Center is developing non-lethal methods to control the numbers of animals – including eastern grey squirrels and white tail deer – that are causing damage to property nationwide. Clemson University has been a part of the study, which started six years ago and will end in mid to late 2014 and focuses solely on eastern grey squirrels.

The first phase of the study tested GonaCan, which suppresses hormones that initiate breeding. While it works, the contraceptive has to be injected in the animals, resulting in a price tag of \$65 per rodent.

"Although it was effective in the ones we treated, it was not cost effective," says Dr. Greg Yarrow, a profes-

sor of wildlife ecology and the Chair of Clemson's Natural Resources Division.

Next in the study was a contraceptive that could be included in food. DiazaCon is a substance that alters a squirrel's cholesterol levels, which in turn will inhibit their reproduction. The agent was developed for use in humans to lower cholesterol, but is now being studied by the USDA as a wildlife contraceptive.

Giving birth control to squirrels is indeed strange enough, but the weirdness does not end there. It turns out that the contraceptive-laced squirrel feed also includes an inert dye to help track the squirrels in the study. The dye makes the squirrels' whiskers and teeth fluoresce under a black light, causing them to glow in the dark. Not only that, it also turns their white bellies a shade of pink while they are eating the study-related food.

"The squirrels in the study have ear tags, too," Yarrow explains, "so we've got a lot of squirrels that look like they're wearing earrings and have pink bellies running around campus."

Could birth control-laced seed be the answer to keeping squirrel numbers at bay? "It is the last year of the project, be what we are finding is it is effective, though there are challenges in delivery," Yarrow says. "Is it a tool in managing wildlife in populations that are out of control? I think the jury is still out." ❧