



# Tree Damage Alert No 127

AAIS • Alice Holt Lodge • Wrecclesham • Farnham • Surrey • GU10 4LH

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## Not Squirrel Nutkin!

Beatrix Potter's eponymous character the mischievous Squirrel Nutkin was reported sailing with his brothers and sisters across the pond to the island where Old Brown, the wise old owl, lived in the old hollow Oak tree. Nutkin's brothers and sisters took gifts for Old Brown and were hoping to be permitted to collect food for storage. Nutkin preferred to play and he tormented Old Brown by singing rude songs, and asking riddles. He paid the price when he lost his tail escaping from the owl.

Nutkin's American cousin, *Sciurus carolinensis*, is clearly not accustomed to the niceties of respecting property. This year the effect of their activity is readily visible to travellers. In many roadside verges, particularly those on Motorways, there are trees with dead leaves hanging above a canopy of healthy green leaves. Also many brown tops are apparent in woodland landscapes.

Questions have been asked about whether this is Verticillium wilt to which the answer is a resounding **NO!** Stopping the car and looking around the tree will usually reveal pieces of bark scattered on the ground and sometimes strips of attached bark hanging down. Where a complete ring of bark has been removed from the stem of the tree the foliage above the ring will be dead.

Bark stripping damage occurs most frequently on trees up to about 13m tall – a height that is common now in trees planted during the great road building era of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Mature and over mature trees are less attractive to squirrels because the bark on the main stem is too thick to remove. However, they still strip bark from branches in the crown where the effect is less visible. Evidence from the roads network suggests that existing trees and new plantings are vulnerable to Grey squirrel damage and therefore they will not achieve the visual stature we expect from mature roadside and landscape trees. While thin barked trees may be preferred there is no genus that is immune from squirrel attack.

Bark stripping damage is widespread in some years, and localised in others. The reason for the variations is not totally understood although population age, structure and density play a significant part. Population control may, therefore, help to reduce the incidence of Grey squirrel damage.

Had Beatrix Potter been familiar with the Grey squirrel how would she have portrayed them? Not all her animal depictions were good and playful – perhaps a Grey squirrel would have had a reputation like Hunca Munca in the Tale of Two Bad Mice.

Derek Patch and Harry Pepper, AAIS Farnham.

This is one of an occasional series of Tree Damage Alerts produced for the benefit of the arboricultural profession and issued by the Arboricultural Advisory and Information Service.