

# Green Scene: The Dark Side

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[photograph]

[caption: A rare glimpse of a flying squirrel, which uses tree cavities or, at Coquitlam's Minnekhada Park, these nest boxes for sleeping during the day.

Victoria Otton photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Action in the dark]

As much as I enjoy the variety of the changing seasons, this is my least favourite time of the year. It's not the rainy weather that I dislike – after all, heavy rains bring home the salmon and provide the awesome spectacle of our creeks running at full bore – nor is it the fog I mind because it can add a touch of enchantment to an ordinary landscape. What I find objectionable about this time of the year is the dark. Arriving as early as the late afternoon and hanging around too long in the morning, the nights are now so lengthy that they cast a lingering lethargy over the entire day. I can hardly wait for the winter solstice to pass and the days to finally begin to lengthen.

As humans, it is easy for us to forget that darkness is a natural phenomenon on which some other species are utterly reliant. Many of these animals are quite small and come out to search for food only at night when they have the best chance of escaping the attention of their predators. For them, even a full moon can be hazardous. Some animals, including raccoons and owls, have more crepuscular habits, i.e., they are active mainly during the twilight hours. We tend to have a passing acquaintance with these species because our active hours overlap a little with theirs.

The species that are totally nocturnal in their habits are ones we rarely see even though we share our neighbourhoods and parks with them. Everyone will be acquainted with the common non-native grey squirrel; most of us will have also observed the smaller reddish native Douglas squirrels in local parks, and sometimes, our yards. However, few of us have probably ever seen the third local squirrel species, the northern flying squirrel, a strictly nocturnal animal that inhabits coniferous forests in areas such as Burnaby Mountain and Minnekhada Park. These squirrels don't actually fly but, instead, use a flap of skin between their fore and hind legs to glide from tree to tree.

Our forests, streams and backyards, come alive at night with a number of small creatures such as insects, millipedes, beetles, salamanders, deer mice, jumping mice, voles and shrews that dare not venture forth during the daylight hours. Even large mammals, such as black bears rely on the cover of darkness to move through residential streets in search of unsecured garbage cans. When spring comes, treefrogs in wetlands will be calling for mates - but only under the safe cover of darkness. The night shift in the forest bears little resemblance to what we see there during the day.

Some nocturnal animals have large eyes that enable them to see in limited light. The eyes of the flying squirrel are unusually large, a giveaway of the hours they keep. Often, creatures of the night are colour-blind because their eyes lack the structures called cones which perceive colour. Instead, their eyes have

become specialized for vision under dim conditions. Nocturnal animals typically have developed other senses better suited to finding their way in the dark. Members of the feline family such as bobcats have sensitive whiskers that enable them to move with ease in the dark. Rarely seen because of their nocturnal habits, the tracks of bobcats have been found locally on the Riverview Hospital grounds. Owls use their excellent hearing to detect prey and have special modifications on their flight feathers that allow them to fly silently and stealthily. Bats, one of the most specialized creatures of the night, have developed radar-like echolocation to detect flying insects with precision. If we want local parks to continue to provide good habitat for these nocturnal animals, we need to ensure these areas remain undisturbed by city lights.

As humans, we have evolved to live in the light and, I suppose, my grumbles about the dark make me sound, well, only too human. There are obviously many good reasons to appreciate the night and the species that rely on the cover of darkness. My only wish is that, this time of year, we didn't have a daily dose of sixteen hours of it.