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a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

Rock squirrel encounters

Throughout the summer, the Sentinel is publishing its popular "A Desert Place" columns from 1987. The columns were provided by members of the Cave Creek Improvement Association's Desert Awareness Committee.

By BERT EDISES

We have a small bird feeder on top of our patio wall.

It attracts finches, sparrows, thrashers, brown towhees, doves, quail and an occasional cardinal. There also is a cactus wren.

One fine day, the devil entered paradise in the shape of an oversized rock squirrel.

The intruder charged furiously up the patio wall, frightening and scattering the birds, and devoured most of the bird seed in a short time.

He then scampered down the wall and went to work on my wife's pansies.

I replenished the feeder and the birds returned.

It wasn't long before the rock squirrel was back. Again, he barreled up the wall, panicking the birds, and consumed most of the birds' feed.

For dessert, he helped himself to the pansies.

The same scenario occurred every time I put bird seed into the feeder. The squirrel was getting fat and our birds were getting hungry.

What to do! Suddenly, I remembered my old Havahart "humane" trap, which I had used last year in a vain attempt to capture our sagacious family packrat.

After locating the trap, I baited it with nuts and peanut butter (supposedly irresistible to rock squirrels), and I placed it at the spot where the squirrel was in the habit of climbing the wall. I then refilled the bird feeder and departed to await the results.

I didn't have long to wait. In about 15 minutes, pandemonium broke loose at the trap.

Elated, I sped to the scene, confident that my strategy had worked.

I calculated how far I'd have to transport the animal to make sure he'd never return to molest the birds.

At the moment, I recognized what the trap had caught – not the squirrel – but a cactus wren.

He was thrashing about wildly, poking his beak through the wires to escape while screaming at the top of his lungs.

I released the wren, thinking "better luck next time" and reset the trap.

In about 20 minutes, the racket commenced again. I rushed to the trap, certain that this time it was the rock squirrel.

Unfortunately, it was the cactus wren again. I let him go and reset the trap.

It can't happen again, I told myself.

If the law of averages or the rules of statistical probability mean anything, next time it'll be the squirrel. After all, any sensible cactus wren who's been through what this one's been through would have learned his lesson, or else be courting a nervous breakdown.

So it was with a degree of complacency that – some two hours later – I responded to the renewed racket on the patio.

Having persuaded myself that the laws of chance were on my side, my imagination had no difficulty in perceiving a squirrel to be the source of rumpus in the cage.

Regretfully, when I got closer, it turned out to be the cactus wren again, back for a third try at the feast within the cage. I let him go.

The squirrel is still at large, but my ego, already bruised by my failed encounter with the packrat, has shrunk to microscopic size.