**Squirrel Power!**

By JON MOOALLEMAUG. 31, 2013

SOME say the world will end in fire. Some say ice. Some say coordinated kamikaze attacks on the power grid by squirrels.

At least, some have been saying that to me, when they find out I’ve spent the summer keeping track of power outages caused by squirrels.

Power outages caused by squirrels are a new hobby of mine, a persnickety and constantly updating data set that hums along behind the rest of my life the way baseball statistics or celebrity-birthing news might for other people. It started in April, after I read about a squirrel that electrocuted itself on a power line in Tampa, Fla., cutting electricity to 700 customers and delaying statewide achievement tests at three nearby schools. I was curious, just enough to set up a Google news alert: squirrel power. But as the summer progressed, and the local news reports of power outages caused by squirrels piled up in my in-box, my interest in power outages caused by squirrels became more obsessive and profound.

I know: it’s hard to accept that a single squirrel can disrupt and frustrate thousands of people at a time, switching off our electrified lives for hours. But since Memorial Day, I’ve cataloged reports of 50 power outages caused by squirrels in 24 states. (And these, of course, are only those power outages severe enough to make the news.) Fifteen hundred customers lost power in Mason City, Iowa; 1,500 customers in Roanoke, Va.; 5,000 customers in Clackamas County, Ore.; and 10,000 customers in Wichita, Kan. — and that was just during two particularly busy days in June. A month later, there were two separate P.O.C.B.S., as I’ve come to call power outages caused by squirrels, around the small town of Evergreen, Mont., on a single day.

Squirrels cut power to a regional airport in Virginia, a Veterans Affairs medical center in Tennessee, a university in Montana and a Trader Joe’s in South Carolina. Five days after the Trader Joe’s went down, another squirrel cut power to 7,200 customers in Rock Hill, S.C., on the opposite end of the state. Rock Hill city officials assured the public that power outages caused by squirrels were “very rare” and that the grid was “still a reliable system.” Nine days later, 3,800 more South Carolinians lost power after a squirrel blew up a circuit breaker in the town of Summerville.

In Portland, Ore., squirrels got 9,200 customers on July 1; 3,140 customers on July 23; and 7,400 customers on July 26. (“I sound like a broken record,” a spokesman for the utility said, briefing the press for the third time.) In Kentucky, more than 10,000 people lost power in two separate P.O.C.B.S. a few days apart. The town of Lynchburg, Va., suffered large-scale P.O.C.B.S. on two consecutive Thursdays in June. Downtown went dark. At Lynchburg’s Academy of Fine Arts, patrons were left to wave their lighted iPhone screens at the art on the walls, like torch-carrying Victorian explorers groping through a tomb. On June 9, a squirrel blacked out 2,000 customers in Kalamazoo, Mich., then 921 customers outside Kalamazoo a week later.

WHEN I tell people about power outages caused by squirrels — and trust me when I say that I tell people about power outages caused by squirrels quite often — I wind up hearing a lot of the same snarky jokes. People say the squirrels are staging an uprising. People say the squirrels are calculating, nut-cheeked saboteurs trying to overthrow humanity. Like the apes in “Planet of the Apes,” or the Skynet computer network in “The Terminator,” the squirrels represent a kind of neglected intelligence that’s suddenly, sinisterly switching on.

Don’t panic, I say. Squirrels have been causing power outages since long before I started cataloging power outages caused by squirrels. (In 1987, a squirrel shut down the Nasdaq for 82 minutes and another squirrel shut down the Nasdaq again in 1994 — a seminal bit of P.O.C.B.S. history that was sometimes noted in coverage of the power outage at the Nasdaq in August, which was a power outage not caused by squirrels. “This is a terrible pain in the neck,” the president of one brokerage firm told The Wall Street Journal in 1994 — which, I’ve found, is still a typical reaction to power outages caused by squirrels.)

Mr. Olearczyk insists that there is no credible way to estimate the number of power outages caused by squirrels nationwide. (He explained that attempting a tally would mean consulting a particular piece of paperwork from every local utility in the country, and that some of those forms might not even have the information I was looking for. Though he told me encouragingly, “You’re after something important, so let us know if you find out!”)

What exists, instead, are only flecks of information, the partial outline of a very annoying apparition. In Austin, Tex., squirrels have been blamed for 300 power outages a year. Other utility companies have claimed that between 7 and 20 percent of all outages are caused by some sort of wild animal, and a 2005 study by the State of California estimated, hazily, that these incidents cost California’s economy between $32 million and $317 million a year. Feral cats, raccoons and birds are also nuisances. Last month, reports surfaced in Oklahoma of great horned owls dropping snakes onto utility poles, thereby causing frequent power outages. Still, no one seems to dispute the disruptive primacy of squirrels.

However, Mr. Olearczyk believes strongly that power outages caused by squirrels are on the decline. For at least a decade, utility companies have been tricking out their equipment with an array of wildlife deterrents to combat the problem, like “arrester caps” and “bushing covers,” the Southwire SquirrelShield, the E/Getaway Guard and free-spinning baffles to make squirrels lose their balance.

There have been very few squirrel specialists throughout history. The most accomplished was [Vagn Flyger](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/11/AR2006011102262.html), a University of Maryland biologist who trapped squirrels with a mixture of peanut butter and Valium and then affixed them with radio transmitters; his major contribution to squirrel science was mapping the so-called [Great Squirrel Migration of 1968](http://www.lib.umd.edu/blogs/univarch_exhibits/?p=433) across the Eastern Seaboard. (Mr. Flyger also liked to eat squirrels.) Mr. Koprowski started studying squirrels as a biology student in Ohio because he needed to study some sort of wild animal and he didn’t own a car.

Essentially, Mr. Koprowski explained, power outages caused by squirrels are the product of a cascade of coincidences — of various forces, including basic squirrel behavior, colliding.

Squirrels chew through electrical wiring because the animals are constantly teething. An adult squirrel’s incisors never stop growing — they can grow as much as 10 inches per year — and the animals must chew constantly to keep them worn down. Squirrels gnaw or burrow their way into transformers for the same reason they enter rotting cavities of aging trees: hollow spaces offer them den sites and safety from predators. Squirrels break into equipment at substations because the seeds and insects they eat get sucked into that machinery by cooling fans, or are pooled inside by the wind. Mr. Koprowski described the flat tops of transformers as perfect spots for squirrel “basking behavior,” when squirrels sprawl out in the sun to warm up, or in the shade to cool down, and also ideal “runways” from which squirrels can start their flying leaps into the canopy.

After the city of Fort Meade, Fla., suffered more than two dozen P.O.C.B.S. in a year, a resident told a reporter: “I just didn’t think a squirrel could make the lights go out. They’re just tiny little things.” A century ago, a shrewd squirrel might have been equally skeptical about our ability to make so many lights go on, watching a few little humans raise the first wooden pole.