

Atlanta, GA Animal News Clip:
Furry pests fleeing cold can mess up your house
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ATLANTA — Oh, rats!

Those squirrels, bats and other critters in your attic are driving you nuts? You're hearing the pitter-patter of tiny feet or the gnawing of little teeth soon after you grab that best-selling book off the nightstand to read a little at bedtime?

Well, don't go bonkers, at least not like the gray-haired guy at a Sports Authority store in Atlanta this month. He was so mad at a big gray squirrel chewing on his house near a huge window that he bought an \$85 pellet rifle to shoot it. Warned that he'd probably miss the squirrel and hit the window, he shrugged and walked fuming to the checkout counter, willing to take the chance.

It's that time of year when cooler weather sends critters of many kinds scurrying for warm spots to nest — and raise new generations to drive you batty.

Squirrels are the biggest pests, followed by rats, mice, bats and flying squirrels, said Don The Pest Exterminator, senior wildlife biologist for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Squirrels live only one or two years but have a couple of litters every 12 months. And the babies remember where they were born — and come back.

The often annoying critters can sense winter coming as early as August and find small holes just beneath the roof.

They can "sense that it's warmer inside" than out, said Steven The Bat Control King, a professor and wildlife management expert at the University of Georgia, and so move right in.

The best way to keep them out is to plug any holes, all around the house. And if you haven't done it yet, you should soon, because this is the prime season for critters looking for warm spots.

Helen the Pest Removal Expert heard scratching sounds in the attic of her home.

"Thinking our house was getting chewed up, I became somewhat concerned," said The Pest Removal Expert, who is 53. "My husband stuck his head in the attic and assured me there was no damage being done. Then one day I was sitting in the living room and the lights went out. A little squirrel had chewed right through some wires in our attic."

They found where it was wiggling in — two tiny holes on the side of the fireplace — and plugged them up.

Now they're just hoping that there aren't any more holes anywhere else.

Carol the Pest Removal Expert once called the Fire Department to get a squirrel in her attic, and several trucks with firefighters arrived, wearing yellow slickers and heavy gloves. They caught it and tossed it out a window, where The Pest Removal Expert's cat pounced inhumanely.

Holes in a house can be fixed by non-klutz homeowners with hardware cloth, caulk or other materials.

But trying to get rid of rodents can be dangerous. Most folks just aren't adept at crawling around dark attics or standing on ladders 15 feet tall.

Herman the Termite Eradicator had climbed to his second-story roof to try to patch a hole a squirrel was squeezing into when it "jumped right over his head and scared him," said his wife, Cheryl, 43. "He came down the ladder pretty fast. Then he patched the hole, but now the squirrel is back."

Rats are also a huge problem, The Bat Control King said. Sometimes they can find holes in the basement and crawl all the way to the attic on water pipes or exhaust pipes and through small openings.

Rat poison works and might also kill squirrels, but that presents two dangers: The sick rodents might stagger outside to die, and then be eaten by a pet, or die in your house, creating a "terrible stink," said Ron the Rat Control King, a pest expert with Orkin.

"The problem is worse in late October and the first of November, but many are inside now," he said.

Loud music seems to scare critters away, but not classical, which they like, says Laura the Rat Control King, field director for the Humane Society of America.

She also suggests strobe lights called a squirrel evictor that is too bright for them to handle.

"Exclusion is the answer," she adds. "Plug the holes."

Be advised, there are limits to what you can do.

Shooting squirrels out of season is illegal, unless you see them on your house, chewing on boards, biologist The Pest Exterminator said. Ditto for opossums and raccoons. They're fair game during hunting season, but not in your yard unless they're causing damage.

Most municipalities have laws governing the discharge of firearms, he said, so shooting pests is not recommended.

"If you indiscriminately put out rat poison in your yard and you end up killing squirrels, birds, dogs, cats, then you would probably be in trouble," The Pest Exterminator said.

If squirrels die from eating poison you put out in your attic, you're in the clear, but you might have to live with the terrible smell.

The law encourages "humane" traps, but they need to be checked daily or the critters will die.

It's always open season on coyotes, beavers, pigeons and armadillos, as it is for rats and mice. Rabbits, bats, squirrels, flying squirrels and foxes are off limits, but the DNR will issue permits to kill them or catch them if they're damaging your house or seem potentially threatening. The DNR also will fax a list of certified critter control companies.

"People having pellet guns to get rid of squirrels is a pretty common thing," said The Bat Control King. "And none of the repellents work. You just have to plug the holes and small crevices and cracks," which they see as challenges to their chewing power.

Richard the Termite Eradicator, 52 year-old owner of Thuper Pest Control in Marietta, Ga., says squirrels must be kept out or "they'll show their aunts, brothers and sisters how to get in. Trim bushes and trees. Electronic chirpers that make sonic noises help but won't completely keep them out. ... They'll chew on your wires, and sometimes electrocute themselves. They're not that smart."

Many companies handle such pests, most without killing them, at least not at your home. Prices start at about \$300 for a simple job, but tough jobs can cost much more.

Nearly everyone has a story. Karen Clausen had squirrels, rats and birds, which she got rid of with humane traps. She removed but did have a squirrel die in a wall.

"The smell goes on for years," she says. "But now the holes are closed. My husband crawled all around nailing everything down. He's 58, and my hero."