

# IF I COULD TALK TO THE ANIMALS

by Melanie Grillo

"I like any kind of animal, it don't matter what kind of animal they are. I like any kind of animal, because I get a bang out of it."

This statement was made by Elsie Franz, 48 year resident of Steamboat Springs on a sunny fall day when Melanie Grillo and a fellow staff photographer visited her to find out about her squirrel feeding and her love of animals.

After moving to Colorado, she lived up at Hahn's Peak for two years, but the town seemed too small for her since she was used to the city life. She described it to be lonesome and different from what she was used to. However, Elsie remembers fun times such as going to parties, dance and skiing. Many times for dances in Clark a horse drawn sled was used.

"Oodles of kids used to ride on the sled, at least a couple dozen, if there were that many up there then," she recalls.

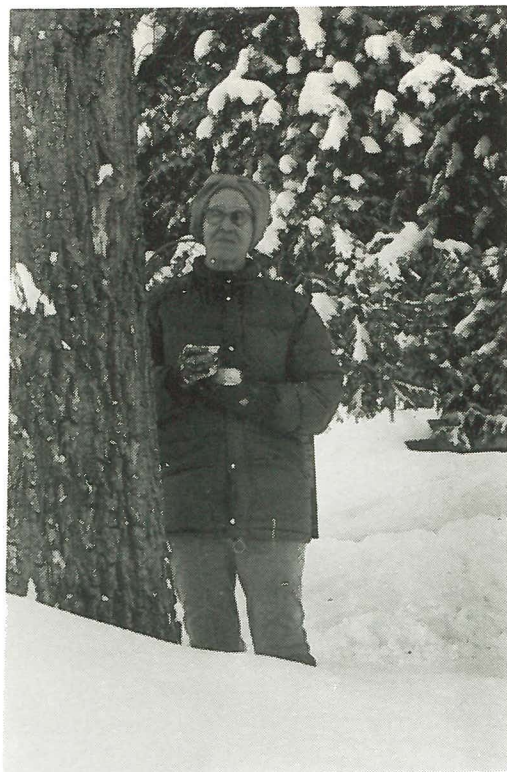
Elsie has a unique relationship with animals, especially with squirrels. "I feel like they're mine, but they're not really mine, they're wild. They belong to everybody, but then when you get them tame, where they'll come eat out of your hand and sit in your lap, why you'll go over there and protect them if you see somebody throwing rocks or shooting B B's at um."



She watches, feeds, doctors and generally protects a family of squirrels that live in the limb hole of an old cotton wood tree across the street from her house.

We found by interviewing Mrs. Franz that she began feeding squirrels two years ago after she watched her neighbor feeding them. Since their lives were endangered by crossing the street she placed two cans in her neighbor's tree, one for food and one for water.





"Last winter I'd go over, and she'd come down from the tree, and I'd just stand there. One time I had some nuts in my hand, and I was gonna hand them to her, and she just jumped into my hand. Why, she just went ahead and ate. And from then on she just started getting tamer. Mamma Squirrel will come and sit on my lap and everything."

"I go out there and call for 'Mamma' and click two cans together and she knows I'm coming. It's a lot of fun!"

She feeds the squirrels any time, yet she checks on them quite early in the morning - 8:15 A.M. to be exact. However, she thinks Mamma Squirrel prefers to be fed in the afternoon.

"The mamma, she's the one that somehow got tamed up. I don't know why, but she just got to where she wasn't afraid. But, of course it wasn't until last summer to where she'd get

onto my lap so I could touch her and stuff. If she can't draw my attention, why pretty soon she'll come over and sit on that limb outside my window looking in, or she'll slam on my screen door, and try to get my attention that way. Yeah, if she wants something to eat, why she'll come right over."

"Once she got her whole side torn off her ribs. So then I went and got some leftover Christmas nuts, and I took them over. I gave her the shelled nuts while I'd hand the little baby squirrel a cookie or something like that to get him out of the way, so I could feed and doctor the mamma squirrel."

When we asked Elsie about the animal's dependency on her for food, she replied, "Oh, no, they find their own, but when I go over there and feed them once a day, why... (they become used to it.)"





"I started feeding the mamma by hand last summer. First, I'd just kinda throw a peanut out to her, then I'd just throw a little bit closer, and a little bit closer, and finally I just got her to take it out of my hand."

Everyone knows all animals look alike. How can you tell them apart? That's just what we asked Elsie.

"Oh, I don't know - each face is different. Every animal has got its own ways, and, of course, mamma won't run from me where the others will. The wild one, she'll come down and take things out of my hand, and she'll eat as long as mamma's there. I can just take a pan and set it there, and she'll come down and eat."

"But the wild one hasn't taken up like the mamma has. She's always kinda timid. She'll take the nut out of your hand, and boy, she just beats it back up the tree. A lot of times I'll put some stuff in a can and she'll sit on the edge of the can and eat."

"Mamma Squirrel will sit there and look at me on her back legs and put her little hands up, crossed in front. When she's scared, why, she twitches her nose, and then I'll start talking to her and telling her it's okay and not to worry. I tell her anything to calm her, cause she's just naturally scared. She'll stop eating to look up at me. I don't know if she understands me or not, but she calms down when I talk to her."



"Come on, mamma!"

Elsie has had lots of troubles with the mamma squirrel since she's the tamest. "Last spring the kids went and shot her with B B's. She had two holes in her body. One was right inside of her neck, andd one was right under the fleshy part of her front leg. It was becoming infected, so I took some Bactine over and gave her some shelled nuts and kind of touched her head a little bit. I just pushed the hairs over to the side and took the Bactine and squeezed it on the hole. She stopped and looked at me, and I kept talking to her and telling her everything was okay, so she started eatin' again. After awhile she got over being afraid and I took the Bactine and sprayed the other hole.



They healed pretty good. But I was afraid for a while that it would be like it was last winter.- like her whole ribs would all be bare. She had a pretty rough time, the magpies got her once. They had gotten a hold of her hair so I had to fix that."

Other incidents have occurred in her life where she was needed to help other animals. Elsie's cat "Scamper" was badly hurt, but she took care of him until he was healthy again.



Another time Elsie used her doctoring skills was when her brother brought home a baby white mouse. Since it was only a day or so old and didn't have its eyes open, it surely couldn't eat - Elsie thought - so she got out the doll baby bottle and warmed some milk. She told how much fun she had watching the mouse wipe its mouth with its tiny paws.

"I just like to mess with any kind of animal. I don't care whether it's a chicken or a duck, or anything. They're just fun. You can get a lot of entertainment out of animals."

When she was little she found a robin that had fallen out of it's nest. She took care of it, and even taught it how to fly. She did this by placing the bird in her hands, then dropping her hands slowly. The bird would flutter its wings. she thought by doing this the bird would feel the air and hence learn to fly.



These bird feeders are outside Elsie's window.



"That's the mamma!"

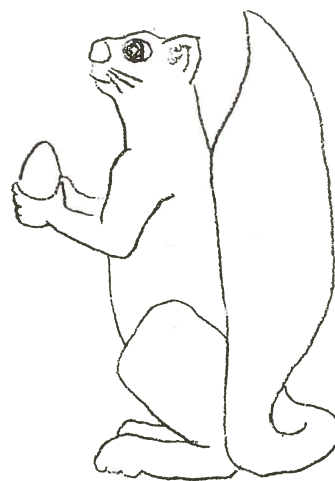
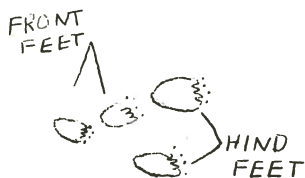
We asked her about her favorite animal, "Well, my favorite was Pixy (her dog)," she recalled, "I don't see whether there's a difference in animals. They're all nice if you get them tamed up. And that's a lot of fun to do, especially wild animals. It's just fun!"



"The stinker, she won't come down!"

Sometimes it may be best to leave wild animals on their own as Elsie expresses, "I feel like I'm doing more harm than good." The squirrels keep getting hurt, and Elsie feels like it is her fault because they are just getting too friendly towards people.

"I hate to leave her (the mamma) go, but it's best for her. I wish I could hold on to them all, but I love them too much to hurt them," as she emptied another bag of sunflower seeds on the ground.



Bowie

#### SQUIRREL FACTS...

- The word "squirrel" comes from two Greek words meaning shadow tail.
- Squirrels are able to move about easily by spreading their legs straight and leaping from place to place, using the bushy tail for balance.
- Squirrels reproduce at a year old having two to six babies in thirty-six to forty-five days.
- Chisel-like front teeth allow squirrels to eat berries, corn, fruit, nuts, mushrooms and seeds.
- In the fall squirrels store food in a den lined with dried leaves and strips of bark.
- Even though squirrels are easy to tame, they are known to carry rabies.
- Smallest squirrel on record: 1/2 ounce- largest: twenty pounds.

Note: Man is squirrel's greatest enemy!