

Angst in August

By Ron McAdow

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Earth whirls around the Sun so rapidly that nearly 2% of the circuit is completed every week. In my boyhood, this sense of rushing through the seasons gave me a sinking feeling every August.

Freedom's weeks drained away, their passing marked by the acquisition of uncomfortable garments. Each had to be tried on in the store, with my funny-looking self for the model, inspected by my mother and by random members of the public. To self-conscious, bespectacled me, this was torture.

We have evidence that Progress is a reality because today's pupils wear sneakers and the back-to-school merchandise is way cooler. Still, the bottom line is that, come Labor Day, the Commonwealth requires kids to sit indoors and do as they're told. August leads to algebra.

Does a chipmunk dread the lapse of August?

I believe rodents are spared the conscious anxiety that plagues the human mind. Avoid the weasel, shun the fox: these precepts must be in every line of code that programs chipmunk behavior. And they must prepare for winter—I don't suppose they are so planful as to make lists, but they do, by instinct, get ready.

Chipmunks spend the cold months alone. Their burrow is about two inches wide and up to dozens of feet long. In winter, they drop into a torpor interrupted by occasional bouts of eating. With no one to send out for snacks and no access to pizza delivery, they must rely on what they themselves have stashed away, in or near their burrows.

That's where August puts the pressure: each chipmunk who will live and love next spring must store a big supply of acorns or other seeds and nuts. Good intentions won't help; only efficient action in August and September will carry a chipmunk through the frozen months.

As is the case with many common animals, wildlife science has fewer details about the life of Eastern Chipmunks than you would think. It's known that they gather food from a half-acre home range that overlaps with the foraging territories of other chipmunks. They possess and defend a "dominance area" of about fifty feet around their burrow entrance. Those entrances are not marked with tailings because chipmunks remove soil as they dig; they carry it off in their cheek pouches for inconspicuous dispersal.

The Algonquins regarded chipmunks as allies and benefactors. According to one Native American story, wild animals met in secret council and plotted to send diseases to human beings. After leaking this information to us two-legs, chipmunks circulated among their friends the plants, reporting people's health catastrophe. As a result, plants provided humans with soothing, healing medications. The animals were furious—one of them scratched those stripes on the chipmunk's back. Since they told

tales against the other creatures, chipmunks have needed to scoot down their burrows plenty fast.

Me, I never was a chipmunk, and I've been excused from school. I've come to think very highly of August.

Ron McAdow is Executive Director of Sudbury Valley Trustees, a member-supported conservation group. (Author's Note: Thanks to Judy Mack for her help in research for this article.)