

THE THREE STOOGES ARE UP TO IT AGAIN!

By Ken Klyme

Sanford, NC Larry, Moe, and Curly are really going out on a limb. But this time, they'll work for peanuts. Like dozens of other squirrels before them, the three squirrels have been specially trained to assist a group of tree climbers with the initial rigging of large trees for climbing. The Three Stooges were obtained, as pups, from an animal rescue shelter in Raleigh after their mother was hit by a car. Abe Willard, owner of Willard's Wildlife has been working with the squirrels for almost four months to get them ready for their next gig: hanging lines in trees. In a few days, the three brothers will move to their new home near Detroit, Michigan. Once there, they'll begin work helping Arbor Quest Unlimited, a group of tree climbers who provide tree climbing programs for people with disabilities.

All three of the squirrels are Eastern Gray Squirrels, known by scientists as *Sciurus carolinensis*. They can be either gray or black so, yes; you can be an Eastern Gray Squirrel and be black in color - like Curly. In fact, black is often the dominant color in Ontario and Quebec, but both colors can be seen in pups of the same litter.

Gray Squirrels are native to North America, found mostly in the Eastern United States. Typically, their homes are in tree cavities or in bulky water-proof twig and leaf nests built in tree branches. They also dig burrows in the ground, but these are usually for food storage for winter. They eat acorns and hickory nuts throughout the year, though they may eat buds, tender twigs, seeds, and insects when the weather permits.

Willard explained that like most Eastern Gray Squirrels, the Three Stooges, are easygoing and exhibit little aggressive behavior. They are generally quiet creatures, but if alarmed they will emit a harsh guttural "bark", flipping their tails with each squawk. It is the large bushy tail that is the most notable physical feature of the Eastern Gray Squirrel. Indeed, the Latin word for squirrel, *sciurus*, is derived from two Greek words, *skia*, (shadow), and *oura*, (tail). Combining the two means loosely that the squirrel is one that sits in the shadow of its own tail.

"These squirrels are perfect for the job because Gray Squirrels can reach speeds of up to 16 miles per hour, and they move headfirst when climbing or descending the trunk," says Willard. To show how the process works,



Originally obtained from an animal rescue shelter, Larry and Moe finish their training before going to Michigan to help Arbor Quest Unlimited run tree climbing programs for people with disabilities. Curly (the black squirrel) is not pictured.

Willard carefully puts a climbing harness on Curly and gets the rodent to hold a nut-flavored weight in his mouth. Trailing the weight is fishing line on a reel. Just as Willard has trained him, Curly races up the trunk to follow the dot from a green laser pointer (much like a kitten will chase a piece of string). Once the squirrel has climbed over the correct branch, Willard leads the squirrel back down the trunk for a tasty treat. "That right there is the key to an obedient squirrel - good chow," Willard observes. If this was Curly's actual worksite, a tree climber would attach a rope onto the fishing line the squirrel has just placed around the branch. "It'll save them climbers a bunch of time," says a grinning Willard.

Now it's Larry's turn to show what he's learned. But as he gets about halfway up the tree, he gets distracted from the green laser dot. A wild squirrel has just jumped onto the tree and is quickly coming down toward Larry. Confused, the Stogee scampers back to the safety of his cage at Willard's feet. Willard sighs. "Well, that's the type of thing they're going to run into when they go to work. He should have just kept going."

Willard insists the Three Stooges will be ready to head North next week. And at \$600 per squirrel, the climbers at Arbor Quest are expecting great things. "They're really going to help bring us to new heights," says Dennis Furlong, one of the group's founders.