

THE SQUIRRELAWAY

ALAN W. BERNHEIMER

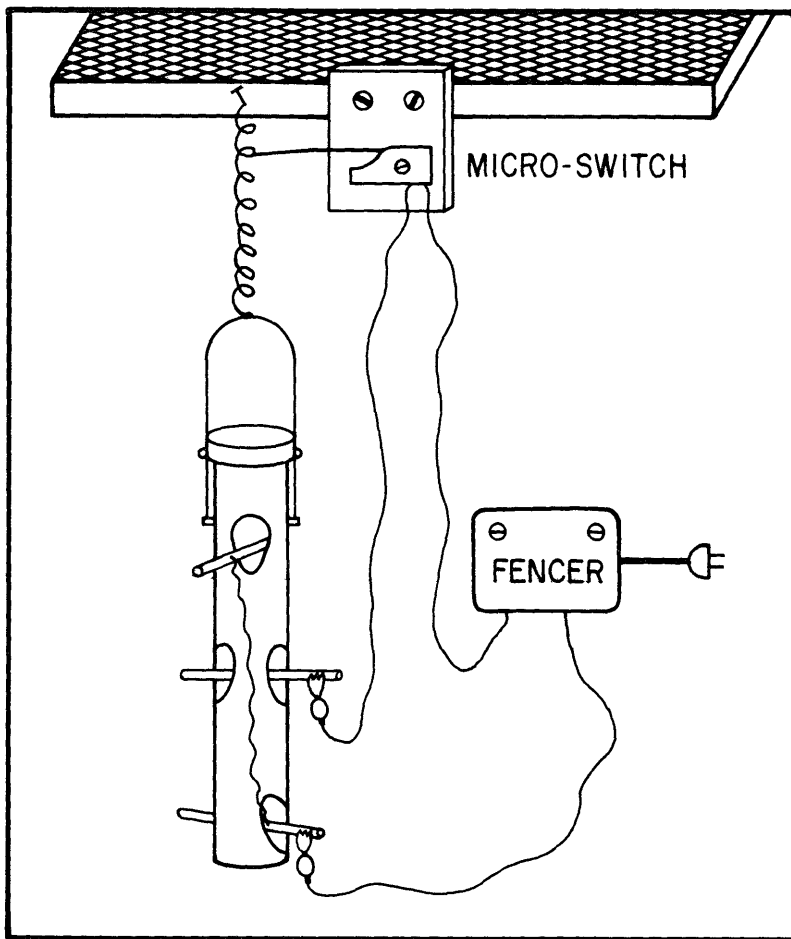
For five summers I have been experimenting with devices designed to keep a commonly used type of bird feeder free of squirrels. The foolproof contrivance that evolved suspends the feeder from a helical spring attached to an eave or other fixed structure of convenient height. The lever of a micro-switch is fastened by wire and epoxy cement to the spring. The feeder is wired to receive current from a common farmer's electric "fencer" when the micro-switch is closed. Earlier versions used other means to encourage the squirrels' departure, but a variety of horns, whistles, sirens, and a supersonic rodent repeller proved to be simply music to their ears.

Birds that visit our feeder weigh between one ounce, the weight of a House Sparrow, and three and a half ounces, the weight of a Blue Jay. The common Eastern Grey Squirrel weighs between fourteen and twenty-five ounces. By virtue of this large difference in bird and squirrel weights, the micro-switch can easily be mounted so that it closes when a squirrel is on the feeder, but remains open when one or more birds choose to congregate there.

A squirrel can get food out of the feeder only when it clings vertically, and in this position it makes contact with two of the three metal cross-bars to which the fencer is electrically connected. Ordinarily, a bird makes contact with only one crossbar, but on the off-chance that it does touch two, the open switch insures the bird's safety.

The relatively low, pulsed current delivered by a fencer will repel even the most voracious squirrel with astonishing rapidity. And its memory of the tingle seems so vivid that when a squirrel has been repulsed two or three times it has learned, perhaps for the rest of its life, not to approach the apparatus again. Instead, it is content to consume the feed that falls to the ground. The birds are rather sloppy eaters, spilling about as much as they eat. Once the neighborhood squirrels have been "trained", the fencer can be disconnected for an undetermined period of time.

Four summers of experience have demonstrated that the fencer's charge is innocuous to the Eastern Grey Squirrel. This should quell any objections from the International Society for the Preservation of Squirrels and Other Rodents. As for the protection of humans, the electricity delivered by the fencer is considered harmless. Nevertheless, some vivid memories of my own recommend that you disconnect the 110-volt



supply to the fencer when you are filling or handling the feeder. One should be aware of the possibility that in very cold weather, the birds' feet may be injured by the metal crossbars. Finally, if the feeder is located remote from a source of electricity, a solar-powered fencer can be used.

*Department of Microbiology, NYU Medical Center,
550 First Avenue, New York, New York 10016*