

# Surprises in the trees

BY ROSEMARY CURLEY

We're so used to looking for birds in trees that we sometimes forget our nearer relatives, the mammals. Several years ago, while leading a group of school children on a "woods walk", I spied a tree cavity and demonstrated the tapping procedure that sometimes works to reveal active woodpecker nests. No bird emerged. Instead, we were startled to see a flying squirrel erupt a foot above my head and scramble upwards. The squirrel reoccupied the cavity within the hour, and was probably nursing young on that mid-June day.

This summer, as people search for active woodpecker nests in conjunction with the Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas, more mammals are turning up in the trees. On June 22, I rechecked an apparently vacant natural

cavity in Waterside and found active young red squirrels peering out from inside a live hardwood. However, the most fabulous non-woodpecker nest was discovered on June 15 by Howard Norton at Howe Bay. In a 15" diameter dead stump near a small marsh, a "woodpecker cavity" was inspected with no result. But lower down on the opposite side of the stump, Howard found a larger cavity housing a raccoon and at least 2 tiny raccoons! The young were helpless with unopened eyes and resembled baby kittens.

On June 21, Howard led the Howe Pt. Atlas Day Crew to see the tree den and we were pleased to see the female still in residence, although she concealed her progeny from us.

Raccoons have become common on P.E.I. since their introduction in 1912 but denning sites are rarely found. Therefore, the moral of this story is clearly seen. "Inspect those tree cavities, or find a friend who does." Thanks to Howard and the raccoons for making our "Atlas Day" expedition a memorable one.