*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Attacked by a tree terrorist**

A lot of time and money has been spent in our country coming up with increased security and contingency plans for the possibility of a terrorist or cyber-attack on our electrical grid.

With winter weather here, even losing power for a few hours poses risks when we rely so much on the grid to keep us warm.

Thankfully we live in a part of the country – not Texas – where we have experienced crews and a grid system designed to handle cold weather and the occasional outages. But the real threat comes not from terrorists, but from the Sciuridae family.

Yes, it’s the wide-eyed and bushy-tailed members of the homegrown squirrel family that is public enemy number one of the grid.

"I don't think paralysis [of the electrical grid] is more likely by cyberattack than by natural disaster,” said John Inglis, former deputy director of the National Security Agency. “And frankly the number-one threat experienced to date by the US electrical grid is squirrels."

Recently we were the victims of such an attack. It was mid-morning on a mild day with no storms when the electrons on my screen went blank – usually in conjunction with my mind – along with the power to our house.

Outages happen in the country and sometimes they are only for a few seconds before the lights come back on. That did not happen, so after a few minutes, I called our utility company to report the outage.

About 45 minutes later the utility truck came up our road and I greeted them in the yard.

“Been shooting squirrels lately,” the lineman asked.

“There’s plenty of them around,” I replied, somewhat perplexed by the question.

“Looks like there may be one up there,” he said with a smile, pointing to the top of the transformer on our electrical pole.

Sure enough, there was some sort of furry carcass splayed out on the transformer. That was confirmed when the deceased tree rat was pulled down by the lineman’s fiberglass pole. The victim and perpetrator were a red pine squirrel that had a black scorch mark across its chest.

The electrocution had caused the connecting wire to the utility line to burn out. Less than a minute later a new connecting wire was installed and we were back on the grid.

Utility companies confirm that squirrels are the top power grid attackers. Entergy, a New Orleans-based energy company operating in the southern U.S., reported 15,000 of the 22,000 animal-related power outages in its Mississippi service area were due to squirrels.

That – I have to do it – is nuts.

Unitil, a utility company serving over 107,000 in the northeast U.S., says squirrels cause an average of 8.5% of its outages each year. Unitil says since the animals use power lines for travel, it’s easy for them to cause electrical trouble.

And it’s not just power to the homes. Squirrels can take down our financial markets too.

MarketWatch.com reported in 1987 and 1994, the Nasdaq was shut down on two occasions when squirrels forced a halt to trading until the power grid could be restarted.

There’s even a website that tracks confirmed power outage attacks caused by animals.

Cybersquirrel1.com tracked confirmed reports from 1987 to 2019 and documented 1,252 power outages caused by squirrels, including a map of the attacks.

Frankly, I’m surprised we haven’t had a power outage before caused by a squirrel as we live in the country and have trees in the yard.

When we first moved into my great grandparents house and before we remodeled, pine squirrels had chewed an entrance into the attic, which sounded like a bowling alley. My late father thinned the herd by picking them off with a .22 at his bird feeder. I believe the final count was close to 30.

A few days after our squirrel attack, there was another outage. This one lasted for several hours and was widespread across the area.

I haven’t heard the cause.

It was a dark and stormy night.

And the Sciuridae family is everywhere.

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Cutlines: The power at the Hardie house was restored by replacing this connecting wire to the distribution line.

Deceased: A lineman removes an electrocuted squirrel that caused a recent power outage at the Hardie house.

Squirrel attacks: The website Cybersquirrel1.com has mapped confirmed power outages caused by squirrels from 1987 to 2019.