

Skip, the Serious Squirrel

This is a story about Skip, the squirrel, and Oscar, his friend. While Oscar and Skip were both squirrels, that's about the extent of their similarity.

Skip was a serious squirrel.

Oscar, on the other hand, just wanted to have fun.

Skip was neat and tidy, and kept his nest in good order.

Oscar, as you may have guessed, was not neat. He was very messy indeed. Bits and bobs of this and that littered his nest, and sometimes made sleeping difficult, but he never really seemed to notice. He was usually too tuckered out when he rolled into his nest after hours of playing with his friends. Oscar was outgoing and had a dynamic personality, which unfortunately, Skip did not.

Skip was a very shy squirrel, and even though he had a voice, he seldom used it, preferring to slip in, and out, and around the branches and twigs and brambles as inconspicuously as possible.

He often lived in fear of being spied and captured by creatures much larger than himself, so he developed skills that rendered him almost invisible to the other forest dwellers.

By contrast, Oscar loved to be heard. He was widely known throughout the county for his musical talents, in particular, his ability to play the saxophone. He loved to belt out tunes, and as soon as he started to play, creatures appeared from far and near.

They would come across the farmer's field, through the tall rows of corn, between brambles and honeysuckle vines, skittering across hedgerows, and ducking under barbed wire fences. Yes, indeed, they would all come to hear Oscar play his sax. They would sing and dance under the milky moon surrounded by twinkling fireflies. They would dance, and dance, and dance until their feet dragged.

Oscar would play one tune after another, his little squirrel cheeks undulating in and out, and his bushy tail keeping time. He was a dashing and dazzling squirrel.

Skip loved Oscar's music as much as everyone else, but he sat quietly on the sidelines, often hidden by the shadows, because he was a shy and serious squirrel. But if anyone ever did catch a glimpse of him, they would see he was smiling, and gently swaying to the music. His heart was happy when Oscar played.

There would be singing, dancing and happy times every evening lasting well into the wee, wee hours of the morning. When the sun appeared on the horizon, the creatures would drift away, and an exhausted Oscar would place his saxophone into its shiny walnut case, snap the clasp, and slowly make his way back to his old pine tree. Once there, he would grasp the rough bark with one hand, the walnut case firmly held in the other hand, and hoist himself higher and higher up the trunk of the tree until he reached the highest branches that cradled his pine needle nest. There, he would flop down with a big

sigh of relief, curl himself into a tight little ball and fall fast asleep. He would dream of all the new tunes he would play at the next party. As dusk would begin to fall upon the forest, Oscar would roll out of his nest, yawn, and shake out his bushy tail, and get ready for another evening with his friends. This was his routine, and he loved it.

He loved it so much that he didn't notice as the days gradually grew shorter and the evenings became cooler. But Skip, the serious little squirrel that he was, did notice these subtle changes, and realized that summer was drawing to a close. He knew that fall was just around the corner. He also knew that it was time for squirrels to stop playing, and to start working, in order to get prepared for the long winter ahead. Responsible squirrels had to work hard to collect enough nuts and seeds to last all winter long, so with this in mind, Skip paid Oscar a visit.

Unfortunately, Oscar was not easily persuaded by Skip. He told Skip to go away, and to let him rest before evening came. "If I don't get enough sleep during the day, I won't have enough energy to play my sax for my friends in the evening," said Oscar in a raspy voice. "I couldn't possibly disappoint my friends. Now go away, leave me alone!"

"Your friends are going to stop coming whether you play your sax or not," said Skip. "All but the silliest of them know it is time to get ready for winter. Sandra the skunk has found a nice dry, hollow log for herself and her three children. Glenda and Galviston the cute gopher couple, are busy digging out a home under the corner of the farmer's barn, and all the field mice are scurrying around, storing kernels of corn in the big hay shed. Everyone is busy except you. No one sleeps during the day anymore. You really must come and help me gather enough provisions for the winter."

"You worry too much," replied Oscar. "We still have lots of time to gather nuts and seeds, winter is miles off. The scarecrow is still standing guard in the field and the pumpkins haven't even been harvested yet."

"The scarecrow is made of straw," said Skip, "he could stay in the field all winter and he wouldn't know the difference." "But you, on the other hand, will starve if you don't get prepared before the snow comes and covers the ground."

But serious Skip might just as well have been talking to the wind. Oscar paid him no mind. Every evening he played his sax, and during the day he slept in his pine needle nest while Skip scurried to and fro beneath the pine tree, collecting acorns, hazelnuts and sunflower seeds.

As the days passed, Skip's supply grew and grew. He had found the perfect hiding place to keep his collection safe and dry over the winter. The farmer's wife had left one of her tall, rubber gardening boots in the corner of the potting shed, and Skip spotted it on one of his excursions. He knew it would make an ideal storage container, so little by little, he began filling it up with the nuts and seeds he collected. The job would have been easier and quicker with the help of another squirrel, but with perseverance, he eventually he got it done on his own. He was very proud of his accomplishment.

Meanwhile, Oscar maintained the same routine, playing all night, and snoozing all day. But, as Skip predicted, fewer and fewer creatures came to listen to his music. The evening air had grown quite chilly, frost began to cling to the barbed wire fences, and all the pretty pink wild roses had been replaced with bright red rose hips. The birds were flocking together and many had flown south for the winter. Most of the leaves had dropped from the trees, leaving only the larch a brilliant gold. Even the

fireflies had disappeared. Oscar grew lonely, with only the owls on the power poles for company. He wondered what they were thinking when they heard his sax. Their sharp talons seemed to tense up and their heads swiveled in the most peculiar way when he played.

The soulful melodies of his summertime sax were replaced by more melancholy tunes. His once robust, bushy tail slowly became limp and matted, and his shiny fur lost its luster. Even his bright little eyes lost their sparkle. Not only was Oscar lonely, he was also sad, and hungry as it was becoming harder and harder to find anything worth eating. The grapes had been picked from the vines by the farmer's wife, the corn was all harvested, and the pumpkins had all been collected for future jack-o-lanterns. Occasionally, Oscar would come across the odd acorn, but it wasn't enough to stop the squeaks, pops, and gurgles of his nearly empty tummy.

One day, as the sun was setting in the late afternoon, Oscar peered down from his pine needle nest, and spied Skip, in the tall dry grass at the foot of the tree. He hadn't seen Skip in a very long time, so he called out to him in an excited voice, asking, "Skip, where have you been?"

"Well, I have been very busy," said Skip. "I sure could have used your help. I logged many miles in search of nuts and seeds, but I am finally ready for winter. I think there is a very good chance of snow tonight."

"Do you think you could spare me one or two of your hazelnuts?" asked Oscar. "I am so very hungry, and I just haven't had time to gather any of my own."

"I'm sorry," replied Skip, "I need all of what I have gathered to last me through the winter. Maybe some of your friends will help you out."

"I haven't seen anyone in days and days," said Oscar sadly. "It's been so lonely with only the owls for company. I have a feeling they aren't really interested in my music or my dynamic personality."

But before Oscar had even finished speaking, Skip had started to scamper away as it was getting dark. As he watched Skip weave in and out of the tall dry grass on his way back to the potting shed, Oscar called after him, "I think you are the meanest, most selfish squirrel in all the county, and I hope you are eaten by an owl!" That said, he lugged his skinny little body back into his pine needle nest, closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the rumblings of his empty tummy.

As each day passed, Oscar remained perched high up in the pine tree, waiting for some of his summertime friends to visit. But no one came. No one came to sing, or to dance, or to laugh. No one came with a little something for him to nibble on, no one came at all. What did come were the winter winds. The winds brought with them icy snow and sleet, and Oscar's once cozy nest, became frigidly cold.

One morning, as Oscar shivered in his nest with his tail wrapped tightly around him, he heard the farmer's border collie in the distance. Yap, yap, yappity-yap, she barked. She had some nerve, thought Oscar. It was frightfully early to be woken up by such an unpleasant commotion. He waited for the din to subside, but when it seemed to get closer, he raised his head above the edge of his nest, and peered across the farmer's field.

What he saw made the fur on the back of his neck stand straight up. It was Molly, the black and white dog, darting back and forth across the frozen field, her tail held high in the air and her nose close to the ground. Oscar knew this was a very dangerous situation. He couldn't see what she was chasing, but he was certain if she caught it, things would not turn out well.

"What to do, what to do?!" thought Oscar, overcome with panic. "Molly is probably after one of my friends!" He watched in horror, his brow furrowed and his hands clasped tightly together as Molly's barking grew louder and louder.

Then, all of a sudden, an idea came to him. He dropped down into his nest, and pulled out the walnut case, flipped open the clasp, and yanked out his saxophone. With all the remaining strength in his skinny little body, he blew on the sax, working the keys with his cold, stiff fingers. Immediately the barking stopped, and Molly stopped in her tracks, with a stunned expression on her face. Her ears shot up, and she tipped her head from side to side, trying to locate the unusual sound.

A moment later, Oscar heard a scrambling on the rough bark of the pine tree, and when he looked down, there was Skip!

"Skip," cried Oscar, "what on earth are you doing out here? Don't you know that Molly is loose, and is after something?"

"She was after me!" panted Skip, gasping to catch his breath. "I was collecting some water from one of the little puddles when she picked up my scent. Then she went crazy, and came after me! I thought for sure I would be a goner until I heard your sax. You saved my life, Oscar."

"Well, that's what friends are for," said Oscar.

When Skip finally stopped panting, and they both calmed down, he looked at Oscar, and said, "You have become so skinny, Oscar, how are you managing to survive way up here?"

Oscar didn't know what to say. He knew he should have listened to Skip long ago, and collected a supply of nuts for the winter. But it was too late for that now, he had been foolish indeed, and he was embarrassed.

But it was a day of surprises. Without hesitation, Skip reached across and took Oscar's hand. "Come with me," he said. "We will wait in the brambles until Molly is gone, and then we will go back to the potting shed. I still have enough nuts to last both of us all winter. You will be safe and dry and warm with me. That's what friends are for."