

Mikel Delgado gives a squirrel a nut to see where the critter will store it.



Nutty Behavior

How do squirrels organize the nuts they find?

Squirrels are busy little creatures. You've probably seen them scampering up trees and hopping across lawns. The rodents are most active in the fall, collecting nuts to eat over the winter.

Squirrels bury their nuts in the ground. That keeps them hidden from other animals that

might eat them. But squirrels have to remember where the nuts are buried so they can recover them later. "It's an interesting problem," says Mikel Delgado. She's an animal behavior expert at the University of California, Davis.

Delgado wanted to know if there's any

pattern in the way squirrels bury their nuts. She set out to investigate the question.

Going Nuts

Delgado and a team of researchers gave 45 wild squirrels in Berkeley, California, four kinds of nuts: almonds, hazelnuts, pecans, and walnuts.



Mikel Delgado

RYAN HOANG/UC BERKELEY (ALL PHOTOS)



These hazelnuts contain a trackable microchip!



A researcher uses a detector to search for buried nuts.

The team then watched the squirrels to see where they buried the nuts. They used a handheld **GPS** tracker—a device that uses satellites to track objects on Earth—to record each nut’s location. The team used that data to make a map showing where each nut was buried.

squirrels put almonds in one place and walnuts in another. Delgado thinks the behavior might help squirrels remember where to find their meals.

In a related study, Delgado set out to learn what happened to the nuts over time. She gave squirrels nuts containing microchips. (Hungry squirrels

could eat the nut around the chip.) Delgado’s team used a detector to track the buried nuts. She found that squirrels often move nuts from place to place. She’s not sure why.

“Animals do so many cool things that we don’t realize,” Delgado says.

—Alexa Kurzius

Keeping Track

Delgado found that squirrels didn’t just bury nuts randomly. They hid them in different spots depending on what type they were. For example,

PETER DASILVA (HAZELNUTS, ARYAN); ROLF NUSSBAUMER/NPL/MINDEN PICTURES (SQUIRREL)



Investigate It!

Think about how Mikel Delgado followed the steps of scientific inquiry. Then answer the questions.

1 What question did Delgado want to answer?

2 How did Delgado and her team collect data about their question?

3 What pattern did Delgado notice in her data?

4 What does Delgado think her findings suggest about squirrels’ behavior?