

If I could walk with the animals, talk with the animals  
Grunt and squeak and squawk with the animals  
And they could talk to me

**Lyrics from the song *Talk to the Animals***

This is one time I wish I was Dr. Doolittle. How vividly I recall Rex Harrison in 1967, and later in 1998 Eddie Murphy portraying Dr. Doolittle in the movie *Dr. Doolittle*. What a clever concept. A doctor who finds out he can converse with the animals. He understands them, and they understand him. How cool would that be!

Of late, I've been witnessing a very strange occurrence. For the past three weeks, on a daily basis, our driveway has been littered with a multitude of small twigs, generally three to four inches in length. Having examined them closely, I've discovered three distinctive facts.



1. All the twigs are coming from our neighbors' ash tree which grows along the north side of our driveway.
2. All the twigs are coming from the tips of the branches on that ash tree.
3. Squirrels are making the mess.



How do I know it is squirrels creating all the havoc? Answer: I've witnessed them munching away and dropping the twigs. A more serious question might be, **WHY?**

Unfortunately, I'm not Dr. Doolittle; thus, I do not have an exact answer explaining this strange phenomenon. According to another individual's hypothesis, and I emphasize the word hypothesis, tree squirrels chew on tree branches for a number of reasons.

1. Sometimes they harvest the branches for nest building.
2. Sometimes they munch on branches to maintain razor sharp teeth.
3. Sometimes they chew on branches for food.

Digging deeper, I also read another opinion as to why squirrels chew on the bark while feeding on the highest branches of the tree. According to the author of the article, located at the tips of the branches within the bark is the greatest concentration of sodium. Conjecture is squirrels are feeding on these branches because they lack sodium. This individual went so far as to suggest a person purchase tiny salt blocks from pet stores and lay them next to the trunk of the tree. Supposedly, the squirrels will get their sodium from licking the salt blocks, thus avoiding nipping off the tips of the branches. Perhaps this is true, but I can only assume all of this is pure speculation since the author is certainly no Dr. Doolittle.

I do know that squirrels eat an assortment of nuts, seeds and berries. However, since such an oddity is happening I, too, can only speculate. Perhaps the population of squirrels is higher than normal and perhaps a food shortage is forcing squirrels to forage for an alternative food source.

After witnessing such a strange phenomenon, I examined other trees in our yard and in the neighborhood. I looked for a similar occurrence involving other tree species. Interestingly, only the ash trees were experiencing this disfigurement. "Why just them?" I wondered. If only I were a Dr. Doolittle, then I could grunt, and squeak and squawk with the squirrels, and the squirrels could talk to me. Since I can't converse with them, I hate to admit it, but most everything I've disclosed in this article is simply supposition.

As a horticulturist I can, however, closely predict the outcome of my neighbor's ash trees. I am reasonably sure they will survive this strange form of pruning. More than likely when new growth begins next spring, the canopy of the ash trees will be bushier than normal.

Hmm, now I'm thinking in order for me to be more exact with this prediction, how cool would it be if I could talk to the plants, and the plants could talk to me. I'd probably prefer talking to plants anyway!