

Critters a menace to U.S. power grid

By Katherine Shaver, Washington Post

U.S. electric utilities are battling a bushy-tailed, nut-loving menace that has wreaked havoc on far more Christmas tree lights, TVs and cellphone chargers than any terrorist plotting against the power grid.

That's right. Beware the squirrel.

Even as utilities have spent millions on "wildlife protection," squirrels routinely outsmart plastic animal guards on energized equipment, gnaw through rubbery insulation and squirm into power substations, zapping electricity to thousands of homes and businesses while meeting an untimely death.

Storms still tend to cause the longest and most widespread outages, experts say. But the American Public Power Association, which represents municipal electric utilities and uses a "squirrel index" to track outages nationwide, says the critters remain the most frequent cause, even if those outages are more limited than storms.

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