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*Protecting Animals: Film Monitoring*



## ON THE SET

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### Getting Squirrely with Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

What epicurean expert can discern the quality of nutmeats with preternatural ease and finesse? Squirrels, of course! In his own fantastic yet logical fashion, Willy Wonka understands that no other creature on earth and certainly no man or machine can sort the good nuts from the bad with such single-minded accuracy and speed.

The American Humane Association knows that no animal, large or small, shall be placed at harm for the sake of entertainment. That's why our Certified Animal Safety Representatives were in the nut-sorting room of Wonka's celebrated candy factory when 100 of these captivating rodents perched on tiny stools, evaluating each nut by scent and sound. They nimbly shelled the good ones and placed the meat onto a conveyor belt while tossing the rejects over their shoulders into a giant trash chute.

#### Live squirrels?

Like Wonka, director Tim Burton also wanted the real thing for this scene -- live, trained squirrels.

"When I found out what was involved, it was a bit overwhelming," says Senior Animal Trainer Mike Alexander of Birds & Animals Unlimited. Alexander was happy to re-team with Burton following his successful stint on *Planet of the Apes*, but admits, "Squirrels can be very tough, and training 100 of them was inconceivable."

Janice Caputo, the American Humane Certified Animal Safety Representative monitoring the production, was equally astonished. "I remember hearing the words 'We will be using real squirrels in the Nut Room.' I asked the production assistant to repeat the statement, as the entire concept was truly surprising," Caputo says. "To my knowledge, there had never been a sequence with more than one squirrel in a very tightly controlled, short time take."

Ultimately, the animals seen on screen were an amalgamation of skillfully crafted animatronics plus some computer-generated (CG) and multiple images along with 40 individual, rambunctious, and very real squirrels that set the standard and led the animal action.

#### ON THE SET

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Once the squirrels came on the set to film, American Humane's Caputo helped secure the entire area for the rodents' safety, making sure all staff understood how a squirrel acts, how quickly they can change their minds, how fast they move, and what can frighten them. Closed areas were designated for staff only and were closely supervised for the safety of the animals. But there was a limit to what the real squirrels could do, by their nature or in deference to the potential danger of a scene. In those cases, animatronic or CG troops were called in.

Alexander's team of four trainers spent 19 weeks with their lively charges, providing mostly one-on-one attention. Some of the squirrels came from private homes in the United Kingdom, but the majority of them were recruited from local shelters. British law forbids releasing rescued squirrels back into the wild for their own protection. The squirrels that were not returned to their owners when filming wrapped were adopted by Birds & Animals Unlimited, where they will be cared for until possibly called for another job.

While undeniably intelligent and, Alexander attests, "incredibly photogenic," squirrels are notoriously difficult to handle. Independent and unpredictable, "they're not necessarily good at doing specific, intricate things," he says. "They don't like to sit still. They're hard to keep in one place. The first couple of weeks were spent just getting the animals to come out of their crates and sit with us, never mind any of the things they were supposed to do."

Caputo adds, "A squirrel, with its quick thinking and reflexes, can climb, jump, run and hide quicker than you can blink an eye." That is why American Humane ensured special provisions were in place for the safety and comfort of each squirrel.

"Tim wanted to use live squirrels as much as possible," notes Visual Effects Supervisor Nick Davis. "But some actions they are just not physically able to do, for example, throwing nuts over their shoulders. Physiologically, their bodies don't work that way. Our job was to make the CG squirrels as realistic as possible, to interact with humans in a kind of anthropomorphic way and yet remain absolutely true to their animal nature. Squirrels have a unique dynamic energy and that's what attracted Tim. He didn't want to shoot in high-speed or interfere in any way with that natural edge -- that intensity and speed that's utterly charming and can be a bit unnerving."

In addition to the painstakingly rendered CG images, the production enlisted animatronics and prosthetic makeup effects specialist Neal Scanlan of Neal Scanlan Studio, an Oscar winner for his work on *Babe*. Scanlan produced 12 animatronic models, plus some partials attached to hand-held poles. "In most of the shots there will be a live squirrel in the foreground performing an action and several animatronics in the background repeating it," he says. The advantage of animatronics is that they don't mind doing things endlessly and they don't complain; but they're never going to appear as real, so mixing and matching is the way to go."

American Humane applauds Warner Bros. for meeting the needs of animals for their safety. American Humane observed master trainers stretch normal concepts, animals responding in normal boundaries to humans, and a production company providing vision, communication, and participation.

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