

P  **V**

**Community
Engagement &
Education**

DISCUSSION GUIDE



MY DUDUŚ

a film by Tom Krawczyk

www.pbs.org/pov



MY DUDUŚ

My Duduś is a story of a Polish mother with empty-nest syndrome who finds and raises a baby squirrel as if it were her own

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----|---------------------------|
| 2 | Film Summary |
| 3 | Using this Guide |
| 4 | Letter from the Filmmaker |
| 5 | The Film |
| 6 | Definitions |
| 7 | Background Information |
| 13 | Discussion Prompts |
| 15 | Taking Action |
| 16 | Resources |
| 17 | Credits & Acknowledgments |

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *My Duduś* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning the next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

During the summer of 2020, I returned home to Chicago during a break from my studies at the Łódź Film School in Poland. When I got there, my mother quietly walked me into a room where she gently pulled a strange, hairless creature out of a shoe box. It looked as if it had plummeted to earth from another planet.

"He's sleeping," she whispered as she opened the box. A tiny head peeked out from the mountain of towels, blankets and a homemade heating pad made out of a used white sock and rice. "What is that?" I asked. I squinted my eyes as I gently moved the blanket to expose the animal's torso. "Is that a squirrel?" I looked over at her, and even though it was dark, her beaming smile lit up the room. "Yes," she nodded.

My mother had found the baby squirrel abandoned in her yard. She contacted animal shelters nearby, but they were struggling to take in more animals during the Covid pandemic, so my mother began caring for him herself. My intuition told me to pick up a camera. I knew something special was happening. My mother, a Polish immigrant who had raised me by herself, had been dealing with her newly empty nest after I left for school, and I knew the joy that raising the squirrel would bring her.

After returning to Poland, I saw my mother raise him as she raised me—with meticulous love and care. But he was a wild animal, and eventually my mother had to do what all mothers do: let her child go out into the world. In the short documentary, I document their journey together.

Tom Krawczyk



Participants

- Tom Krawczyk - a Chicago and Poland-based photographer and filmmaker
- Czesława Krawczyk-Miczejko - Tom's mother
- Duduś - a gray squirrel
- Louie - a cat

Key Issues

My Duduś is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Mothering and motherhood
- Non-traditional family structures and kinship
- Empty-nest syndrome
- Wild animal rehabilitation
- Human-wildlife interactions
- Speciesism and anthropocentrism

Empty-nest syndrome: the complex emotions that some parents and caregivers feel when their children leave the family home. While this experience can manifest as sadness, anxiety, and loss of purpose, some people might feel excited when thinking about this new period of their lives and discover newfound or lost independence and flexibility.

Kinship network: a social network of formal or informal relationships that are either biological or nonbiological.

Speciesism: prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species.

Anthropocentrism: a philosophical belief that human animals are the most important beings in the world.

Duduś: Polish for *child* or *baby*.

Sources:

American Psychological Association. www.apa.org.

Lamoreux, Karen. "Empty Nest Syndrome." *PsychCentral*, October 29, 2021. <https://psychcentral.com/health/empty-nest-syndrome>.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Implications of Human and Wildlife Interactions

The film *My Duduś* exists in the greater context of and discussion about relationships between humans and wildlife. Whether we live in urban, suburban, or rural environments, we share the land with a community of wildlife, from coyotes and squirrels to raccoons and opossums. Interactions with these creatures are increasing because of issues such as agricultural expansion to meet rising food and energy needs, deforestation, and climate change-related events, such as floods and droughts. In drought-stricken areas, for example, animals are more likely to venture onto private property in search of water. Human-led activities also contribute to significant loss of life (for humans and non-human animals) and reduced eco-diversity. A 2022 report found that since 1970, wildlife populations have decreased by 69%, primarily due to human influence.

The way we view animals also impacts our treatment of and relationships with them. Consider the contrast between human perception of coyotes and human perception of dogs: the former are often condemned, and the latter are exalted. Smaller mammals like rats and squirrels are often seen as dirty or pests. Many cultural, social, and personal factors, including speciesism, shape these perceptions. Indeed, these views can negatively impact how individuals and societies approach animal welfare and population recovery and management.

Despite the negative implications of human-wildlife interactions, if these interactions are handled with respect for animals' natural habitats, they can be beneficial to wildlife management. Research shows that people who observe wild animals may experience improved mental health, wellbeing, and even a sense of happiness. Consider Duduś's human mother, Czesława, who says, "He brings me so much joy, that it's hard to explain." Regular interactions with wild animals can also help people gain a sense of connectedness to the natural world around them, challenging their anthropocentric worldviews and creating opportunities for positive human-wildlife interactions.

Sources:

Castillo-Huitrón, Nathalia M., Eduardo J. Naranjo, Dídac Santos-Fita, and Erin Estrada-Lugo., “The Importance of Human Emotions for Wildlife Conservation.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, no. 1277 (June 24, 2020). doi.10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01277.

Dickie, Gloria. “Global wildlife populations have sunk 69% since 1970-WWF report.” *Reuters*, October 13, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/global-wildlife-populations-have-sunk-69-since-1970-wwf-report-2022-10-12/>.

Skroch, Matt, and David Ellenberger. “New California Law Protects Wildlife Corridors—and a Lot More.” *Pew*, October 20, 2022. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/10/20/new-california-law-protects-wildlife-corridors-and-a-lot-more>.

Sytsma, Mira L. T., Tania Lewis, Beth Gardner, and Laura R. Prugh. “Low levels of outdoor recreation alter wildlife behaviour.” *People and Nature* 4, no. 6 (December 2022): 1547–1559. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10402>.

Yerbury, Rachel M. and Samantha J. Lukey. “Human-Animal Interactions: Expressions of Wellbeing through a ‘Nature Language.’” *Animals (Basel)* 11, no. 4 (March 29, 2021). doi.10.3390/ani11040950.

A Brief History of Squirrels and Humans

Humans have a long and complex history with squirrels, as we do with most animals. In the 1700s and early 1800s, squirrels were considered predators and a threat to crops, similar to wolves and other large mammals. As a result, hunters targeted squirrels and some states even had bounties on their heads. Today, many states still consider tree squirrels game mammals. While there are limits on squirrel hunting, people don’t always adhere to them, as in the case of 16 Missouri hunters in 2021 who killed 471 squirrels over two days. Such large-scale killing of squirrels actually has a negative impact on forest ecosystems. For example, when gray squirrels forage, they find and bury seeds; up to 25% of these seeds get left behind, and as a result, they grow into trees. Without this foraging, these trees wouldn’t grow.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The expansion of U.S. cities was pivotal for the squirrel populations. On the one hand, development led to the destruction of squirrels' natural habitats and populations. On the other hand, from the mid-1800s through the latter part of the century, urban planners introduced squirrels back into urban parks in East Coast cities, with Central Park being a notable example. Bringing squirrels to parks became intertwined with broader ideas about the benefits of bringing nature to people in cities who might not otherwise have access to green space or contact with wildlife. The introduction of squirrels was shown to create mutual benefits. One researcher found that "feeding squirrels becomes adopted as a way of encouraging humane behavior," in adults and children. These interactions also helped people learn how to connect with animals on a deeper emotional level and even build empathy for animals in general.

Sources:

Benson, Etienne. "The Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel in the United States." *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (December 2013): 691-710. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jat353>.

Clark Estes, Adam. "The Fascinating Story of Why U.S. Parks Are Full of Squirrels." *GIZMODO*, December 9, 2013. <https://gizmodo.com/the-fascinating-story-of-why-u-s-parks-are-full-of-squ-1478182563>.

Grenrock, Samantha. "Why should you love squirrels? Here are six reasons." *University of Florida News*, January 17, 2018. <https://news.ufl.edu/articles/2018/01/why-should-you-love-squirrels-here-are-six-reasons.html#:~:text=They%20are%20nature%27s%20gardeners.,of%20nutrients%2C%20and%20burying%20them>.

"Protecting Wildlife." U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. <https://fws.gov/initiative/protecting-wildlife>.

Schorger, A. W. "Squirrels in Early Wisconsin." *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 39 (1949): 195-247. <http://images.library.wisc.edu/WI/EFacs/transactions/WT1947/reference/wi.wt1947.awschorger2.pdf>.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“Squirrel.” *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/squirrel>.

Stahl, Shoshana. “Missouri Department of Conservation finds group overhunting squirrels.” *KY3*, September 22, 2021. <https://www.ky3.com/2021/09/22/missouri-department-conservation-finds-group-overhunting-squirrels/>.

Weisberger, Mindy. “What Can Human Mothers (and Everyone Else) Learn from Animal Moms?” *LIVESCIENCE*, May 12, 2018. <https://www.livescience.com/62548-wild-animal-moms.html>.

Did You Know? Squirrel Facts:

- There are more than 200 squirrel species worldwide. Animals such as marmots, prairie dogs, and chipmunks are included in this breakdown.
- Squirrels are born blind and remain so until they are five to six weeks old.
- Squirrels are known for their big front teeth, which continue to grow throughout the animals’ lives.
- Squirrels are present on every continent except Australia and Antarctica.
- Gray tree squirrels (like Duduś) can live up to six years.
- If you’ve ever seen squirrels in the road, you’ve probably noticed that they tend to wait until the last minute to move or dart back and forth. Scientists think this is a defense instinct whereby squirrels try to confuse prey (or cars) by zigzagging.
- Research from the University of California, Davis ranked squirrels according to four main personality traits: sociability, activity level, aggressiveness, and boldness. These traits may have both positive and negative effects. For example, bold squirrels may better defend their territory, but they also may take more risks around predators.
- Squirrels have fierce mothering instincts. If warranted, a mother squirrel will fight off animals larger than herself, such as dogs, and chew through just about anything, including plastic and metal wires, to get to her young.
- Squirrels don’t mate for life.
- Eastern gray squirrels are sneaky and pretend to bury food, then hide it in their mouths. This kind of behavior was once believed to exist only in primates.
- Gray squirrels can reach speeds of 10 to 15 miles per hour on the ground.

Sources:

Kerlin, Kat. "Personality Matters, Even for Squirrels: Social Skills Give Social Squirrels an Advantage." *UCDavis*, September 10, 2021. <https://www.ucdavis.edu/curiosity/news/personality-matters-even-squirrels-0>.

Lawson, Nancy. "Squirrels: Nature's Real Gardeners." *the humane gardener*, March 22, 2017. <https://www.humanegardener.com/squirrels-natures-real-gardeners/>.

Parental Connection and Kinship Networks

This film invites us to reconsider the image of a mother and think about how maternal relationships can form. Babies of all species emotionally attach to parental figures, a process known as imprinting. Imprinting happens in the first hours after an animal's birth and helps individuals gain context and build a sense of identity. Duduś imprinted on Czesława because she provided care and comfort to him soon after his birth, and she was also the first "animal" he saw, since squirrels are blind for five or six weeks after birth.

For most parents, there comes a time when children leave home. This experience can generate feelings of loss, anxiety, and depression as parents grieve the end of one phase of life. For some, it can be helpful to rediscover who they are as individuals outside of being parents. Others may need to find a new purpose or way to feel needed. It's important to note that empty-nest syndrome centers on the female experience, though it's not exclusive to people who identify as female. Kinship networks can be a helpful support system for families experiencing empty-nest syndrome. According to the scholar Donna Haraway, kinship networks are vital, as they can provide connections and support beyond what may be available from immediate family members, such as partners or siblings. Kinship networks are often formed by people with biological relationships or those related through marriage or adoption. These social groups are also common within the LGBTQ+ community as a form of chosen family. Kinship networks can provide a sense of belonging and safety and even ease emotional and practical burdens, such as doing chores, managing finances, raising children, and addressing loss and grief. New parents can also greatly benefit from the support of people in their kinship networks as parenting can feel overwhelming and isolating.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sources:

Badiani, Feryl, and Avinash Desousa. "The Empty Nest Syndrome: Critical Clinical Considerations." *Indian Journal of Mental Health* 3, no. 2 (June 2016): 135. doi.10.30877/IJMH.3.2.2016.135-142.

Paulson, Steve. "Making Kin: An Interview with Donna Haraway." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 6, 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/making-kin-an-interview-with-donna-haraway/>.

"Who's Your Mama? The Science of Imprinting." *PBS*, November 16, 2012. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/my-life-as-a-turkey-whos-your-mama-the-science-of-imprinting/7367/#:-:text=Imprinting%20refers%20to%20a%20critical,to%20imprint%20onto%20their%20mother.>



The discussion prompts, which follow specific themes of the film, are an invitation to dialogue.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with partners before starting a group discussion.

Warm up:

- What were your initial thoughts/feelings after watching the film?
- What did you think about squirrels before viewing this film? Did this film invite you to think about them differently? If so, how?
- What surprised you the most when watching this film?

Relationships:

- In the beginning of the film, before Duduś's human mother names the squirrel, she refers to him as "it." Does giving an animal a name make you think about them differently?
- Duduś's family or kinship network is a mix of nonbiological relations. Did this film encourage you to think about how you define family?
- Czesława is not Duduś's biological mother, but she says she raised him like her own child. How did this film invite you to reflect on assumptions you/we make about the connections we can form with animals?
- Do you think there is a difference between how a person loves an animal who is a companion and how they love another person?

Going deeper:

- Czesława says that when she found Duduś, she debated whether or not she was doing the right thing by taking him in. What were your thoughts at that moment? Did they change over the course of the film?
- How did this film invite you to consider our responsibility toward wild animals?
- Much of a parent's identity can be wrapped up in caring for another person. If you

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

are a parent, did the film challenge you to think about your own identity as a parent and how it has evolved?

- Think of a time when you had to strike a balance in a relationship between being supportive and letting someone figure things out for themselves. How did you navigate that?
- The film deals with grief, specifically the grief of letting go of a child. Were there any moments when you related to Czesława and her experience of losing her son, Duduś?
- Did this film prompt you to think about a wild animal's right to freedom? If so, how?

Questions for young learners:

- How would you describe Duduś's personality? What made you answer in that way?
- How do you define a mother? What kind of qualities does a mother have?
- Do you think Duduś treats Czesława like a squirrel or a mother or both? Why?
- Think about your own experiences growing up. Do you see any similarities between yourself and Duduś?
- Czesława, Duduś's human mother, says he brings her so much joy. Was there a time in your life when an animal made you feel happy or helped you?
- Think about the different people and animals in Duduś's family. Are there any similarities to your family? Any differences?
- How did this film make you think about what it means to be a family? What did you learn?

Following your discussion of the film, you may choose to invite people to go deeper. Below are suggestions for ways to take action:

Animal Advocacy

Familiarize yourself with what to do if you see an abandoned baby (or adult) wild animal by referring to the resources listed below.

Add the number of your local humane society or wildlife rehabilitation center to your cell phone contacts. The next time you see a wild animal in distress, you can alert trained professionals.

Share information with your community about how to coexist peacefully with different kinds of wildlife. Distribute flyers at local businesses or give a talk at a library or community center.

Encourage your neighbors to create safe wildlife corridors on their property so that animals can move around safely in their habitats without crossing roads.

For parents experiencing symptoms of empty-nest syndrome, use sites such as Meetup.com to find support groups in your area.

Share Your Story

Provide paper and writing utensils. Ask participants to reflect on a time when a non-human animal helped them through a period of loss or grief. If people feel comfortable, ask them to share their stories. Alternatively, or in addition, participants can share their stories on social media and use the hashtag #MyDudus.

ACTIVITY FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Observation

The next time you are outside or in your yard and see a squirrel, take time to stop and observe its behavior. What kinds of activities is it doing? Is it interacting with another squirrel? What do you observe in that interaction?

Time: Five to ten minutes

Below is a list of relevant social movements, nonprofits, and organizations.

[My Duduś](#) - Website for the film.

[Animal Help Now](#) - A website where a user can enter their zipcode to find a list of organizations to call for help with wildlife conflicts or emergencies, such as hurt or orphaned wildlife.

[The Animals' Agenda](#) - A book that explores animals' rights to freedom and peaceful coexistence and how humans affect the lives of animals.

[National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association](#) - A national association for professional rehabilitators that provides free resources to the public.

[North American Tree Squirrels](#) - A book that explores the lives of gray and fox squirrels. It looks at squirrels' habits, habitats, and roles in the forest ecosystem.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*Discussion Guide Writer:*

Rachel Rona Henry is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and editor. She has worked with nonprofits, professional services firms, and startups in the technology sector, public and social sector, DE&I, and healthcare spaces to create content that educates and inspires readers to take action. Her interests include animal rights and welfare, environmental sustainability, and stories that explore people's relationships with the natural world.

*Discussion Guide Producer:*

Courtney B. Cook, Phd | Education Manager, POV

Thanks to all who reviewed this guide:

Natalie Danford, Copyeditor

Jordan Thomas | Education Assistant, POV