

A Help Guide for At-Risk Red-tailed Squirrels in Trinidad and Tobago



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Introduction

This guide is intended for anyone who would like to help Red-tailed Squirrels live healthier and happier lives in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. It has been produced as a collaboration between the Nurture Nature Campaign (www.nurturenaturett.org), the Trinidad and Tobago Veterinary Association (TTVA), the Veterinary Students Association of Trinidad and Tobago (VSATT), and the Exotics Club at the University of the West Indies School of Veterinary Medicine.

We offer you this guide as many Trinbagonian squirrel keepers often unknowingly participate in a harmful wildlife trade spanning the Southern Caribbean. This trade has impacts on the welfare of squirrels and removes an important species in our ecosystems. Though the situation facing our squirrels is difficult, we also know that positive change for squirrels and other wildlife is possible. In fact, since 2021, these and other wild animals have been given legal protection from poor care and abuse under the Animals Act.

If you want to stop participating in the harmful wildlife trade and perhaps even help end the trade, then this guide is for you. As you will learn, any keeper who wants to make a change should first “Get to Know Your Squirrel” and learn how to “Give Short-term Care”. If you are ready, you can even “Be a Squirrel Rescuer” to best support the welfare of your animal.

Get to Know Your Red-Tailed Squirrel

The first step in helping any at-risk Red-tailed Squirrel in captivity is to better get to know the animal. With knowledge comes power. You may be surprised to learn that many keepers do not know that there is a special subspecies of the Red-tailed Squirrel that is endemic to Trinidad and Tobago or that these squirrels may be seen as pests by farmers. You may also find it interesting to learn about squirrels' lives in the wild or how they are unfortunately impacted by the pet wildlife trade.

The Red-tailed Squirrel

Red-tailed Squirrels (*Sciurus granatensis*) are medium-sized tree squirrels normally found in Central and South America. Their range includes northern Costa Rica, southern Venezuela, Columbia, Panama, and Ecuador. They are also found on the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, Margarita, and Barro Colorado.



The colour of these squirrels can vary greatly from one area of the species' range to the next, depending on the environment in which they live. A reddish brown color is typical, but some squirrels have darker skin and may be black or brown.



Map showing the range of the Red-tailed Squirrel in Central and South America. Image credit: The Nurture Nature Campaign.

Their name implies, their tails are red in colour. Their back fur is usually dark orange, but it can also be dull yellow with black speckles or completely black in colour. A stripe can be found on the tails of some Red-tailed Squirrels. Their front fur colour can vary greatly, ranging from a bright orange-rust to white.

There is a subspecies of this squirrel that is endemic to Trinidad, Tobago, and the northern coast of Venezuela: the Trinidadian Red-tailed Squirrel or Chapman's squirrel. This subspecies can be identified by the lack of orange patches behind their ears.

They can be found in a variety of habitats, including tropical forests and croplands. They are terrestrial animals found both on the ground and in trees, though trees are more common.

As far as body weight goes, they range from 228 grams to just over 500 grams. The length of the body can be from 33 cm to 52 cm. The total length



Red-tailed Squirrel climbing a tree. Photo credit: Neil Bowman.

of both male and female squirrels is 33-52 cm, with a tail length of 14-28 cm. Length is an important factor to be aware of when designing an enclosure for them.

Life in the Wild

Red-tailed Squirrels are diurnal animals, meaning they are active during the day. They spend most of their lives above ground on trees. Feeding and travel are examples of daily activities that are done in trees rather than on the ground. They feed approximately 30m above the surface of the ground. Traveling through the forest is accomplished by using tree trunks and vines. Squirrels travel by running along tresses and vines and leaping from one tree to another to get where they want to go.

Normally, Red-tailed Squirrels are solitary and quiet creatures, but they occasionally make several distinct calls and communicate with one another. They make short, hoarse notes when they are scared or sense the presence of predators. They also have distinct vocal mating calls that they use to attract mates. Grunts, chuckles, and squeals are examples of these.

In addition to vocal communication, squirrels also utilise tail gestures - using their tails as communication devices. This is accomplished primarily through tail-flicking. Additionally, this is done to fend off predators.

The home ranges of adult females do not overlap, and females do not come within 10m of each other.

Threats, fights, and attacks may occur if a female feels the need to mark new territory. These squirrels often mark their regular routes with urine. During the breeding season, this is a method of territory marking as well as a method of attracting mates.

Adult females do not feed at the same time or in the same place. This only happens if feeding ranges, such as trees, are very large, allowing the acceptable spatial distance to be maintained. However, an adult male's home ranges overlap with those of other males and females. Where food is plentiful, adult males feed together.

A typical day for Red-tailed Squirrels begins with foraging for food from around sunrise to midday and will continue in the afternoon until sunset. They forage by severing large, decaying tree trunks and vines to reach insect larvae inside. They also gnaw through



the shells of nuts to crack the hard exteriors and feed on the inner seed. When the squirrel takes fruit from the ground, it climbs several meters above the ground to eat. They grasp the fruit with their forepaws and tear the skin off with their incisors by moving their heads up and backward.

There are various ways squirrels build their homes: in a tree fork, near the stem of a conifer, or in a tree hole. They usually use soft hair, moss, and dried grass for building their nests and may share their nests with other squirrels.

Red-tailed Squirrels keep a varied diet, including fruits, hard nuts, twigs, flowers and leaves, tree frog eggs, mushrooms, and fungi. Small insects have also been found to be a favorite food for Red-tailed Squirrels. These squirrels eat crops such as mangoes, avocados, maize, coconuts, and bananas in areas where humans live. Most of the time, they forage for food on the ground and make their way to the trees to consume it. They also search the crowns of trees more than 30m above the ground for food.



Red-tailed Squirrel feeding in the wild.
Photo credit: Barloventomagico.



Red-tailed Squirrels feeding on fruits and nuts.
Photo credit: Gary Leavens (left) and Barloventomagico (right).

It is common for young squirrels to tussle with one another and with their mothers playfully. When traveling, they curl their tails over the back of their mother and hug her neck with their limbs. After the young squirrel is weaned, they stay within a few kilometers of the mother's home range.

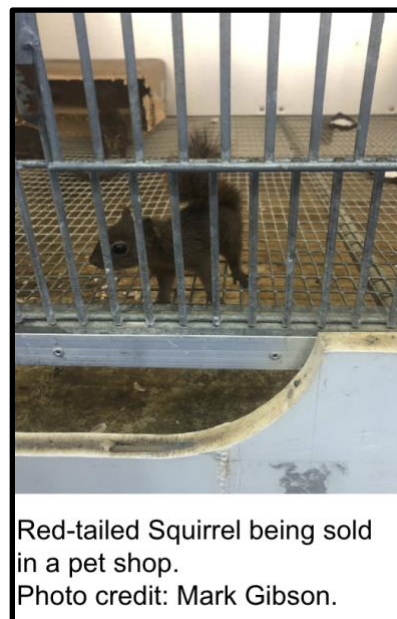
In the wild, Red-tailed Squirrels can face a range of natural and human threats. They are preyed upon by several mammals like Capuchin monkeys, wild cats, and reptiles like tree-dwelling snakes and Boa constrictors that are native to the area. They are also sometimes hunted by farmers, who seek to protect their mangoes, avocados, coconuts, bananas, and other crops.

The Harmful Pet Wildlife Trade

The Red-tailed Squirrel is harmed greatly by the pet wildlife trade in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the Southern Caribbean. Poachers ransack forests in order to trap these squirrels, after which they are crammed into cramped and unsanitary cages or sacks in order to profit from the trade. Many animals are sick, injured, or dead as a result of the experience, and those that survive are often traumatized and suffer from long-term mental health issues.

In Trinidad and Tobago, Red-tailed Squirrels are legally categorized as “vermin,” even as they are native animals and provide important ecosystem services, including seed dispersion. Given this legal status, they are not regulated and are commonly sold in pet shops. However, the legality of selling these animals does not make it right, nor does it justify the harmful negative effects of the trade.

Unfortunately, keeping these animals as pets can cause a wide range of harm. Red-tailed Squirrels have not evolved to want human affection. As a result, they can react badly to being handled, often scratching and biting their keeper. They have teeth that never stop growing, so they must constantly chew or risk dental problems. They do not like messing in their own space and will spray and throw urine and feces out of their cage while dropping unwanted food to the floor. They also require a varied diet which is difficult and expensive to replicate in captivity, so many squirrels end up malnourished and die young.



Red-tailed Squirrel being sold in a pet shop.
Photo credit: Mark Gibson.

Give Short-term Care

The next step in helping a captive, at-risk Red-tailed Squirrel is to ensure that they at least get the minimum necessary care to be healthy and happy in the short term. Unfortunately, in Trinidad and Tobago, many squirrels do not ever receive such basic care, so they can suffer serious traumas, diseases, and early death.

If a keeper wants to do the right thing, we recommend that they pay attention to providing six things in the short-term:

- 1) appropriate caging
- 2) healthy food and water
- 3) regular cleaning and bathing
- 4) mental health support
- 5) safety in the household, and
- 6) veterinary care.

Appropriate Caging/Housing

When building an enclosure for Red-tailed Squirrels, height is the most important dimension to consider. Height gives the squirrels a better sense of security, and it also makes them much calmer, especially when someone approaches or enters the enclosure. Furthermore, because these animals spend the majority of their lives in trees, climbing, and jumping, branches should be placed in their enclosures so they can feel secure.



Appropriate housing for the Red-tailed Squirrel.
Photo credit: zoogiraffe.

It is recommended that a squirrel enclosure should be walled with a 16 gauge 25mm x 25mm welded wire mesh. This can prevent juvenile Red-tailed Squirrels from escaping as well as other small rodents from entering. One or more sides of the enclosure should ideally be solid brick or timber panels covered in wire so that these squirrels can run up and down. The mesh walls should be buried 30 cm into the ground with 25mm x 25mm mesh to prevent predators from entering the enclosure.

The enclosure should have as much natural timber as possible. The timber should be preferably older or partially decayed, because these animals love to tear them apart and this aids in keeping their incisors in check. Horizontal branches or ropes with a diameter of 6 cm can also be used to simulate the terrain they are familiar with. These should be installed in such a way that they do not take up too much room within the enclosure. Using branches from different trees is preferable because it can provide a variety of textures, scents, and tastes; which can be used as a form of enrichment. Hanging baskets and commercial wooden fruit crates in their enclosures can be added to provide platforms where they can groom themselves.

During hot or rainy seasons, you can hang brushwood, an old cloth, or sacks from the roof of the enclosure to keep them dry and protected from the heat.

Wood shavings can be used to cover the flooring of the enclosure, or can be mixed with small pebbles, sand, and leaf litter and placed on concrete ground. This will allow the squirrels to forage, dig, and collect materials for their nesting sites.

Remember to replace branches at least twice a year to provide the squirrels in your care with “new branching”.

Rubber storage boxes are also ideal to make into squirrel boxes. These boxes should have no sharp edges to injure the squirrels and should not be transparent - to keep the stress levels of the squirrels low. If there are no rubber storage boxes available, a cardboard box can also be used. However, it is recommended that regular checking and replacing these cardboard boxes is done as they can become saturated with urine. Remember to not use wire cages as they can cause head, foot, and dental injuries.

For nests, old newspapers covered with white paper towels can be used to line squirrel boxes to absorb urine. The paper towels ensure that the squirrels are not exposed to the ink of the newspaper and can give the keeper an indication if a squirrel is experiencing diarrhea.

To ensure that the container is thoroughly disinfected, all squirrel containers should be cleaned with a diluted bleach solution and dried in the sun.

When the juveniles are weaned and eating well on their own, they should be placed in a large outside cage to acclimate them to the outdoors and the resident squirrel population. Outside cages should never be housed in glass aquariums or plastic containers, as these can quickly heat up and can cause heat stroke. The outside cage

should be made of 12" hardware cloth (wire mesh) over a wooden frame. If you use treated lumber for the cage frame, make sure the wire mesh covers the inside of the cage to keep squirrels from chewing on the treated lumber, which will poison them.

For adult squirrels, the cage should be at least 8 ft X 8 ft X 8 ft in size. For every two squirrels, increase the height or length by 2 ft. The cage also requires a nest box for the squirrels to sleep in. The nest box should be approximately 14 in X 10 in X 10 in with a 3 in hole in the upper front corner (Miller, 2012).

Healthy Food and Water

As a general rule, squirrels should be fed a well-balanced diet. Adult Red-tailed Squirrels eat about 65 percent fruits, nuts, and seeds (Harell, 2012). They may also eat leaves, bark, mushrooms, and flowers.

Sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, peanuts, hazelnuts, walnuts, and pine nuts are among the most common seeds that you can offer. A variety of fruits, vegetables, and fungi can be included with apples, pears, and sliced carrots as mainstays.



Examples of some nuts and seeds that Red-tailed Squirrels can be fed.
Photo credits: Martin Weller (left) and AwakenedEye (right).

Do not feed Red-tailed Squirrels processed foods, Brazil nuts or high-starch foods.

Though daily feeding is recommended, providing food at irregular times is beneficial because it leads to longer periods of activity. Food containers can be stored in two or more locations, preferably within a shelter or open-fronted box to keep the contents dry. Seeds or nuts can be spread across the enclosure's floor or hung from branches or

foliage to encourage foraging. Finding and collecting these food items can become a form of enrichment.

Red-tailed Squirrel Food Groups	Some Good Foods
Fruits	Bananas, coconuts, lime, mangoes, orange papaya, pineapple
Vegetables	Carrots, sweet corn, butternut squash, cucumber, sugar snap peas, celery, spinach, bean sprouts, green beans
Seeds/Nuts	Almonds, pine cones, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, peanuts, hazelnuts, walnuts

Because squirrels exhibit strong foraging behavior, it is difficult to determine their daily food consumption. They may also be seen or heard feeding within the enclosure on days when their food dishes are barely touched. Squirrels may also urinate in their food dishes while eating, therefore it is advisable to replace any uneaten food each day. It is important not to give too much food to avoid it going bad, especially in hot weather.

It may be necessary to hand-rear a baby squirrel in certain circumstances. Every effort should be made to avoid imprinting because, once it has happened, it is difficult to reverse the process. Imprinted squirrels are less likely to be good breeders and make poor candidates for release because of their negative associations. It is recommended that hand-reared squirrels be thoroughly evaluated before they are considered for release because they are at a distinct disadvantage over their wild counterparts.

Recommended Feeding Schedule for Baby Squirrels		
Age	Amount	Interval
0 - 2 weeks	0.5 ml	2 hours
2 - 4 weeks	0.5 - 1 ml	2 - 3 hours
4 - 6 weeks	1 - 2 ml	3 - 4 hours
6 - 8 weeks	2 - 3 ml	4 hours
8 - 10 weeks	4 - 5 ml	5 hours

There are hand-rearing formulas available in pet shops, but you can also use sunflower oil, lactose-free baby powder, calcium, and multivitamins to make a formula at home. Any formula that is given to the baby squirrels must be through a syringe and at body temperature. A 0.3 cc syringe can be used for babies up to 4 weeks old, progressing to a 1 cc syringe later on. At weaning, this formula is mixed with liquidized fruit in order for them to transition to a solid diet.

For lactating female squirrels and newly weaned squirrels, you can provide antler, sterile animal bone, and/or cuttlefish shell as a source of calcium.

It is important to provide squirrels constant access to fresh, clean drinking water. Pet drinking bottles, shallow stainless steel containers or ceramic pots are recommended to be used as these are easy to clean.

Regular Cleaning and Bathing

When it comes to the care of captive squirrels, hygiene is crucial. The removal and replacement of branches and ground surface substrate in cages are largely dependent on the situation. Large natural enclosures may only require cleaning once a month, whereas smaller units may require cleaning on a more regular basis. This is to prevent any build-up of mold, bacteria, nematode eggs, and other pests that may cause harm to the squirrels.

It is recommended that nest boxes be cleaned and contents replaced on a weekly basis, taking into account the rate of soiling and weather conditions in the area. Flea powder can be applied to the boxes in cases of infestation.

Dish detergents can be used to wash food and water bowls, provided that they are rinsed thoroughly. Be wary of using strong chemicals to clean or disinfect cages. Fumes from these chemicals can cause respiratory problems for squirrels.

Red-tailed Squirrels are capable of grooming themselves and other squirrels to keep their fur clean. Rubbing, scratching, licking, and lightly gnawing are all examples of grooming techniques. The most common instances of social grooming occur between siblings.

Mental Health Support

'Gyms' can be constructed to provide exercise and problem-solving tasks for the squirrels in your care. One option is to provide different perches and hanging areas for the squirrels to explore. Another option is to create a "mobile" suspended from the roof of the enclosure made from short chains and natural branches. There should be places where food can be attached to the mobile. This enrichment can aid in exhibiting the squirrel's natural foraging behavior.

Constructing a swing made from branches attached at either end of a rope provides swinging movement to improve the balance and dexterity of Red-tailed Squirrels. Natural rope of varying lengths can also be hung from the roof, with food items inserted into the fibers of the rope. This will prolong the feeding time and increase the dexterity needed from the squirrels.

Squirrels will regularly use a wheel that is larger in size but otherwise similar to those used by hamsters if one is provided for them. Ideally, a 45cm diameter and a wheel track with a width of approximately 10cm are used in conjunction. When taking measurements, care should be taken to ensure that the squirrel's back is not put under any strain while running.



Safety in the Household

Squirrels are known to be carriers of several diseases, and Red-tailed Squirrels are no exception. It is possible for them to remain asymptomatic even while carrying the disease, meaning they may not exhibit any signs or symptoms of illness. The importance of maintaining good hygiene should always be a priority when handling any squirrel. Hands should be thoroughly washed with soap and running water after handling Red-tailed Squirrels or items from their enclosure.

Squirrels panic when confronted by humans in a new environment, and they may attack by biting or scratching if they feel threatened. Some people are not concerned about an animal of that size attacking them, but you should think twice. They are a high-energy,

destructive species. They are bigger than most pet rodents, and they do not have a long history of domestication. As a result, they can cause serious bites and scratches.

Along with other squirrel species, Red-tailed Squirrels are notoriously difficult to contain. They are strong and persistent, and their size and natural tendency for roaming require a large area to keep them healthy and happy. If they do not have it, they will focus their energy on destruction, and they will be able to break out of even the most unbreakable cages. Squirrels will eagerly seek to exercise their natural instincts once they are free of their cages. They can cause damage to your home due to their chewing habits. Climbing with their long claws can cause holes and damage to many things in your home.

Most importantly, squirrels are wild animals that lack the same sense of affection and bonding with humans that domestic animals have developed over generations. As a result, they are more likely to bite you, other household members, and even pets. This makes them potentially dangerous to have around.

For appropriate short-term care, special attention should be paid to minimizing these risks. A household environment must be made clear of any furniture or material a squirrel can damage when it is let loose out of its cage. It is possible for a captive Red-tailed Squirrel to leave the house without you knowing and cause more damage or spread diseases in the neighborhood.

Veterinary Care

An essential element of short-term care is that a veterinary expert be consulted. It is very easy for keepers to make mistakes that harm their squirrels or even cause them to die. Therefore, all keepers should have a professional check their practices.

A first meeting with a veterinarian would include a physical examination, a discussion on appropriate care practices, and additional laboratory testing if there are signs of problems. Importantly, a veterinarian can detect specific diseases like chlamydiosis and parasites like roundworms and tapeworms. Also, by getting to know a veterinarian now, you will be ready to act if anything happens, like a physical injury or sudden illness.

Unfortunately, squirrels are known to carry and suffer from a variety of diseases. Aside from parasites, leptospirosis, salmonellosis, rabies, tularemia, typhus, plague, and ringworm are some of the more common diseases that they can pass on to humans. Bite wounds or other forms of direct contact with infected squirrels can spread these diseases to other squirrels and humans.

Common Diseases and Medical Problems in Red-tailed Squirrels	
Squirrel Pox	Squirrels with this disease can develop tumors all over their bodies which are large or small. Most squirrels infected with the virus are young. Squirrels infected with the disease frequently become lethargic as the disease progresses. As a general rule, squirrels that are naturally infected do not show any signs of being sick except for the tumors on their skin. (DNR, n.d.)
Rabies	This fatal disease is contracted after exposure to the saliva of an infected animal, usually after a bite or contact with an open wound or mucus membrane like eyes, nose or mouth. At this point, the virus will travel up to the brain where it will multiply and cause inflammation. Common symptoms include: lethargy, fever, vomiting, overt aggression, and excessive salivation.
Malocclusion	Like all rodents, squirrels continue to grow their teeth throughout their lives. A wild squirrel's teeth wear away by chewing on hard objects. In captivity, a misalignment of the incisors known as malocclusion can occur, such as when the squirrel has an overbite, underbite, or the teeth are in the wrong position. Teeth that do not line up will continue to grow and eventually kill the squirrel.
Mange	Mange is a skin disease caused by mites. The skin becomes inflamed and irritated, and the hair becomes sparse. A thick, odorous crust forms over the affected areas. Blindness, hearing loss, and eating difficulties can all result from changes in the skin around the eyes, ears, and mouth. Large areas of the body may become hairless.

Be a Squirrel Rescuer

A third and most important final step in helping a captive Red-tailed Squirrel is to start supporting this animal's long-term well-being and that of other parrots. Our advice at the Nurture Nature Campaign is that you consider becoming a "squirrel rescuer" by taking three specific actions.

Action #1: Don't Release This Animal

Do not release this animal into the wild if you think you can no longer care for it. Captive Red-tailed Squirrels typically require special rehabilitation if they are to be returned to the wild and survive there. This rehabilitation includes teaching the animal to forage and interact with its own species and sometimes many months of training to improve their fitness.

Action #2: Relinquish, or Give Long-term Care

If you are truly committed to giving this animal the best long-term quality of life, you have only two meaningful options.

Option 1 is to relinquish your squirrel to a rehabilitation centre, of which there are several in Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, two of our NGO coalition members are wildlife rehabilitation centres: the El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation in Trinidad and Corbin Local Wildlife Park in Tobago.

Location	Rehabilitation Centre	Phone	Website
Trinidad	El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation	+1 868-366-4369	www.wildliferescuett.org
Tobago	Corbin Local Wildlife Park	+1 868-327-4182	www.tobagowildlife.org

Option 2 is to commit to high-quality, long-term care for the at-risk squirrel now in your home. Appropriate long-term care would require that you establish a care plan with a veterinarian and that you construct a large enclosure to let the animal climb, forage, and move about.

Action #3: Stop Buying Wild Animals

The best way to do justice to your Red-tailed Squirrel is to make sure that other squirrels like it are never again harmed by the wildlife trade. For every squirrel that survives the uncaring trade, many more will have suffered terribly and died unnaturally young. To stop the trade, you must commit yourself to stop buying wild-caught Red-tailed Squirrels.

If you still would like to have a pet animal, we recommend you consider adopting one of the many incredible dogs and cats now available at shelters across the country. You can contact your nearest shelter by consulting the following table.

Location	Organisation/Shelter	Contact
Trinidad	Animal Welfare Network (AWN)	Phone: +1 868-269-4296 Facebook Direct Message: @AnimalWelfareNetwork
	Animals 360 Foundation	Phone: +1 868-364-7729 Facebook Direct Message: @animals360foundation
	Animals Alive	Phone: +1 868-709-1151 Facebook Direct Message: @AnimalsAliveTT
	Trinidad and Tobago Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TTSPCA)	Phone: +1 868-622-1367 +1 868-628-1615
Tobago	Trinidad and Tobago Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TTSPCA)	Phone: +1 868-639-2567
	Venus Doggess of Love	Email: venusdoggessofoflove@gmail.com Facebook Direct Message: @VenusDoggessOfLove

Conclusion

In closing, there are many ways that you can help at-risk Red-tailed Squirrels in Trinidad and Tobago.

You can get to know your squirrel better and appreciate how it is an important part of our natural world or how so many squirrels have been harmfully taken from the wild. Few people realise that many squirrels live tragically short lives in captivity as a result of poor care.

You can learn about appropriate short-term care practices to ensure that your own squirrel is free from any immediate danger. As you may have learned, caring for squirrels is complicated and involves many considerations, from providing caging and nutrition to cleaning and mental health support to special safety precautions and veterinary care.

You can also become a squirrel rescuer by taking the best steps for your animal's long-term welfare. This includes seeing that the squirrel receives proper care by establishing a long-term care plan with a veterinarian. You can also make sure you will never again support the harmful trade in squirrels by following one simple rule: Don't Buy Wild!

Finally, if you have any remaining questions, we welcome you to contact the Nurture Nature Campaign on Facebook or Instagram, by email (nurturenaturett@gmail.com), or through our website (www.nurturenaturett.org).

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