

The Animals Behind Power Outages

THE ATLANTIC, *MATT VASILOGAMBROS*, JUN 9, 2016

The monkey that caused a nationwide power outage in Kenya on Tuesday is one of many animals to sabotage electrical grids.



Kenya was left without power for more than three hours Tuesday—not because of a fierce storm or technical glitch, but because of a monkey.

Despite an electrical fence at the Gitaru Power Station, there to keep wild animals away, a vervet monkey was able to climb onto the roof of the hydroelectric plant. The monkey then either jumped or fell onto a transformer, which tripped (a circuit opened and stopped the conduction of electricity) and caused a chain of trips that led to the nationwide blackout. The power outage even knocked out internet service and disrupted several business operations, the BBC [reports](#).

The Kenya Electricity Generation Company (KenGen), which runs the plant, called the incident isolated and said its facilities “are secured by electric fencing which keeps away marauding wild animals.” Despite its dramatic ordeal, the monkey survived and was taken into custody by the Kenya Wildlife Service. As *The New York Times* [reports](#), this species of monkey is known for its curiosity and troublemaking:

Vervet monkeys, which are usually about two feet long, not including the tail, can be pesky creatures. They can be seen everywhere in Kenya, and they often travel in packs, scampering along power lines, snacking on mangos in backyards and even sneaking into kitchens through open windows to pinch a banana or two.

Power outages as a result of furry creatures is quite commonplace around the world, including in the United States. The May outage that knocked out power for 40,000 people in Seattle **was caused** by a raccoon getting into an electrical substation. Another raccoon **caused** a power outage later that month in Colorado Springs, affecting 5,600 people for nearly an hour.

The most common foe to power grids, though, may be the squirrel. In February, a squirrel **caused** 5,400 people in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to lose their power when it got into a substation. Squirrels are so troublesome for power grids that a website called Cyber Squirrel 1 **has documented** all the power outages from our bushy friends. And it's been a consistent problem for decades, as *The New York Times* **wrote** in 2013:

Matthew Olearczyk, a program manager with the Electric Power Research Institute, explains that typically a squirrel will cause a blackout by scampering across electrical equipment and touching simultaneously both an energized component, like one of the cylindrical transformers at the top of a utility pole, and a grounded piece of equipment. The squirrel completes the circuit, generating an arc. There is an instantaneous flash of blue light. At its center is the squirrel, combusting. (In one news story, the squirrel was said to make a “popping sound” when it ignited.)

And it's not just furry creatures, either. Snakes **caused** two power outages recently in Rock Hill, South Carolina, leaving more than 6,000 residents without power. On Wednesday, a starling **disconnected** a transformer in downtown Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, killing the bird and leaving several businesses in the dark. And in South Bend, Indiana, a goose **shorted** an electrical line in May and knocked out power for two local schools. These animal antics were restricted to smaller regions. The monkey business in Kenya, however, affected the entire country. In response, KenGen said this week it is “looking at ways of further enhancing security at all our power plants.”