

Squirrel hunting provides opportunity to return to basics

For many hunters, the allure began with squirrels. A glimpse of rusty brown and gray spiraling up a red oak or an erratic rustling of leaves followed by the unmistakable crack of an acorn shell. Squirrel hunting brands lifelong impressions into a hunter's senses.

This fall has the potential to rekindle squirrel memories, or create new ones, even though Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) biologists suggest the upcoming squirrel hunting season for most of East Texas will be average at best.

"We're probably never going to see hunting like it once was when hunters had access to a vast acreage of mature hardwood forests," explained Jasper-based TPW biologist Clayton Wolf. "Much of the mature hardwood and hardwood-pine forest have been converted to pine, but in areas that still have hardwoods, hunters would be able to find enough squirrels for a few enjoyable hunts."

Research over the year has confirmed what most squirrel hunters have known from field experience: more acorns mean more squirrels. "Last year's acorn crop was pretty poor," Wolf says, "and

historical data has shown us that when we have a poor acorn crop, the squirrel harvest will be down the following year." Acorns or not, it would be difficult to surpass last year's estimated squirrel harvest of almost 544,000, highest since 1994. However, TPW mast surveys indicate that the acorn crop for this fall should be much improved, meaning more squirrels next year.

While their ranks may be less than half what they were 20 year ago, the 100,000 who make up Texas' squirrel-hunting population remain ardent. Last year's 88% success rate among squirrel hunters surveyed was the highest on record.

TPW manages more than 800,000 acres in East Texas, available for squirrel hunting through the agency's Public Hunting Lands program. With a \$40 Annual Public Hunting Permit, which may be purchased wherever hunting licenses are sold, hunters can access the area during designated seasons. Youth under 17 years of age are not required to purchase a permit, but must have a \$6 Special Resident Hunting License and be accompanied by a permitted adult.

"Even if you don't have access to prime squirrel habitat on private land, squirrel hunters in East Texas can find ample opportunities on public land," Wolf said. "Most of the national forest areas and the wildlife management areas managed by Parks and Wildlife in East Texas offer quality squirrel hunting."

There are two species of squirrel in East Texas—the gray squirrel (or cat squirrel) and the fox squirrel. The fox squirrel has the widest range and can be found along creek and river bottoms throughout much of Texas. Ideal fox squirrel habitat in East Texas is mature mixed pine and hardwood forests.

Cat squirrels are limited to the eastern portion of Texas and can be found in abundance in mature

stands of hardwoods. They tend to be early risers, so hunters working the bottoms for cat squirrels should plan on getting afield early to catch the cats in action. Fox squirrels, on the other hand, tend to forage later in the mornings. And, according to Wolf, you don't necessarily have to be in prime bottomland hardwoods to get in the squirrels. Although squirrels do the best in habitats dominated by mature hardwoods, squirrels can exist in a variety of wooded habitats. This means even an enjoyable day in the woods may be as close as your neighbor's woodlot, with their permission of course.

During the first month or so of squirrel season while the leaves are still on the trees, most hunters

prefer to use shotguns loaded with No. 6 or No. 4 shot, but the serious hunter may opt for a .22 rimfire rifle.

"Unlike hunting many other game species, which require a higher level of patience and skill, squirrel hunting success can be achieved at a casual pace," said Wolf. "That's what makes it an ideal pursuit for young people and newcomers to hunting. It's a great way to pass along the hunting tradition."

Squirrel season runs through Jan. 15 in most counties having a squirrel season, and the daily bag limit is 10. Refer to hunting regulations in the 1999-2000 TPW Outdoor Annual for specific bag limits and season dates for squirrel hunting in your area.

With deer, best scent is no scent

It has often been said that the best scent in deer hunting is no scent. A hint of truth rings true, but there is also a time and place for cover scents, urines and scrape products in deer hunting.

For hunting scents to be effective,

they must be used in a manner that prevents it from being contaminated with human.

Before any scent product can be effective, human odor must be, at the very least, managed.

Store in a plastic bag to prevent unwanted odors from collecting on your clothing.

Clothing picks up odors quickly so hunting clothes should only be worn in the field.

Playing the wind

One of the most effective ways of controlling scent is to make sure the wind carries human odor away from the area that deer are expected to approach. A hunter should be conscious of wind direction.

Scent-blocking products

These products are designed to destroy human scent on clothing and bodies by killing the bacteria that causes human body odor.

Many versions of these products are available; like clothes washes, hair and body soap, underarm deodorant, bar soap, body bath and body gels.

Using these products in various combinations allows a hunter to reduce human odor at the source and on clothing.

Laundry clothing in scent-control product, then hang them outside to prevent household odors from contaminating them.

Cover scents

Cover scents are designed to mask or hide human odor.

The most common are animal urines but natural plant oils are also available.

Deer have a sense of smell approximately 400 times more acute than our own, which makes it a safe bet that they can smell more than one scent at a time.

Rubber boots

A simple piece of hunting equipment provides a foolproof scent control. A must have for serious deer hunters, rubber completely blocks the transfer of human odor.

Knee-high rubber boots with pant legs tucked inside represents the minimum protection. Non-insulated and insulated boots are available for early and late-season hunting.

(See Scent, Page 19)



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