



set your sights on...

BAGGING a BUSHYTAIL

Surprisingly challenging, squirrel hunting can be a great introduction for kids — and a welcome chance to sharpen your skills for the season.

BY SEAN WILLIAMSON AND JANE VACHON

Crafty eyes watch from the branches above as you tread quietly down a faint game trail, trying your best to keep twigs from snapping underfoot. You stop at a sturdy tree trunk and settle against it, shotgun ready on the crook of your arm. The volume of twittering of chickadees

and nuthatches picks up, and you scan the trees for a swishing branch or the telltale silhouette of a fuzzy tail. A rustle of leaves across the clearing snaps you to attention, and suddenly you're face to face with your quarry — a large gray squirrel. You lift your gun, he's gone, as if by magic.

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When alerted by an intruder, the eastern gray squirrel will often freeze in place, blending in with its surroundings. This makes a pair of binoculars a must for the serious squirrel hunter.

The scritch-scratch of his claws taunts you as he scampers up the back side of a large oak and leaps to safety in the canopy overhead with the ease and abandon of a trapeze artist.

One thing is for sure — hunting wild squirrels is no walk in the park.

You settle back against the tree, but not for long. As clever as they are, the squirrel's relatives will soon forget you're there and reveal their presence with the crack of a nut or a scurrying foray to the irresistible feast of the forest floor. With an abundance of squirrels in New Hampshire and very few people hunting them, heading out to bag a bushytail is a sure bet for nonstop action.

Appeal for Young Hunters

Comfortable early fall weather and frequent game sightings make squirrel hunting a great activity for introducing kids to hunting. This time-honored training opportunity is a great chance for kids to hone their hunting skills at the same time they develop their powers of observation as budding naturalists. A lengthened season in New Hampshire now starts September 1, when the bugs are for the most part gone and temperatures can be downright balmy, both making for a pleasant time sitting in the woods. Comfort really counts when introducing a youth to the hunting experience, as does a taste of success.

While the southern portions of the state offer the best squirrel hunting, a new wildlife management unit, WMU C2, is also open to squirrel hunting this year. Because squirrels are relatively plentiful — and on the increase — in southern New Hampshire, there's a high likelihood for squirrel hunters to experience success.

That promise can be elusive, though. "You see

a lot of squirrels — and you miss a lot, too," says Scott Kittredge, of Barrington, who has taken his thirteen-year-old stepson, Chris Morganelli, squirrel hunting for the past two years. "Hitting them isn't easy, because they don't stay still very long. We might see ten squirrels for every one we shoot, but it's all part of the action."

Kittredge first took Chris squirrel hunting, when he was 11. That year, he saw squirrels, but didn't bring home a bushytail. Last year, Chris finally succeeded in shooting a big gray with his single-shot 22 rifle. Chris now has the tail of his squirrel proudly displayed in his room, right next to the tail of a deer he shot in Pennsylvania.

Kittredge keeps Chris interested in hunting by recognizing the limits of kids' patience. "I try to make it something that's

not going to be boring," he says. "Squirrel hunting fits the bill perfectly. There's plenty of quarry to be found, and they're quick and smart — just as smart as a deer. These aren't your tame squirrels in the park — they're wild and not easy to outwit."

Another plus of squirrel hunting is that most people in the southern half of the state don't have to go far to find prime squirrel-hunting territory. Kittredge and Chris walk down to a site they've scouted out, a stand of oak trees sandwiched between cornfields and a local river. "It's our spot," says Kittredge. "Chris loves it. He's eager to go, especially right after school."

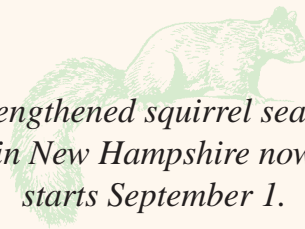
Make it a Safe Shot

You don't need a lot of fancy equipment for squirrel hunting, either. "All you need is a handful of shells and some

patience," Kittredge says. Some squirrel hunters use game calls, not to attract squirrels, but to trick them into giving away their locations. For the serious squirrel hunter, a good pair of binoculars is a must. Once alerted to danger, a squirrel will often lie along the top of a branch, peering down. Scanning the tree with binoculars, you may detect its fluffy tail caught by a slight breeze. A .22 with a good scope could come in really handy in this situation!

When you get a bushytail in your sights, wait for the squirrel to present a safe shot. If using a .22, this means having a good backstop — a tree trunk or the ground — and knowing what lies beyond your target. (NEVER use a .22 or other rifle to take a shot at a squirrel in the upper branches with only the sky beyond. A common .22 long-rifle bullet can travel 1.5 miles before coming back to earth.)

A lengthened squirrel season in New Hampshire now starts September 1.




Because of these safety concerns, a shotgun is the best option for squirrel hunting, especially for youth and those with limited shooting experience. A good choice is a 20 gauge with a modified or full-choke number with a load of #5 or 6 shot.

Also keep in mind that squirrel hunters share the woods with archery hunters, who often have stands up in the trees where the squirrels are. When you hear a sound in the trees, always assume it is a human and identify your target from “tip to tail” before firing.

Great Action – Great Eating

After you shoot a squirrel, cleaning it is not as overwhelming an experience for a new hunter as cleaning a deer can be, and you won’t need help to get your game out of the woods. Even if you’re lucky enough to get more than one (the daily limit is five), they’ll fit nicely into the game bag of your hunting vest or coat.

Once you get home, head straight for the kitchen, because squirrels make great eating. Kittredge’s favorite recipe is a simple one — just remove all the bones and boil up the meat with a soup-starter mix for a delicious squirrel stew. Another variation: toss the meat in a crockpot with potatoes, carrots and onions and let it simmer. Most young hunters will get a real kick out of bringing home the meat for the family supper.

For exciting action and close-to-home convenience, it’s tough to beat going after gray squirrels to get a kid interested in hunting. With the early start of the squirrel season this year, experienced hunters can take advantage of a chance to pass on the tradition at the same time they sharpen up their own shooting, still-hunting and stalking skills for the upcoming deer hunt — or at the very least enjoy a sunny afternoon under an oak tree. 



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There is no closed season on the smaller, highly vocal red squirrel (right), but a license is required to hunt them. Red squirrels are not generally sought after by hunters because they offer such a small amount of meat with a strong pine flavor because of their diet.

Try these tips for squirrel-hunting success:

- ✦ The best times to hunt squirrel are just after sunup or late afternoon.
- ✦ Scout the area. Squirrels are creatures of the mast trees — oaks and beech — and cornfields.
- ✦ Good things come to those who wait. Once you enter the woods, the squirrels will know you are there; if you sit quietly, they will forget you’re there and resume their normal behavior.
- ✦ If a squirrel hides on the other side of a tree, toss your hat behind the tree to flush it into view.
- ✦ Always make a quick, clean kill. The heart-lung shot is best for deer, bear or moose, because it is the largest kill zone. It is also a good choice for a squirrel, but if you are using a .22 or larger bullet, you may lose a substantial amount of meat, depending on the angle of entry and exit of the bullet. While the head shot isn’t recommended for deer, it is the best shot for squirrels.
- ✦ Always wear blaze orange when squirrel hunting.

The 2004 New Hampshire gray squirrel hunting season runs from September 1 through December 31. Bag limit is 5 per day; no season limit. No hunting is allowed in WMUs A, B, C1 or in parks and cemeteries.

