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.

continued on next page

Sean Williamson is a hunter education coordinator for Fish and Game and manages the Owl Brook Hunter Education Center in Holderness. Jane Vachon is associate editor of New Hampshire Wildlife Journal.
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.)
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.

Try these tips for squirrel-hunting success:

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- 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.
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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.
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