

SQUIRREL HUNTING

BY BRIAN BARGER



Cautiously, quietly, I move through the timber, deftly dodging the cobwebs glistening in the morning light. Straining to see through the thick branches ahead, I stop to load my trusty double-barrel .410 and breathe in the sweet fragrance of green walnut.

Nearby, a bubbling creek blends with the songs of many birds to create a symphony like no other. Listening to its soothing rhythm, I glimpse movement in the distance. Looking closer, I see bouncing leaves breaking the sun's golden rays like a strobe. This is what I am looking for, a sure-tell sign of my quarry. Then they appear. Two eastern gray squirrels chase each other through the trees, both trying to keep the other from gathering its food.

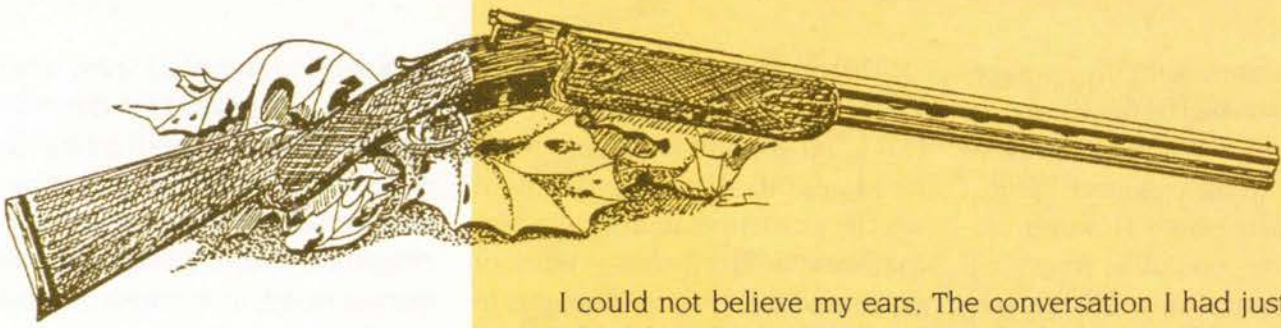
I survey the area and quickly pick out a trail of trees to hide my approach. At the end of this trail

lies a large fallen log near their position. The log is my goal. If I reach it without alarming the squirrels, I will have a chance. A quick glance at the bouncing limbs tells me they're still there.

I approach carefully and methodically, taking care to keep large trunks between us at all times. By the time I reach the log, the squirrels are gone. The surrounding woods are dead still, as if I am the only creature present among the trees. Trusting instinct, I sit down on the log, knowing time and patience is all it will take before the woods come alive once more.

As I sit quietly, my mind wanders to past hunts, and the image of my first squirrel hunt plays before me. Though it was long ago, I feel as if I have been transported back to that special hickory grove on my grandparents' place.

Other hunts dance across the insides of my closed eyelids. I feel



blessed that I can enjoy the Lord's creation in such a manner, and I wonder why more sportsmen do not do the same. This is a great sport to enjoy alone or with others, and for youngsters never experiencing the outdoors, the sport of squirrel hunting offers them a great way to start. After all, squirrel season is the longest of the Oklahoma hunting seasons. Beginning May 15, and running through January 31, it offers the flexibility to enjoy a hunt in Oklahoma's outdoors during your favorite time of year. It may be in late spring among blooming wildflowers, during the heat of summer, surrounded by Oklahoma's beautiful fall splendor, or amid the somber setting of winter.

Liberal limits offer hunters additional flexibility. You may want to make several trips throughout the year, taking only a couple of animals each trip. On the other hand, a combined daily bag limit of 10 fox and gray squirrels will allow you to stock the freezer even if you can only make one trip a year.

Places to hunt are unlimited, as well. Whether hunting on private property

I could not believe my ears. The conversation I had just overheard made me wonder where the hunting tradition is headed.

It happened at a local sporting goods store last fall. I was standing in line behind a young man I thought to be about 13 years old. Another man was at the counter in front of him, purchasing his hunting license. I had presumed they were together until they began talking.

The young man asked the other gentleman if he was headed out to do some deer hunting.

I was amazed at the dumbfounded expression which came across the young man's face as the older gentleman turned and said, "Nope, squirrel hunting."

Even more amazing was the young man's inquiry. "Why would you want to chase around a little squirrel when you could hunt deer," he asked.

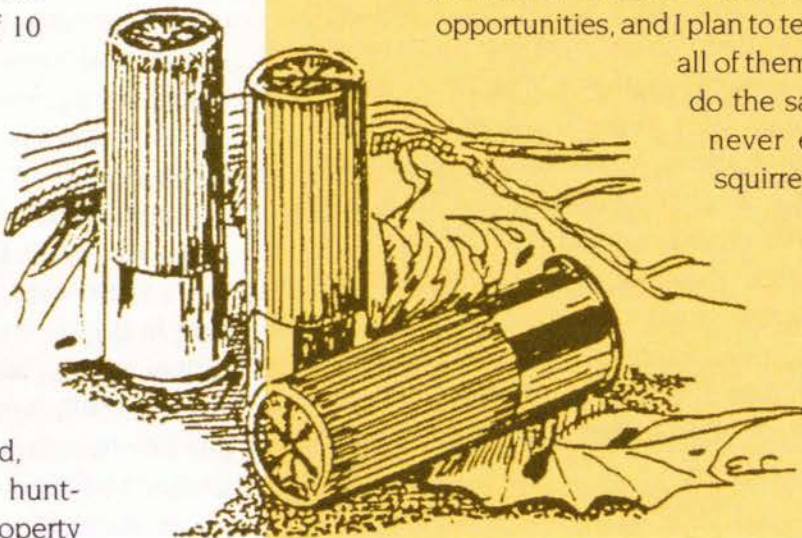
Obviously, the youngster had never been squirrel hunting. Hunting squirrels and other small game is how I and many others started out, and many of those hunts were also my most enjoyable. They helped form my hunting heritage as I slowly progressed to hunting big game such as deer and turkey, and even now I hunt small game as often as I deer hunt.

Unfortunately, this young man represents a new generation of Oklahoma hunters; hunters who start out deer hunting, and all too often, only hunt nine days out of the year during deer gun season. Is this where our hunting tradition is headed? I certainly hope not.

Oklahoma is blessed with an abundance of hunting opportunities, and I plan to teach my children about all of them. I hope other parents do the same. Those who have never experienced a good squirrel hunt don't know what

they're missing. Next time I'm in that situation, I'm going to invite that young man – and the older gentleman, too – to come hunting with me. ■

— Brian Barger



or on the many wildlife management areas owned by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, you can find squirrels almost anywhere in the state. However, seasons may vary on public areas, so if you're planning a trip to a WMA, consult the regulations for the specific area you intend to hunt. Regardless, squirrel hunting is simple and easy, but there are still some things to consider, such as proper attire.

I recommend wearing camouflage clothing if you have it, but jeans and a T-shirt are all you really need. Avoid abrupt movement which can alarm squirrels into hiding. Wear a dark T-shirt – black or gray – and keep your movements to a minimum. Tuck in shirttails and trouser cuffs to reduce the number of areas where ticks and other insects can enter.

Speaking of insects, it is a good

idea to bring some bug spray along. Winter hunts may not require this accessory, but anyone hunting during other times of the year should prepare to encounter mosquitoes, chiggers and ticks. Swatting at mosquitoes makes ambushing or sneaking up on a squirrel very difficult.

Squirrel season overlaps both deer muzzleloader and rifle seasons. During these periods, squirrel hunters are required to wear either a blaze orange hat or blaze orange upper garment. You may have to fine-tune your tactics while wearing blaze orange, but with a little practice, you can sit still enough to ambush a squirrel.

Wardrobe aside, a hunter also needs proper armament. A quick glance at the *Oklahoma Hunting Regulations* shows there are many options. A hunter may use anything from a hand propelled missile (also known as a slingshot), to a variety of rifles and shotguns. Most squirrel hunters prefer either a small gauge shotgun, with size 6 to 8 shot, or a .22-caliber rifle.

If you choose a .22, you may wish to use one fitted with a scope. This is a nice option, but it isn't necessary. Hunters can become very proficient shooting any rifle with open sights by spending time at the range, and shotgunners should spend time patterning their shotgun to determine effective ranges for clean kills.

Safety is always important on the range and in the field. Start by taking a hunter safety course. Many people do not realize it, but a .22 caliber rifle bullet can travel more than one mile. Squirrel hunting usually involves shooting skyward, so always be aware of what is down-range. Watch for other hunters, and

OKLAHOMA'S SQUIRRELS

Oklahoma is blessed with a rich diversity of wildlife, including two species of squirrels. The eastern fox squirrel and the eastern gray squirrel both live within Oklahoma's borders. Here is a closer look at each.

The eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is about 18 inches long, including its small bushy tail which accounts for about half its length. Its upper body and sides are reddish orange to gray in color and it is white underneath. Gray squirrels live in the eastern half of the state.

They prefer timber with thick underbrush. They live up to five years and are very active, especially early in the morning. If a gray squirrel is alarmed, it gives a series of barks before trying to escape through the tree canopy.

The eastern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) can be found in open woodlands across the state. Reddish-gray on top and orange underneath, this squirrel can reach lengths of 28 inches or more. The fox squirrel often appears later in the morning and is not as active as the eastern gray squirrel. Many times a very bushy tail flicking in the sunlight is all that alerts you to a fox squirrel's presence. They live up to six years and are much less vocal, preferring to hide behind a tree trunk before escaping across the ground to another tree when alarmed.

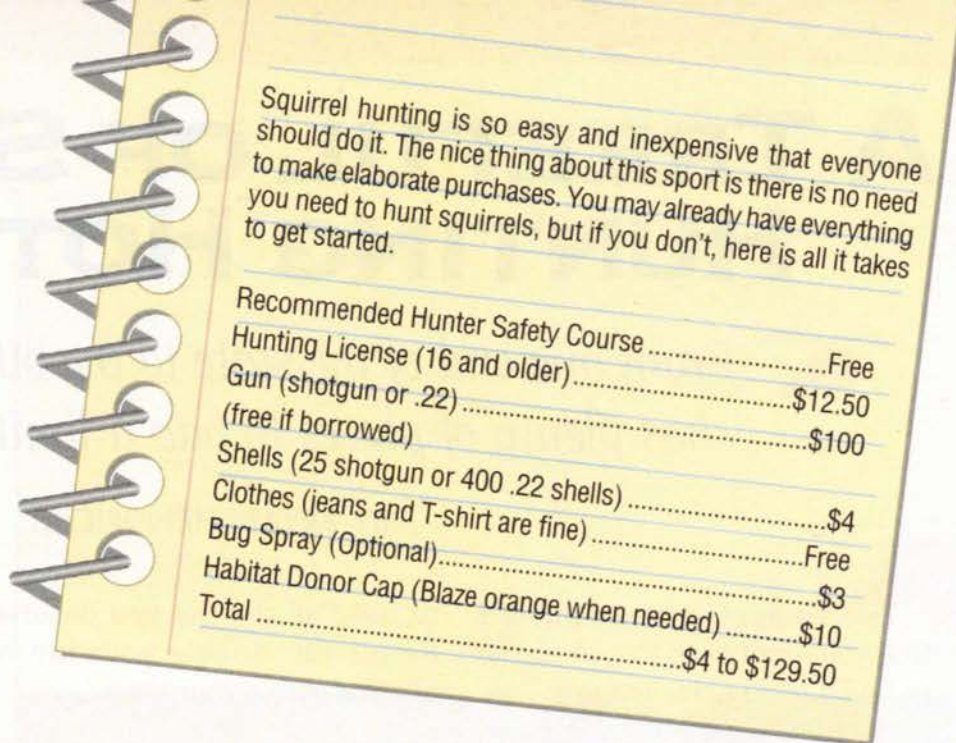
Both species eat pecans, hickory nuts, acorns, walnuts, mulberries, mushrooms, buds and seeds. When these foods are not readily available squirrels often switch over to crops such as corn and milo. 🌱 — Brian Barger

have a good backstop behind your target before shooting.

A high-pitched chirp breaks my reverie. I slowly turn and see a female cardinal in the underbrush close by. I realize other birds are singing again, and the squirrels have reappeared in separate trees while I was daydreaming. One frolics through the treetops while the other eats. Both are in range. It is just a matter of shouldering the .410.

I stop on the trail just short of the truck to admire the beautiful bushytails I now carry. I turn and take one last look at the stand of timber that produced them, knowing it and the adjoining creek will host many fond memories. I hope many other squir-

rel hunters use similar areas to provide them with memories as well. For it is these memories that they will carry with them throughout their lives. 🐿



Squirrel hunting is so easy and inexpensive that everyone should do it. The nice thing about this sport is there is no need to make elaborate purchases. You may already have everything you need to hunt squirrels, but if you don't, here is all it takes to get started.	
Recommended Hunter Safety Course	Free
Hunting License (16 and older)	\$12.50
Gun (shotgun or .22)	\$100 (free if borrowed)
Shells (25 shotgun or 400 .22 shells)	\$4
Clothes (jeans and T-shirt are fine)	Free
Bug Spray (Optional)	\$3
Habitat Donor Cap (Blaze orange when needed)	\$10
Total	\$4 to \$129.50

THE RIGHT GUN MEANS FUN FOR SQUIRREL HUNTERS

One of the most attractive things about hunting squirrels is you don't have to spend a ton of money on a gun. With slight expense, you can purchase any number of affordable firearms suitable for squirrel hunting, including shotguns, and .22-caliber rifles and pistols.

Many great marksman have perfected their shooting skills by hunting squirrels with a .22-caliber rifle. These can be as plain or as fancy as you desire, but remember, the squirrel woods can be brutal on wooden gun stocks. Therefore, the simpler the better.

If you have good eyesight, you can hunt squirrels effectively with open sights. However, many hunters equip their rifles and pistols with scopes. Again, your choice of scopes is limited only by your budget, but a simple 4X model is suitable for most shooters.

Hunting squirrels with a .22 is an exact science. Shot placement is absolutely critical in making a clean kill. One thing is for certain; if you become proficient at squirrel hunting with a .22, you'll be more proficient at hunting other game, as well. A .22 long rifle can, and will, travel two miles if fired skyward. The old motto "Better safe than sorry," should be foremost in your mind.

Hunting squirrels with a shotgun offers the best chances for success, especially in thick cover. Therefore, the shotgun may be the best firearm for hunting in the spring, summer and early fall.

Some hunters enjoy hunting squirrels with a .410-gauge shotgun, but most hunters prefer at least a 20-gauge with either a full or modified choke. This will provide a large enough shot string and sufficient power to get the job done in the leafiest treetops.

For the ultimate challenge, many hunters enjoy hunting squirrels with a .22-caliber pistol. The advantages to hunting with handguns is that they are extremely light and portable, and you can get your sights on a squirrel a bit quicker with a pistol than you can with a rifle or shotgun. Of course, you have to be a crack shot to be successful, but that comes only with practice.

Whichever you choose, your firearm will supply you with many years of enjoyment, as well as plenty of squirrels for the table. 🐿 — Bryan Hendricks

A TREEFUL OF SQUIRREL HUNTING HOTSPOTS

From one end of the state to the other, Oklahoma has plenty of places to bag a limit of bushytails

BY BRYAN HENDRICKS

The beauty of squirrel hunting is that you never have to look too far to find a good place to hunt.

Squirrels are plentiful throughout the state where suitable habitat exists, especially areas with high densities of soft mass and nut-bearing trees. In fact, some of the best squirrel hunting in Oklahoma is available on many of the wildlife management areas owned by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. All you need to enjoy these fantastic public hunting opportunities is a valid Oklahoma hunting license, your favorite firearm and a willingness

to have all the fun you deserve. Better yet, double your fun by hunting with a youngster.

LEXINGTON WMA

The only major public hunting area near Oklahoma City, Lexington WMA is probably the busiest Department-owned WMA... except, that is, during squirrel season. If you're hunting bushytails, chances are you'll have the entire area to yourself.

Covering 9,440 acres in Cleveland County, Lexington WMA supports excellent numbers of fox squirrels. Characterized by low, rolling hills and small valleys, Lexington features a variety of habitat that includes crosstimer woodlands and tallgrass prairie. Acorn production is cyclical among Lexington's blackjack and post oaks, but a number of other food sources provide supplemental nutrition for squirrels.

To get to Lexington WMA from Oklahoma City, take I-35 south to Lexington, and then go east on State Highway 39.

THREE RIVERS & HONOBIA CREEK WMAS

Volumes have been written about the excellent deer and turkey hunting available at Three Rivers and Honobia Creek WMAs, but these

areas should also be at the top of every squirrel hunter's list of destinations.

Covering a total of 725,000 acres in southeast Oklahoma, Three Rivers WMA and Honobia Creek WMA are managed by the Department as part of a cooperative agreement with Weyerhaeuser and the John Hancock Timber Resources Group, respectively. Three Rivers WMA covers 450,000 acres primarily in McCurtain Co., and Honobia Creek WMA occupies 275,000 acres in Pushmataha Co. Both areas feature long, latitudinal ridges forested and deep, narrow valleys. They are forested mostly with pine, but some large areas feature mixed pine and hardwoods.

The best way to hunt these areas is to still-hunt along the ridgetops, keeping a sharp eye out for movement both in the branches and along the ground.

To hunt either area, you need to purchase a Land Access Permit (\$16 for Oklahoma residents, \$25 for non-residents).

CANTON WMA

Though best known for its excellent sand bass fishing, Canton WMA can be a great place for squirrel hunters, too.

Situated in Blaine, Dewey, and Major counties, Canton WMA occupies nearly 15,000 acres, most of



1 - LEXINGTON WMA

2 - DEEP FORK

3 - CANTON WMA

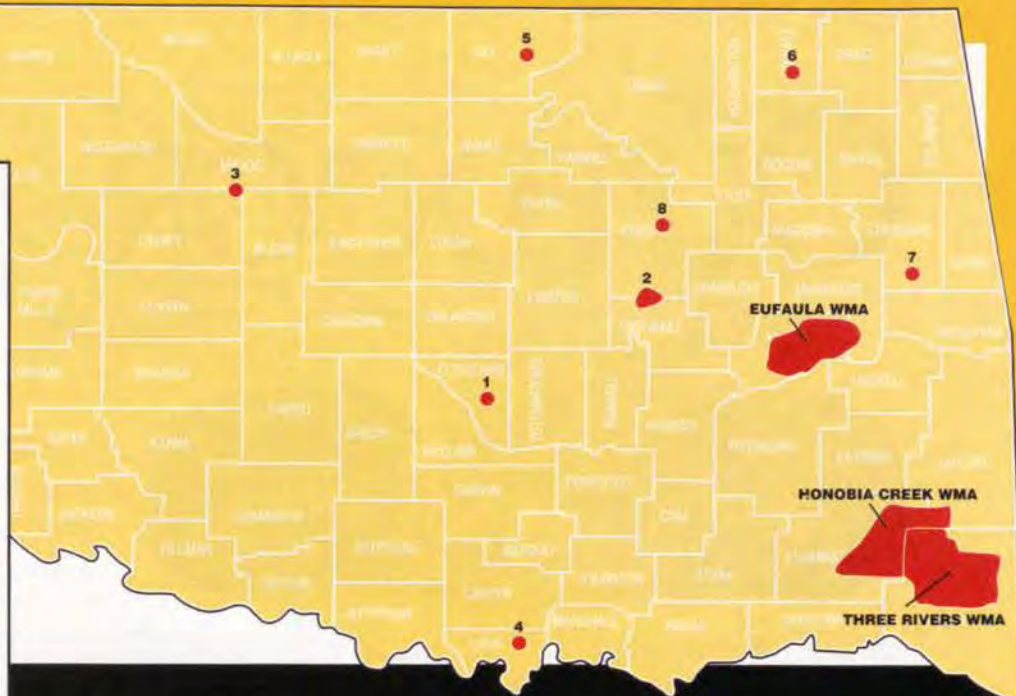
4 - HICKORY CREEK WMA

5 - KAW WMA

6 - OOLOGAH WMA

7 - TENKILLER WMA

8 - HEYBURN WMA



which bracket the North Canadian River on the west end of Canton Lake. The best squirrel habitat is in the crosstimer woodlands on the eastern portion, but a surprisingly large number of fox squirrels also inhabit the elm and cottonwood groves in the bottomland areas. Those are great places to hunt in the mornings and evenings, and the squirrels are easy to silhouette against the sky when scampering along the bare forearms of a cottonwood tree.

Canton WMA is about three miles north of Canton and is accessible from State Highway 58A.

Those are just a few of the public hunting opportunities open to squirrel hunters. There are many others, including Kaw, Heyburn, Oologah, Tenkiller and Hickory Creek WMAs. For information on areas near you, pick up a copy of the *Oklahoma Wildlife Management Area Atlas*. It contains topographic maps of all Department-owned WMAs, along with descriptions of their habitat and hunting opportunities. At \$10 (\$15 if mailed), it's a bargain for the hunters in your family. 🦫

HOOK & HUNT

Float fishing and squirrel hunting offers a feast of springtime fun

Though usually associated with fall, squirrel hunting is one of many activities available to sportsmen in the spring.

That's right, squirrel hunting in the springtime! In Oklahoma, squirrel season opens May 15 and ends Jan. 31, offering the longest continuous hunting season in the state.

Of course, May is fishing season to most sportsmen, but in Oklahoma, you can enjoy the best of both worlds by combining a squirrel hunt with a stream fishing trip. One of the most enjoyable and most productive ways to hunt spring squirrels is to carry a .22-caliber rifle or shotgun in your canoe while float-fishing for smallmouth bass in eastern Oklahoma. It's perfectly legal, too, as long as your boat is not powered or assisted by any type of motor.

During the springtime, it's difficult to hunt squirrels with traditional methods because they're so hard to see in the thick foliage. However, you can see them easily in streamside trees as you paddle quietly downriver, and for some reason, the sight of a human in a canoe doesn't alarm squirrels like the sight of a human stalking through the woods.

If you see a squirrel between casts, you can simply put down your rod, pick up your firearm and add a squirrel to your "creel." Another good thing about this style of hunting is that a downed squirrel usually falls in the water, making retrieval easy.

One excellent destination for a hook-and-hunt trip is the Glover River in southeast Oklahoma, as well as the Mountain Fork and Little Rivers. Any stream with adequate flow will do, and always be courteous of others, both on the river and on the banks. Don't shoot when other paddlers or anglers are nearby.

Most of all, be careful and have fun, because this is the kind of adventure you'll treasure for a lifetime. 🦫 — *Bryan Hendricks*