

A squirrel hunting lesson from Larry 'Fat Man' Fitch

by Lee Keck

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Things do not change much in southern Illinois. In fact, most of the following still holds true in these parts of the state.

For instance, it seems like almost everyone living in southern Illinois has a nickname. West Frankfort professional hunting and fishing guide Larry Fitch is no exception.

Folks around these parts call him the Fat Man. Like many things in southern Illinois, this makes little sense to me because Fitch is not really fat.

However, this is how he prefers to be addressed. 'Come fish with the Fat Man' is even printed in big red letters across the bottom of his business card.

"People have called me the Fat Man as long as I can remember," he explained. "In fact, I suspect very few people around here even know my real name."

To make things even more interesting, the nickname seems to be passed along to the following generations.

"Most people I know also call my son the Fat Boy," he explained. "And now, everyone calls my grandchild Fat Baby."

Fitch, however, is not just known for his interesting nickname. He is widely recognized as one of the finest crappie fishermen in southern Illinois. He can be found probing the many quality fishing lakes in this area several days each week throughout the spring, summer and fall.

"We are blessed with many excellent crappie fishing lakes in this part of the state," he explained. "Good crappie fishing can be found in almost every lake ranging from the larger ones like Rend and Crab Orchard to the dozens of smaller lakes scattered throughout this area."

Still, it's not his crappie fishing skills that actually attracted my attention on this outing. It was Fitch's widespread notoriety as a top-notch squirrel hunter that had lured me to the hardwood forests of southern Illinois.

"Squirrel hunting is something I really enjoy," he said while unloading his tiny Jack Russell terrier from the dog box. "This little dog keeps me company and helps to spot the squirrels against this camouflaged background."

It was interesting to watch Fitch and his tiny dog quietly slip across the leaf-covered forest floor. It seemed like only seconds had passed before he spotted the first gray squirrel darting across a fallen tree.

It was obvious this critter had spotted us first. Before Fitch could even raise his .22 rifle, the squirrel disappeared among the hardwoods.

Several more similar incidents occurred before he finally experienced success. Suddenly, the little dog rushed across a shallow creek in pursuit of yet another squirrel. This time, Fitch raised his rifle and the shot was true.

"My eyes are beginning to get old and this little dog helps me spot the squirrels," he explained. "But, you have to watch the dog closely because it likes to grab the squirrels and bury them."

Though our day came to a quick end when the light rain suddenly became heavier, our trip was a genuine lesson in the lost art of real hunting. Fitch pointed out the fact that a good squirrel hunter needs to be a knowledgeable woodsman.

"Anyone hunting squirrels realizes this is not an easy thing," he explained. "Once the leaves begin to fall, there is little cover to hide the hunter."

Recent years have seen squirrel populations thrive throughout our entire state. Interestingly, few hunters seem interested in pursuing this game species.

"This is a real shame," Fitch explained. "The hunting opportunities are plentiful and squirrels can be found almost everywhere good timber exists."

He also feels that introducing a youngster to squirrel hunting is one of the best ways to learn about the sport. A beginning squirrel hunter will quickly develop the necessary skills to become successful when hunting other species like deer and turkey.

"I have been taking kids squirrel hunting for years," he explained. "And, I'm proud to say that most of these individuals have grown to become good all-around sportsmen."

Before we finished our hunt, I had to ask Fitch if he called his little four-legged hunting companion Fat Dog.

"Nope," he said. "I call this dog Sissy."