

Plenty of squirrels, few hunters

by Lee Keck

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With most hunting opportunities in high demand, many wildlife experts are curious why more sportsmen do not take advantage of the bountiful squirrel populations found throughout the state. In addition, this often-overlooked game species is ideal for introducing youngsters to the sport of hunting.

This year, in particular, is proving to be an excellent one for squirrel hunting. Those hunters heading to the woods are reporting superb populations of squirrels.

"As a kid, I hunted squirrels throughout the entire season," said call manufacturer Harold Knight who still spends many hours each year pursuing bushytails. "Squirrel hunting is a challenging sport and squirrels are also quite tasty as tablefare."

Knight admits that new game hunting opportunities have lured many squirrel hunters away from the sport. Interest in wild turkeys and white-tailed deer - relatively recent arrivals to the hunting scene - has witnessed phenomenal growth and these species are considered more inviting to many experienced sportsmen.

"Still, I do a lot of my scouting for deer when hunting squirrels," he said. "You can learn a great deal about other game animals while in the squirrel woods."

Knight and many others feel that squirrels are the ideal game species for introducing youngsters to the enjoyment of the hunting sports. Woodsmanship and other important hunting skills are learned while pursuing squirrels.

"The squirrel woods is one of the best places I know to teach a kid about hunting," he added. "There is usually plenty of action and the sport provides an excellent opportunity to share quality time with a youngster."

This concern is also shared by now-retired IDNR regional wildlife biologist Deck Major. He, too, feels youngsters who have never hunted squirrels are missing out on a quality outdoor experience.

According to Major, squirrel hunting opportunities in Illinois are vastly underutilized. Finding good hunting usually requires little effort.

"We have excellent squirrel hunting on most public lands throughout Illinois," Major explained. "Squirrel populations are quite good at most state sites though relatively few hunters take advantage of this species."

Major says Pere Marquette State Park near Grafton always offers excellent squirrel hunting. Other good sites for squirrels include the Ray Norbet Conservation Area near Pittsfield, the Jim Edgar Public Hunting Area near Ashland and the federal and state lands surrounding Carlyle Lake.

"The new Illinois Hunting and Trapping Regulation booklet lists a number of excellent public areas offering quality squirrel hunting opportunities," said Major. "These booklets are available free from most license vendors and IDNR offices."

Special site-specific regulations may apply at some state-managed public hunting areas. In many cases, special free permits are required and hunters may be required to sign in then record their harvest after the hunt. Interested individuals are encouraged to check with the specific site office before planning trips to these areas.

Though the Illinois squirrel season opened Aug. 1, most veteran squirrel hunters realize that most of the better hunting will be found during the month of September. It is during this month that squirrels will seek out the mast-producing trees and are often found concentrated in these areas.

If you've not yet headed to the squirrel woods, plenty of time remains in the season. The annual squirrel season is among the longest hunting seasons in our state.

The Illinois squirrel season continues through Feb. 15 statewide. However, the season does temporarily close during both segments of the firearm deer hunt scheduled for Nov. 17-19 and Nov. 30-Dec. 3. The daily bag limit is five squirrels, with a possession limit of ten.