Bushytail Business

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You like to get away from crowds? Then squirrel hunting may be for you. It's a very popular sport, but without opening-day "mob scenes."

Squirrels were in the number-one spot on the game harvest list in 1956. Although they don't create as much furor as the other major game species in Wisconsin, more squirrels have been harvested in recent years than any other game animal—over a million each year over the past eight years. (The cottontail rabbit ran a close second). And this does not include the hundreds killed as nuisance squirrels by farmers around farm buldings.

The gray and fox squirrel are the two species that are hunted in Wisconsin. Fox squirrels are slightly heavier than gray squirrels and have a characteristic tawny coloration. The gray squirrel may have a few tawny markings on its body, but the white belly and conspicuous white tufts of fur behind the ears help distinguish it from the fox squirrel.

BOTH the gray and fox squirrel are widely distributed in Wisconsin, but each prefers a somewhat different type of habitat. Although both species have been extending their range northward, the extreme northern counties are still squirrel-less. Here cold winters, deep snow, and a lack of oak and hickory trees limit squirrel numbers.

The best gray and fox squirrel populations in Wisconsin today are located in the southern, central, and western parts of the state. This vast area, known as the prairie-forest province, was one of interspersed prairie and oak openings when the white man first arrived. It is the area where most of the remaining mixed-oak woodlands are found today.

Gray squirrels are more common in the western uplands where, because of the severely dissected topography, much of the land is covered by mature oak woodlands—heavily wooded with dense undergrowth. On the average, 20 to 30 acres of every 100 acres of land in farms are still timbered.

Fox squirrels are most abundant in the southeastern quarter of the state—more open-type country with farmlands interspersed with small woodlots. Most of the land area here is under intensive cultivation and the remaining woodlands (less than 20 per cent of the land area) are small farm woodlots. Fox squirrels were originally associated with prairie country and were confined to the prairie-oak openings of southern and western Wisconsin. As the dense forest areas to the north and east were logged off and converted into farmlands, the fox squirrels slowly moved northward. The clearing of these dense forested lands aided the fox squirrels in obtaining a foothold in areas once the sole domain of the gray squirrel.

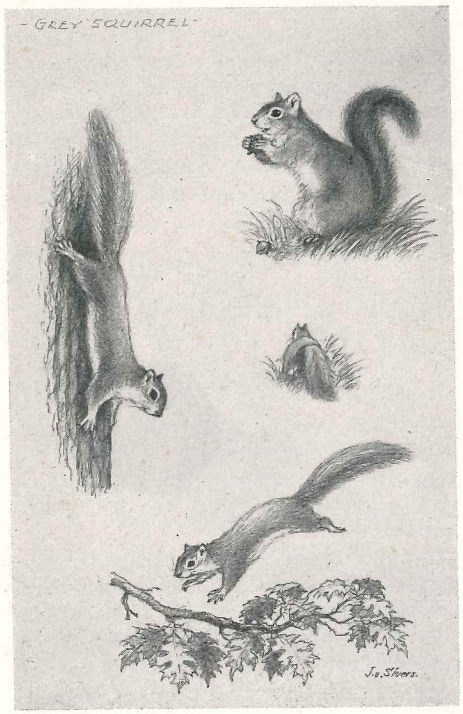
STUDIES on where squirrels are harvested show that there is a pretty good "formula" for identifying fox and gray squirrel habitat: Where as little as 10 per cent of the land is wooded, fox squirrels are as numerous as grays. When the amount of land in woods increases, the grays become increasingly predominant. When 70 or more per cent of the land area is in woods, fox squirrels are almost absent.

Gray squirrels have always been the dominant species in the hunter's bag each fall. During the past 22 years two gray squirrels were killed for every fox squirrel shot. Habitat conditions apparently favored an increase in the propor-

tion of fox squirrels through the 1930's up to 1942, but since that time there has been a general decline in the proportion of fox squirrels harvested. Part of this change may be due to the southern movement of the gray squirrel into fox squirrel habitat.

Regulations governing squirrel hunting are among the most important factors in their management. Wisconsin squirrel hunting seasons have been quite liberal as compared with those of other hunted species and the breeding population has maintained itself very well. Season lengths have varied from 45 to 123 days in a "northern" zone and 15 to 104 days in a "southern" zone during the past 30 years. Our present long seasons are necessary to insure an adequate harvest of the abundant squirrel crop.

The opening date of the squirrel season will largely determine the success of the fall hunt. Ripening dates of acorn and berry crops play an important role in this respect. Ripening of nut (mast) crops in Wisconsin takes place during September and October. Berry crops ripen from July to October. Squirrel activity is greatest during the mast ripening periods and decreases after the last of the mast crops have fallen, as by this time most of the nuts and acorns have been stored for the winter ahead. Once the ground activity has slowed down, squirrels are harder to find and bag.



The best time of the day to hunt the bushytails is in the early morning hours and again in the late afternoon. This is the time when they are most active.

Earliness or lateness of the first killing frost in fall is another important factor in determining hunting success. With an early frost, many of the leaves have fallen, making visibility good for hunting. With a late killing frost the visibility is lowered and so is the hunting success. In Wisconsin the average dates for the first killing frost in the northern counties is September 10–20; in the southwest, October 5–10; and in the southeast, October 10–20.

Squirrels in Wisconsin do not experience the same type of hunting pressure as do some of our more heavily hunted species such as pheasants and deer where the heaviest pressure is concentrated on the opening week-end of the hunting season. The squirrel season opens along with the seasons on several of our more heavily hunted species and the hunting pressure doesn't build up until other favored species become hard to bag.

IT TAKES very little effort to keep a good squirrel population around. Farm game management for squirrels can be practiced on soils unsuited for agricultural purposes and on land in need of erosion control. Farmers can aid squirrel production by retaining or planting mast-producing trees in woodlots or odd corners of the farm. A few hollow trees should be left in the farm woodlot for nesting sites. Although squirrels build leaf nests when hollow trees are not available, they still prefer the security of a tree den. Selective logging will also give remaining mast trees a better

chance to produce nuts and acorns and at the same time will improve the whole woodlot.

4–H groups and sportsmen's clubs can help squirrel management by building artificial denning boxes. These can be constructed quite cheaply from slab wood or old nailkegs and then placed in areas where hollow trees are lacking.

Intensive game management is not needed at the present time to maintain our squirrel population. Population highs and lows seem to be directly correlated with mast production. A mast failure one year usually means a lower squirrel population the next. We have occasionally experienced poor mast production in several areas of the state, but it had not been serious enough to greatly affect the state-wide kill. There usually are enough substitute foods available to carry through a fair squirrel population. Good forestry practices resulting in the maintenance of mixed-aged stands of mast trees, protection of these woodlands from fire and grazing, and selective cutting will do much to maintain a prosperous squirrel population.

Squirrel hunting can be a very exciting sport and it is quite inexpensive. No fancy hunting equipment is necessary. The shotgun used to hunt pheasants or waterfowl will do very nicely, but a .22 will greatly add to the sport. A dog will help but is not essential. Almost any kind of dog can be easily trained to tree a bushytail. A pocket full of shells, a trusty gun, your hunting license—and you're off to many hours of enjoyable hunting.

The Hungarian Partridge

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The Hun, an immigrant from Europe, has done pretty well in eastern and part of southern Wisconsin. Here's the story of its introduction and factors affecting survival.

The "theme" of the Hungarian partridge might well be that popular song of a few years ago—"Don't Fence Me In!" The Hun likes his country *open*, much the same as prairie chickens, but Huns tolerate more intensive agricultural development.

Huns probably give a net boost to Wisconsin's game populations, for they take up residence in fields that are generally unfavorable for other species of upland game birds. The best part of the Hun range is centered in the east–central counties of the state.

Huns may have been introduced prior to 1908 but they really seem to have gotten their start from introductions by Col. Gustave Pabst. From 1908 to 1929 he imported and released over 5,000 Huns on the Pabst farms in Waukesha county.

Since 1908 there are records of over 70 other releases by private individuals, clubs and the Conservation Department. These efforts have resulted in the liberation of a minimum of 3,000 Huns. These additional releases have occurred in 35 of our 71 counties.

Success of the Pabst releases was almost immediately apparent and the first open season was allowed in 1919; Jefferson and Waukesha counties were the only two counties open. From this humble beginning Huns have progressed to third place in the harvest of upland game birds, and this fall about one-third of the state will be open for almost 40 days. The average harvest estimate for the past seven years has been 46,000 birds each year.