

Conservation Corner

by James Cummins
Executive Director
of Wildlife Mississippi

One person who I always admired as a squirrel hunter was my Grandfather Cummins. He had excellent eyesight and was a crack-shot with a .22 rifle. I remember him talking about hunting the Big Black River swamp in Montgomery County and talking about how many

squirrels he harvested. Of course, his father being a conservation officer, I'm sure he didn't take too many.

Every conservationist should know the biology of the animal he or she is managing or pursuing. By knowing this, one should gain not only more appre-

ciation for the species, but also understand what is needed for better management of the species (i.e. habitat, seasons, bag limits and other issues).

From mid-October until deer season in late-November, the squirrel is the ruler of Mississippi's forests. Squirrel season for 2017 will end on February 28. The two types of squirrels in the Magnolia State are the Eastern gray squirrel and the fox squirrel.

The gray squirrel or cat squirrel, as it is sometimes called for its cat-like cry, weighs about a pound and is usually 15 to 20 inches in length. The unique development of the tail in the gray squirrel allows the animal to direct its flight as it searches for food. It also serves as a parachute and a signaling device in times of danger. Usually 4 to 6 gray squirrels are born in a litter. The gray squirrel prefers mature bottomland hardwoods such as oak, hickory, beech and

other mast trees.

The fox squirrel weighs up to 3 pounds and reaches a length of about 19 to 25 inches. Its color is reddish-yellow with alternate bands of black and orange on the tail. However, it is the fox squirrel that has a black color phase that is found in parts of Mississippi. Fox squirrels are late risers. This is one way they are unlike grays, which rise at daylight. The fox squirrel doesn't get up until about the second hour of daylight, but they sometimes feed until noon. Two to five squirrels are born in each litter (two litters per year).

Like my grandfather, squirrel hunting is one of my favorite types of hunting - I just wish his feist, Big Boy - was still alive. Hunting with a squirrel dog is great fun.

I like to get out at daylight and hunt for about the first 3 hours. An ideal situation would be the morning after a soft rain. And, of course, the

wind should not be blowing. Squirrels don't move much during wind or rain; this dampens their senses that protect their survival.

When squirrel hunting, never take a shot that could be unsuccessful, such as long shots and definitely don't shoot into nests. This can kill them and they may not fall out of the nest. But

most of all have a safe hunt, and always take a kid with you.

James L. Cummins is executive director of Wildlife Mississippi, a non-profit, conservation organization founded to conserve, restore and enhance fish, wildlife and plant resources throughout Mississippi. Their web site is www.wildlifemiss.org.

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