

PINING *for* SQUIRREL

Hunters, look up in the pine trees, where the bushytails seek succulent seeds

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

With the Alabama squirrel season opening in September, specifically Sept. 14 this year, hunters might hit the pines for early season action on wily bushytails.

Few hunters look to the evergreens when chasing squirrels, but in late summer and early fall, the little furballs love to eat pinecones. Squirrels tear apart cones to get at succulent seeds in the “chips.” Walk through any park or suburban area with pine trees and observe the chewed husks and chip pieces littering the ground.

“Once cones get seeds, squirrels go into the pines to get those seeds,” explained Ray Metzler, a biologist with the Alabama Forestry Commission. “Loblolly pines attract a lot of squirrels. Fox squirrels are more prone to go in longleaf pine savanna habitat where people burn off a lot of the underbrush.”

Pinecone debris on the ground can confirm the presence of squirrels in an area, especially green or freshly gnawed cones still sticky with sap. Squirrels habitually return to dine in their favorite trees. Mounds of discarded cone husks, chips and other debris could build up around a “kitchen” tree. Sometimes, hunters can even find downed trees, or stumps where squirrels like to sit and enjoy their pine-flavored meals.

Hunters usually won’t find squirrels in a solid pine forest or timber plantation with rows of trees because a monoculture habitat provides little food diversity for them. However, in a forest of mixed pines and hardwoods, squirrels commonly prefer the pines over the oaks in late summer and early fall.

“A pure pine forest doesn’t provide good habitat for a large squirrel population, but a mixed forest provides a lot of good hard mast with a variety of squirrel foods,” Metzler elaborated. “That type of forest is especially good because it can



Photos by John N. Felsher

Daniel Felsher spots another squirrel up high as he retrieves one he shot, which is on the ground.