

Small game, long seasons

Squirrel, rabbit hunters can enjoy plenty of days afield

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Alabama small game enthusiasts can hunt for nearly six months each year. This year, squirrel and rabbit seasons last from Sept. 12 through March 7, 2021.

Many squirrel hunters head to the hardwood bottomlands in the Upper Delta Wildlife Management Area. Sportsmen need a boat to reach most of the Upper Delta WMA, but a road running through the northern part of the forest provides access if the water doesn't get too high like it did for much of the past three winters.

"The rain from the storms in August messed up the road through the Upper Delta a little, but it should be in good shape for hunting season," reported Thomas Harms, an Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division game biologist in Spanish Fort. "We graded the whole road for the second year in a row. With the rain, I think we should have a pretty good mast crop this year. The habitat in the delta is looking good for all game species right now. If we keep the water down, we'll have a good season."

Escape the flood

High water in the past few years didn't drastically affect the game in the delta, particularly squirrels, Harms said. If necessary, squirrels can just climb a tree and stay there for a while. Ground animals like deer, pigs and rabbits can find tracts of higher ground to escape the flood waters.

"The Upper Delta WMA and the northern part of the lower delta are always good for squirrels," Harms remarked. "When the water



Photo by John N. Felsher

Jim Sealy of Citronelle shows off a rabbit he killed.

gets high, wildlife will go to upland areas. It may take them a little while to move back in, but they'll move back in."

Besides the delta, squirrel hunters might want to visit the David K. Nelson WMA, an 8,308-acre tract of hardwood bottomlands on the Black Warrior River near Demopolis. Squirrel hunters might also try the Barbour, Black Warrior or Oakmulgee WMAs. Some small tracts also offer good squirrel hunting.

"The Red Hills complex covers 4,426 acres in northern Monroe County near Franklin," detailed Jeremy Doss with the Alabama State Land Division. "It's a squirrel hunting paradise that probably doesn't get enough use from small game hunters. It has some rough sloping terrain, but some areas are easy to walk."

Both gray and fox squir-

rels exist throughout the state. Much more common, gray squirrels generally prefer denser canopies like those found in bottomland hardwood swamps such as the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Like the open

Larger and more colorful fox squirrels typically like open country, such as scattered pines or mixed pine and upland hardwood forests. The Perdido River WMA in Baldwin County consists mostly of open fields and longleaf pine savannas, but it does hold some gray and fox squirrels. However, rabbit hunters would likely find better luck there.

"Perdido WMA does not have a huge squirrel population," Harms advised. "It doesn't have the hardwood bottoms for gray squirrels. We're not quite there with the fox squirrels, either.

There are plenty cottontails and a few swamp rabbits in Perdido, but there's plenty of both in the Upper Delta WMA and parts of the lower delta. There's also a lot of marsh rabbits in the southern part of the delta."

Almost any brushy thicket or briar patch could hold cottontails. Larger than cottontails, swamp rabbits live statewide wherever people find cottontails, but the highest population occurs in the southern Alabama wetlands. Marsh rabbits primarily stay in the wetlands of the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Sportsmen hunting the delta could possibly bag all three rabbit species.

"When jumped, cottontails generally stay within a couple hundred yards of that spot," observed James Sealy, Jr., a rabbit hunter from Citronelle. "A big swamp rabbit, or cane cutter, will typically cover a lot more area when they run than a cottontail. Cane cutters like to eat canes. If we see something snapped off about eight to 10 inches off the ground and cut off at an angle, we know a big swamp rabbit did that."

Most hunters use beagles to flush rabbits from thick cover. Without dogs, sportsmen could still bag a few bunnies, but must work harder for them. Hunters could take turns smashing through thick cover while their partners wait on the edges watching for anything bolting out to escape.

Some Special Opportunity Areas offer limited small game hunting. For more information, see www.outdooralabama.com/hunting/special-opportunity-areas.