

SQUIRREL

DOGS





Hunting squirrels with dogs is fun for the whole family

by David Hoover | photographs by David Stonner

When I was growing up, my small-game hunting experiences mainly consisted of chasing rabbits and quail with dogs. My squirrel hunting excursions were more limited. They generally involved donning camo, quietly walking the woods near my house, and searching for an unwary squirrel given away by a subtle flicker of fur among the treetops. When the spot-and-stalk tactic didn't work, I would find a big tree to sit against and do my best to imitate the sound of a squirrel eating a hickory nut, hoping to encourage any nearby squirrels to investigate and give up their cover. It had been a few years since I last chased any bushytails around the woods. So when Tom, a friend and quail-hunting buddy of mine, called and asked if I wanted to try my hand at squirrel hunting with dogs, I jumped at the opportunity.



Top: Austin holds Belle, an English pointer, while his grandfather, Tom, gets Zip out of the dog box. Middle: Daisy and Zip head toward the woods to start the hunt. Bottom: Marcus and Austin take a break after treeing their first squirrel of the day.



A Family Tradition

Tom and his 14-year-old grandson, Austin, brought along Zip, a 2 year old mountain feist, when we drove out to meet Tom's friends on their family farm in north Missouri. Marcus, his wife, Jess, their two kids — and Zip's mom, Daisy — had made the trek out from New Jersey, something they do twice a year to visit family and friends. Marcus, an avid squirrel hunter, had learned to hunt on this farm and had harvested his first squirrel in the very woods we were about to hunt. The kids, 5-year-old Danielle and 3-year-old Robert, were a little too young to carry a gun while walking the woods, but they were just as excited as the adults to be going squirrel hunting.

Until today, Tom and Austin were the only two hunters I knew who hunted squirrels using dogs, so I asked Marcus about the popularity of this tradition. He said that back when the countryside was dotted with small subsistence family farms, most farmsteads likely had a dog from one of the common squirrel dog breeds. Not only were they used to hunt squirrels to supply the family with meat, they were good at protecting the hen house. As time went on and these small farms disappeared from the landscape, the squirrel dog hunting tradition began to decline. Marcus also said he sees this tradition starting to gain in popularity as more folks are finding out how enjoyable it is.

As Daisy and Zip were getting reacquainted, Marcus and Jess got their kids ready for the hunt. It was obvious to me that the trips back to the family farm for Marcus and Jess were as much about instilling a love of the outdoors and conservation in their children as it was about hunting squirrels on the home place. Once the dogs were sufficiently reacquainted, they were ready for the hunt.

Timbering Out

As we walked down the wooded fence line leading to the woods, Marcus and Austin kept close eye on Daisy and Zip's every movement. We hadn't yet reached the woods when suddenly both dogs stopped and cocked their ears toward the trees and looked back as if to say, "You guys hear that?"

"What are they listening for?" I asked Marcus. "It may be a squirrel timbering out."

Marcus went on to explain that "timbering out" is when a squirrel hops from treetop to treetop in an attempt to elude detection or escape after being treed. Both dogs made a beeline to the woods. Once there, they searched the tree tops to detect the slightest bit of movement. Not seeing any, they moved on, putting their noses

Daisy pinpoints the tree where a squirrel is located. Daisy will keep a close eye on the squirrel, alerting Austin if the squirrel is attempting to timber out.



to the ground in hopes of picking up the scent of a squirrel, all the while keeping eyes and ears focused on the treetops.

Suddenly Daisy got very excited and began yipping. She ran toward a big oak tree on the edge of a ravine, staring at the treetops. She circled the tree once and put her front feet on the trunk and began to bark, much the same way a baying coonhound does with a treed raccoon. "Let's go! They're on the wood," Marcus called to the group. After a couple of steps, Marcus turned and said, "That means they have a squirrel treed."

I picked up the pace, not wanting the squirrel to get away, or timber out. I looked back, hoping that Danielle and Robert would be able to keep up, and to my surprise they were right behind me. In fact, Jess was trying to keep up with them! As I reached the oak tree, Daisy was barking and leaning against the tree. Zip was close by, keeping an eye on the elusive squirrel. I heard Austin say, "I see him." Marcus told Austin to go ahead if he had a clear shot.

Austin aimed his shotgun and fired.



Mountain feist

is just one of the many squirrel dog breeds, several of which have been around for hundreds of years. The most common squirrel dogs generally come from one of three breed classifications: curs, feists, and terriers. A quick internet search will help you find sources of squirrel dogs and squirrel hunting clubs in Missouri.

A Teachable Moment

Both Daisy and Zip made a mad dash to retrieve the harvested fox squirrel lying on a pile of oak leaves. When Daisy brought the squirrel to Marcus, he showed it to Danielle and Robert and explained the difference between a fox squirrel and a gray squirrel.

He also took a moment to praise the dogs for their efforts, and we grown ups discussed how keeping cattle out of the woods and selectively cutting trees can provide quality wildlife habitat, particularly for squirrels and other small game species.

Marcus got the kids involved in this discussion, too. "Taking good care of the woods helps make sure we have lots of squirrels to hunt every year," he said.

For their part, Danielle and Robert took the woods in stride. Neither complained much about the weeds and bushes they had to navigate through, all of which seemed to hit them at eye level. It was obvious they had, even at such a young age, spent many hours in the woods

chasing squirrels behind Daisy. They fully understood it was just part of the game.

We continued hunting and soon entered a large area of open woods with stately bur oak trees. Austin harvested another squirrel, with the assistance of Daisy and Zip, of course. We had hunted for nearly an hour and had seen some pretty nifty dog work when we decided to take a break. Marcus told us about the time, as an 8-year-old boy, he harvested his first squirrel with his dad in these woods.

"I also found a yellow jacket-nest," he said, "but that wasn't nearly as much fun as getting my first squirrel."

We laughed and, with legs rested and spirits high, continued on until Daisy and Zip were on another squirrel. This time the bushytail was able to retreat into a cavity high in the tree, likely its den. Knowing that the squirrel wouldn't venture out until we were well out of sight, we moved on.

When temperatures started rising into the 50s and the winds picked up, we knew it was going to get more difficult for the dogs to find squirrels. We decided to cut across a harvested cornfield and make one last push through a wooded draw on our way back to the vehicles and a well-deserved lunch. About halfway down the draw, Daisy located a squirrel in a hard-to-reach tree along a deep ravine. With a little studying and careful navigation, Austin was able to bag his third squirrel of the morning, assisted by Daisy with a nice retrieve.

Enjoy Time Outdoors With Family and Friends

Back at the vehicles, we discussed the morning hunt and how well the dogs had performed. Danielle and Robert were happy to get another break and play with the dogs, which were no longer in hunt mode and receptive to the affection the kids gave them. After seeing the kids and adults interact with the dogs, it was clear that the hunt was not about how many squirrels we harvested. Rather, it was about enjoying time spent outdoors with family and friends, passing on a love of the outdoors and the conservation of an abundant and renewable wildlife resource. Squirrel hunting with dogs does not ensure you will harvest more squirrels than with any other hunting method, but it does allow for greater interaction among those in your hunting party. Instead of sitting motionless and quiet, you are afforded the



Danielle, Daisy, Robert, Zip, and Austin at the end of the morning's hunt.

Opposite page: Austin and his dog, Zip, are a seasoned squirrel hunting duo.

opportunity to have lively conversations while hunting. This provides an excellent opportunity to teach firearm safety and hunting ethics to children and beginning hunters, discuss wildlife management, and life in general.

As Jess rounded up the kids for a photo with Daisy and Zip, I thanked Tom and Marcus for inviting me to accompany them on such an enjoyable and unique hunting experience. Once all the photos were taken, dogs rounded up, and gear put away, all that was left was for Austin to clean the squirrels. As we watched him perform this task with efficiency obtained only from years of practice, I again thanked Tom and Marcus for a wonderful day afield and told them I might just have to get one of these squirrel dogs. That way, I could invite them to join me sometime for a day of squirrel hunting. ▲

Dave Hoover is MDC's small game coordinator. He enjoys hunting quail and other upland game birds with family and friends and promoting habitat management for the benefit of Missouri's small game.

Plenty of Squirrels, a Long Season, and Lots of Places to Hunt

Squirrel hunting has a rich history and remains popular among Missouri small-game hunters. It is also a great way to obtain locally sourced food while enjoying the outdoors and time spent with family and friends.

Tree squirrels are abundant throughout the state. Missouri is home to three species: the eastern gray squirrel, eastern fox squirrel, and the southern flying squirrel. Both the eastern gray squirrel and eastern fox squirrel are legal to hunt. With the exception of coyotes, squirrels have the longest season of Missouri's small-game species.



Fox squirrel



Gray squirrel

Properly licensed hunters can legally harvest squirrels from the fourth Saturday in May to Feb. 15.

If you don't have access to good squirrel hunting on private land, you can find plenty of conservation areas with good squirrel hunting statewide. Visit mdc.mo.gov/atlas, and use the activity menu to search for hunting.

THE HUNT

was not about how many squirrels we harvested. It was about enjoying time spent outdoors with family and friends.

