Squirrel hunters celebrate the return of the hunting season by venturing into the August woodlands.

Early Season Squirrel Hunting

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August 1 rings in the opening of squirrel season, and with the season not ending until the middle of February, hunters can enjoy the woods through two seasonal changes. Few other hunting seasons in Illinois last as long as the opportunity-filled, 6-1/2-month season for squirrels.

Getting back into the woods to hunt after many months away is refreshing, and many squirrel hunters choose to hit it early. Here are some helpful thoughts for early season hunting.

You will be sharing the woods with many critters, including those that fly, bite and crawl up your leg. Good bug spray, and, unfortunately, a bunch of it, is a good idea. Early in the season, once the day starts to heat up the cool morning, the woods will start to sound like an airport. Spray yourself down and don't be afraid to reapply as you sweat it off.

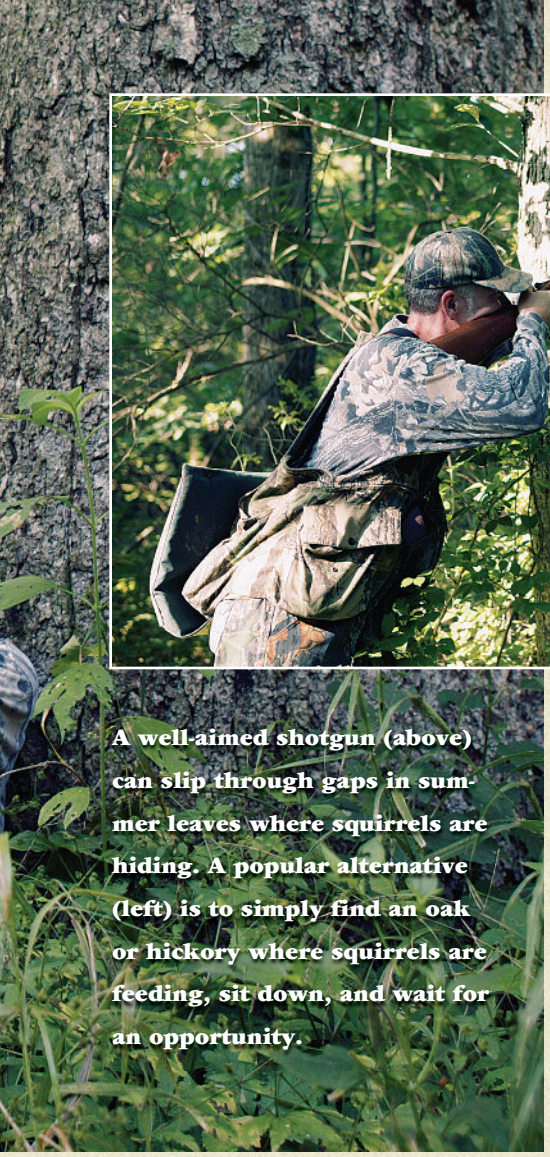
Carry a long, narrow stick through the woods as you'll find spiderwebs in places you would like to go. Do your best to leave them undisturbed, but you may get in the middle of a mess and need to fight your way out. Sometimes you'll need the stick in self defense. I've seen yellow garden spiders that were so big they actually had tattoos.

Include in your pack a bottle of water as you will work up a sweat in the woods on those warm, August mornings. A nasty thirst can chase you out of the woods sooner than you would like.

There are a couple of different ways to pursue squirrels that are usually successful.

One way is to get in the woods just before shooting time (one-half hour before sunrise) and settle in at the base of a tree. And, as a bonus: You'll get to enjoy the woods waking up around you. Eventually squirrels will start their

Morning mists for August squirrel hunters appear in the form of preventative sprays for mosquitos and chiggers.



A well-aimed shotgun (above) can slip through gaps in summer leaves where squirrels are hiding. A popular alternative (left) is to simply find an oak or hickory where squirrels are feeding, sit down, and wait for an opportunity.

day and, since you will already be in the woods and quiet, it will be a good start to a successful stalk. It's even possible that a few squirrels will be in the tree branches and already in range.

Another method is to get on the trail, or even in the timber, and move slowly and quietly, watching and listening for squirrels. Early in the season, squirrels will be feeding and cutting, and finding a tree with bouncing limbs is generally easy. Finding the rambunctious squirrel may be another matter, and can be difficult early in the season when the tree is still heavily canopied. Be patient and scan the tree.

Once a squirrel is spotted, begin to make your approach as quietly as possible. Squirrels are known for disappearing if they sense any possible danger. One misstep and a snapped twig and the tree could fall silent. With all of the leaves on the trees you will be hard-pressed to find these furry creatures if they go into stealth mode. These are nervous animals (they're not real high up on the old food web) and you will be able to tell if they are continuing on their merry way doing squirrel things or if they are on alert. If they are scurrying and barking, be very still so things can quiet back down. If they don't know you are there, pick your path to the tree.

There are plenty of squirrels, and plenty of opportunities to harvest them, so try to get as close as you can. Within 15-20 yards is ideal. If you can't get closer than that, move on. There will be plenty more squirrels. I mainly squirrel hunt on public land so I use a sweet little 20 gauge single shot with a very tight choke.

If you are squirrel hunting in the warm weather, get a harvested animal dressed as soon as possible. Getting the squirrel cooled off and on ice will ensure this morsel that you battled the bugs to get will remain in good condition.

Keep a small cooler in your truck with a one-gallon jug of ice and a half-gallon jug of water. Several plastic bags, a squirrel-cleaning knife (many people have a knife specifically for this task) and some paper towels complete your kit. And if you get skunked? This kit is handy because you'll appreciate having extra drinking water after you have drained the bottle you took into the woods.

Find timber with nut trees and you will find squirrels. Don't let the August heat or the bugs deter you from attempting to get a mess of squirrels for the frying pan. Most mornings you should have an hour or two of comfortable temperatures and limited bug activity to give the squirrels a whirl.

August squirrel hunting is a great way to kick off a new hunting season.

If hunting on public land, make sure to understand any site-specific regulations, including type of firearm allowed and how to report your bag. Pick up a copy of the annual "Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations" from any license vendor or DNR office, or view or download the document from the Hunting section at www.dnr.state.il.us.

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Field-dressing squirrels quickly during summer heat is essential for keeping the meat fresh.