

# Keeping it wild:

## Outdoor food and forays

### GREAT THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES.

John Motoviloff



KERRY MOTVILOFF

While it's exciting to match wits with a wise old buck or boss gobbler, it can be equally engaging to pursue humbler creatures. In fact, there's much to be said in these days of sensory overload and meteoric change, for simple pursuits with fairly certain outcomes. Welcome to the world of small game hunting! For the price of a few shells and a pair of boots, you'll have an extra-large helping of fun — plus some great eating.

What kind of fun are we talking about? It's not high-volume wingshooting or heart-stopping trophy hunting, and this may be precisely why small game hunting is so appealing. It takes you back to a simpler time when, to paraphrase a friend, the hunting didn't get in the way of the hunting. You just did it.

You might step into an oak woods right outside your door. Or visit a favorite woodlot on a Trempealeau County farm. Or maybe spend an evening with your teenage son sitting on the crumbling farmhouse foundation tucked away in a central Wisconsin hunting ground. There are no soccer games to rush off to. No tests to take. It's the kind of weather that makes you think of apple picking.

As you're thinking about crisp apples, you hear the telltale noises — claws on bark, then a kind of mewing that brings to mind the lengthening shadows of evening.

"See it?" you whisper.

He nods and shoulders the .22. Neither he nor you hears the shot go off. It's as if the squirrel, resting now on a blanket of oak leaves, didn't hear it either. You show him how to skin it — starting with a small cut behind the rear legs — and let it cool. He shoots another just before dark. Soon, back at the family cabin,

there's the sound and smell of frying squirrel in a skillet.

Maybe you're a winter person. Pheasant and grouse and just about everything else is closed.

"Except rabbit," you say, slipping your feet into the bindings of old wooden snowshoes. You grab your trusty Remington 870 and cut tracks in the new-fallen February snow. A wool shirt is all the outerwear you need as you trek toward the fencerow that's thick with deadfalls and blackberry vines.

You slip in some No. 6s and slowly walk along. Little roads of rabbit tracks weave in and out of the warrens made by fallen trees. Your eye catches a brown shape moving in the berry vines. In that moment a series of neurons — rabbit-moving-moving-mount-swing — that feels more like one neuron, fires. The rabbit is there in the snow and you bend to pick it up.

Just as the relaxed pace of small game hunting is rejuvenating in the field, so the meat brings with it a whole range of eating options. There's a simple fried squirrel or rabbit, which is the envy of fried chickens everywhere; savory stews, such as rabbit and mushroom or tangy burgoo; grilled rabbit marinated in mustard, thyme and olive oil; then of course potpies, thick with

cream gravy and tender meat.

Rabbit or squirrel, fall or winter, you can't go wrong with small game — in the field or in the kitchen.

#### Getting your small game on

Thanks to good habitat, healthy populations and long seasons, hunting rabbits and squirrels in Wisconsin is as good as it is anywhere. What's more, some of the best hunting areas are within easy driving distance of major population centers like Madison, Milwaukee, La Crosse, Eau Claire and Green Bay.

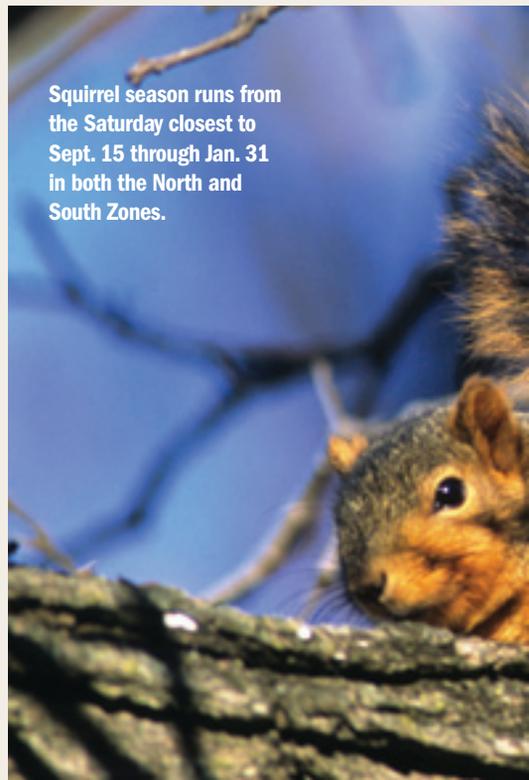
#### Gear

Once you've purchased a small game license, you need a minimum of gear before hitting the hunting grounds.

Clothes for squirrel hunting should be drab in color, as bushytails have excellent eyesight. Woodland or marsh camo will do. Failing that, an old fatigue jacket or duck-cloth vest will fit the bill. Army surplus stores are good sources for inexpensive camo gear. Since rabbit hunting is done in heavy cover with limited visibility — and rabbits do not have keen eyesight — wearing some blaze orange is recommended, especially if you'll be near other hunters. Brush pants are a must as are comfortable, weather-appropriate boots with good-gripping soles.

#### Guns

There are two gun choices for rabbit and squirrel hunters: shotguns and .22s. The precision of a .22 means more precise shot



Squirrel season runs from the Saturday closest to Sept. 15 through Jan. 31 in both the North and South Zones.

placement (and less wasted meat). It also makes long-range shots of 50 to 75 yards possible. The disadvantage is that moving shots are more difficult and that hunters need to pay close attention to what is beyond their target, as a .22 bullet can travel up to a mile. Shotguns pay dividends in heavy cover like brush piles or thick leaf canopy, where 12-gauge and 20-gauge are good choices. Use an open choke for rabbits and tighter choke for squirrels.

Any standard .22 round will work on rabbits and squirrels, and a low-power scope helps immensely with accuracy. Number 6 steel or lead shot is a good all-around choice for shotgunners. Bear in mind that squirrel hide is much tougher than rabbit hide, so shotgunners should limit shots to inside 30 yards. Rabbits can be killed with a shotgun out to 40 yards.

### Ground

Habitat types for squirrel and rabbit, while sometimes overlapping, are fairly distinct. Squirrels like open woodlands of mast-producing trees such as oak, hickory and walnut. Think oak savannah and you will have a good picture of squirrel habitat. Portions of the Kettle Moraine State Forest in eastern Wisconsin are a good starting point, as is the Kickapoo Valley Reserve in western Wisconsin. The vast majority of public hunting grounds have nut trees on them. As with all hunting, scouting is key to squirrel hunting success.

A handy way to think about rabbit cover is to envision your favorite berry

patch — the thicker the better. Since rabbits are preyed upon heavily, they seek out places where they can eat, sleep and reproduce in relative safety. Berry and burdock patches offer food and shelter. Cattails (after the ground is frozen), overgrown orchards, wild plum thicket and fencerows are all good areas to target. Don't hesitate to ask landowners for permission to hunt small game. It's often an easier ask than deer, turkey or waterfowl.

### Game bags

Squirrels and rabbits need gutting and skinning soon after the kill, especially in warm weather. My go-to game bag is a small burlap sack that I keep in my hunting vest. This protects the meat from dirt and also allows it to breathe. Any cotton or mesh bag will work. Avoid resealable plastic bags, unless hunting in winter, as they trap heat.

Rabbits and squirrels are cleaned in the same way. First, make two small incisions on the underside of the animal near the hind feet. Begin by slipping a foot through one hole and then do the same thing with the other foot. Once the hide is separated from the back legs, you can stand on or grip the tail and pull the hide toward the front of the animal, over the front legs and head. At this point, it's time to vent the animal by making a small cut from the rib cage to the anus. Gently work your fingers inside the cut to remove the entrails and organs. Be careful not to puncture.

Once cleaned, these animals should

be allowed to cool and then put into a breathable game bag or vest. Finish cutting the animal into serving pieces (two hind legs, two front legs, back/ribcage) at home or camp. Remove the head and cut legs at the joint above the foot. Soak in cold salt water before cooking. Freeze in airtight containers.

### Game time

- Squirrel season runs from the Saturday closest to Sept. 15 through Jan. 31 in both the North and South Zones.
- Rabbit season in the North Zone runs from the Saturday closest to Sept. 15 to Feb. 28.
- Rabbit season in the South Zone runs from the Saturday closest to Oct. 15 through Feb. 28.

*John Motoviloff is a hunter, fisher and forager. He also wrote "Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest."*

### SIMPLE FRIED SQUIRREL OR RABBIT

**2 squirrels or 1 cottontail rabbit, skinned, gutted, cut into serving pieces and trimmed of any shot or shot-damaged areas**

**1 gallon cold, salted water (½ cup salt) - this is the brine**

**¾ cup flour**

**½ cup cornmeal**

**Seasoning mix of choice (Old Bay, Cajun, etc.) plus salt and pepper if desired**

**½ cup peanut oil plus more (if needed) for frying**

1. Brine the meat in salted water for 1-2 hours. Drain meat from brine, cover with fresh water and parboil, gently, for 10 minutes.
2. Remove meat from water; allow meat to cool. Reserve 1 ½ cups of cooking liquid if making gravy.
3. Dredge meat in flour that has been mixed with cornmeal and seasoning of choice.
4. Preheat oil in cast-iron or other large skillet.
5. Cook meat until golden-brown, adding more oil if necessary.
6. For pan gravy, combine one tablespoon flour and one tablespoon oil in skillet used for frying. Mix and heat until light brown. Add reserved squirrel broth (or 1 ½ cups water) and mix until a smooth texture forms. Correct seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve with meat.



HERBERT LANGE