**Showcasing the DNR: Feeling squirrely**

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As I sat piled up in the recliner, regretting that second helping of ham on Christmas day, I was delighted by the various photos people were sharing, coming across my phone, of their families and the holiday memories they were making.

Social media, as bleak as it may seem some days with rants and raves of all shapes and sizes, sometimes really can provide some A+ content, and facilitate connections I wouldn’t otherwise have.

One particular set of photos really stuck out to me – those of my friend from West Michigan, Heather Iverson. Here I was loafing around the house, thinking about how it was as warm out as many spring trout season outings, and then there was Heather and her family out enjoying state lands on Christmas day.

Filled with “outdoor jealousy,” I was thinking how much fun it would’ve been if I had spent a little time outdoors on Christmas.

However, with the sun quickly waning and dark coming, I would have to settle for living vicariously through Heather’s photos of her family’s day afield squirrel hunting, that she had so beautifully captured and shared on social media.

I asked Heather why squirrel hunting ranks so highly on her family’s list of favorite things to do outdoors.

“One of my favorite parts of squirrel hunting is that it is a great group activity, especially to get kids exposed to hunting,” she said. “We bring our 8- and 3-year-old and it is so much fun to spend time in the woods as a family.

“You see squirrels all the time and think hunting them would be easy, but they are very quick and can disappear in the blink of an eye. So, when you see one, it gets your heart pumping while you try to keep an eye on them and set yourself up for the best shot. Even if you come home empty handed you still are ahead because you had a great hike in these beautiful Michigan woods with people you enjoy.”

Iverson said squirrels are also very good to eat. One of our favorite dishes is pulled barbecue squirrel sandwiches.

“I do a ciabatta roll with a bed of coleslaw, then the BBQ squirrel, a slice of swiss and top with a few slices of jalapeno,” she said. “If you haven't tried squirrel hunting, it is something I highly suggest, whether you are a beginner or seasoned hunter.”

A few days before Christmas, I was attending a great potluck gathering at a coworker’s house. The subject of squirrel hunting came up when I asked Michigan Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Division employee Kelsey Fisher what she was going to be up to over the holidays.

“I really hope squirrel hunting,” she said.

It was a few days later when, once again, I was delighted to see a squirrel hunting social media post, one that not only talked about her successful hunting experience, but also included some great words of respect for her quarry.

“As one sits against an old white oak, the natural inclination is to thank the universe for the ability to hunt and experience nature with such a deep connection,” she wrote.

I reached out to Kelsey and asked her what it is about squirrel hunting that really excites her.

“Squirrel hunting is a timeless tradition that I don’t want to see disappear into the past. I squirrel hunt because it brings back memories of learning to hunt and honing my marksmanship skills when I was young,” Fisher said. “It provides insight into the natural world and an escape from the everyday clutter of the technology era. It provides delicious food for the table that can be shared with hunters and non-hunters alike.

“Squirrel hunting provides a mentor with a way to introduce new and interested hunters into the world of hunting and outdoor recreation. I squirrel hunt for all these reasons and many more.”

Sitting inside the house and watching the squirrels demolish our “squirrel-proof” bird feeders and how tame they can be sometimes could give the false impression these animals are easy to hunt.

Once you leave the city and get into the squirrels’ element, some days it almost feels like you are the one being hunted by them.

“What was that?” you think as you spin around at the sound of a falling walnut shell. You then hear a squirrel barking and carrying on in the treetops. You look all over the place, as if you are under attack.

When they are 20-plus feet above you, looking down, they have the upper hand, and some days pursuing them isn’t as easy as one may think.

Squirrel hunting is something that I have always done sporadically, and I really have no good reason for that.

For starters, as Heather mentioned, they are delicious to eat. They also provide a great reason to be outdoors and can be a quite challenging quarry at times.

I tell people that some of the best times to go for a walk in the woods and look for squirrels are the winter days when the sun is warm, and you don’t necessarily need a heavy coat.

But if it is cold and bitter, think like a critter. On some of those brutally cold and windy days, squirrels, and rabbits for that matter, often will hole up in their dens, much like a person would curl up with a good book by a warm fire on a winter’s day. With some sun and a more comfortable winter day, they will be out and about, eating, socializing and moving around.

I have always liked to go out first thing in the morning, once it is light enough to see the canopies of the trees well, and again at midday. My midday approach would be much different than the morning, in the sense that I would stalk along very slowly in the morning, sitting down occasionally, looking for squirrel sign.

One such day I remember was when I took my wife along with me in late February, when temperatures had really warmed up for a few days. We headed to the Middleville State Game Area near Grand Rapids and set off with no agenda.

I wanted to look for some old elm and ash trees for morel mushroom season, scout roost trees for upcoming spring turkey hunting and, if luck was on my side, hunt some squirrels.

I took the .22 rifle my dad gave me for my 16th birthday and a couple clips of ammo and we set off on our walk. Lots of good-looking squirrel areas in the hardwoods, but no squirrels.

“I think these were high-pressured squirrels that had evolved due to being in a high traffic area,” I thought to myself. As the day warmed and lunchtime was calling, we made our way back toward the truck.

Just then, I glanced up to see a squirrel hiding in the forked trunk of a tree. In one motion, I pulled my gun up and let a shot fly.

“What in the world?” my wife asked, as her back was turned. She didn’t see me drawing my gun up. I let out a cheer that could be heard back to Interstate 96 10 miles away.

“Got him!” That squirrel not only made a delicious addition to a stew, but his tail was saved for fly tying. Squirrel tail is a very commonly used material in making fishing flies and other lures.

So instead of sitting in the easy chair, dust off that .22, .410, 12-gauge or even a pellet gun, grab some hunter orange garb, and explore that favorite deer hunting spot for those furry friends who tormented you all deer season making your heart race thinking that big buck was coming down the trail, only to see a gray or fox squirrel chattering below your stand.

You’ll be glad you did.

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