



OUTDOORS

East Texas has deep roots in squirrel hunting, but the sport is fighting to survive. **PAGE C7**

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SPORTS



INSIDE

■ Spring product Josh Beckett tries to save the Red Sox from elimination when he faces the Indians tonight in Game 5 of the American League Championship Series. **PAGE C3**

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‘ W E L C O M E T O S Q U I R R E L C A M P ’

Thursday, October 18, 2007

A fading heritage

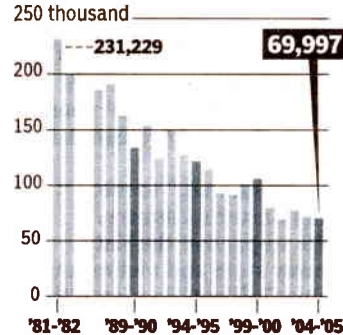
Due primarily to changes in land use and surging deer numbers, squirrel hunting no longer dominates the East Texas landscape, but the tradition is hanging on at the Iron Ore Creek camp



UP A TREE: A cat (gray) squirrel peers from an oak. Once the most popular game animal in East Texas, the squirrel has seen its population decline with loss of habitat.

HUNTING DECLINE

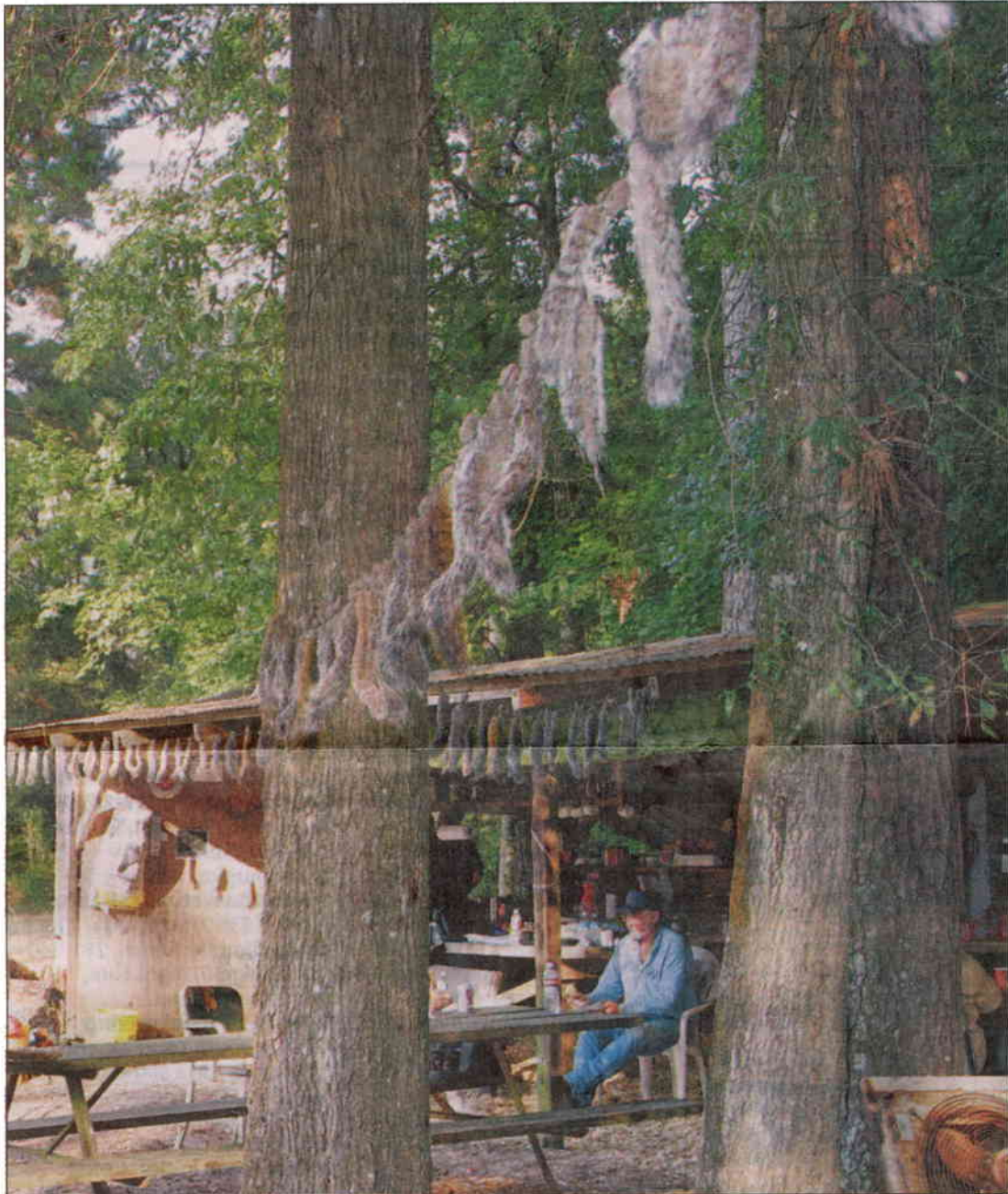
Estimated number of squirrel hunters in Texas, based on annual surveys of licensed hunters by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.



Note: No results available for '83-84 through '85-'86; Squirrels removed from Small Game Harvest Survey in 2005.

Source: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, *Annual Small Game Harvest Survey*

CHRONICLE



SHANNON TOMPKINS PHOTOS : CHRONICLE

FADING TRADITION: Under a line of squirrel-tail talismans ringing a "squirrel camp" in San Augustine County, Royce Lynn Johnson ponders the future of East Texas squirrels, squirrel hunters and the forest upon which both depend.

By SHANNON TOMPKINS

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

A dozen or so twisting miles off the San Augustine County blacktop, down a dusty maze of unmarked red-dirt and sand roads slithering through a landscape of pine plantations in varying stages of their increasingly short life spans, sits a small, sturdy bridge spanning the tea-colored, spring fed water of Iron Ore Creek.

Cross the bridge any day in the first couple of weeks of October, and time spins backward.

In a park-like setting beneath a clump of towering pines and oaks, a collection of hard-worked pickup trucks stand at picket around a weather-beaten, open-sided shed shading a collection of hunters.

Some sit on folding chairs around an old table ringing with the clackety-click of dominos as one of a constantly changing set of players "shakes" the rocks for the next hand in what seems an endless game of 42.

A pair of folks stand at a homemade counter, wielding knives as they chop vegetables. A couple squat at water barrels, carefully washing the pink-fleshed rewards of the morning's hunt.

Others work over pots and skillets set on a propane-fueled stove, turning and stirring as thin streams of steam spread the scent of cooking food in the early-autumn air.

"Welcome to squirrel camp," Royce Lynn Johnson says as he uncurls from a chair under the shed, greeting a pair of visitors with a smile, strong handshake and an invitation to sit and visit.

Then Johnson adds, with no little wistfulness in his voice, "See it before it's gone."

That time of year

For generations, the forests of East Texas have hosted annual October gatherings similar to the one on Iron Ore Creek, which is about 30 miles east of Nacogdoches.

Groups — whole extended families from grandparents to toddlers along with their relatives, friends and neighbors — would set up camp in the woods in anticipation of what

was one of the most important dates on the calendar — Oct. 1, opening day of squirrel hunting season.

For more than a century, squirrel hunting was, by far, the most popular hunting activity in East Texas. More than a quarter-million people — young, old, men, women, poor, well-to-do — would take to the woods, .22 rifle or shotgun in hand, in search of the main ingredients of a meal of squirrel and dumplings.

Squirrels — gray or “cat” squirrels in the bottomlands along creeks and rivers and bayous, and their larger cousins, fox squirrels, in the mixed beech/hickory/oak forests of the uplands — were the only game

animal found in abundance throughout the region.

The “squirrel camp” tradition began in the late 1800s, with hunters and their families gathered for a week or more of hunting, cooking and eating squirrels, playing dominos, telling tales, swimming in the creeks and generally celebrating and cementing their culture and social ties.

“My father and his father and his father had squirrel camps,” said Johnson, a 62-year-old lifelong resident of East Texas. “It’s just something we always did and enjoyed.”

Not all squirrel hunters participated in organized squirrel camps. But most everyone hunted squirrels.

“Everyone hunted squirrels because that’s what was out there, and that’s what you did; it was an important part of the cultural and social fabric, and served great positive purposes in both respects,” said Carl Frentress, a 62-year-old, Athens-based wildlife biologist who has lived, worked and hunted squirrels in East Texas throughout his life, as did several generations of his ancestors. “There were plenty of places to hunt, and squirrels were very abundant. Not only was — and is — squirrel hunting a fine way to spend time, immersing yourself in the aura of the woods, it’s one of the best ways for young hunters to learn hunting skills

and woodsmanship. We all learned how to hunt by squirrel hunting and were much better hunters for it."

Start of the decline

That fabric began quickly unraveling in the 1960s.

Changing land use, an explosion in the deer population and an increasingly urban population disconnected from its rural roots sent squirrels and squirrel hunting into a tailspin.

Conversion of mixed forest to commercial pine plantations and "improved" pasture, along with a frenzy of reservoir construction that flooded hundreds of thousands of acres of bottomlands, destroyed much of East Texas' squirrel habitat, reducing squirrel numbers.

But the rise of white-tailed deer in East Texas proved the most devastating blow to the tradition of squirrel hunting.

Deer, nearly extirpated from eastern Texas by the early 1900s, made a comeback beginning in the 1960s.

An aggressive deer stocking program by the state coincided with an explosion of temporarily deer-friendly habitat created by increasing conversion of East Texas uplands to "even-aged" pine management.

East Texas deer numbers climbed rapidly in the 1960s, gathered steam in the 1970s and went through the roof in the 1980s. With that increase in deer came an increase in deer hunters.

Deer hunters began leasing and restricting access to land previously used by squirrel hunters. Deer camps began replacing squirrel camps.

On many of the leases, squirrel hunting was actively discouraged or even prohibited because deer hunters were convinced it made deer more wary and harder to hunt.

"All the focus shifted to deer," Frentress said. "That's where the money and the interest was. White-tailed deer were driving the (recreational/leasing) value of the land, and it got so valuable for deer hunting that it pushed squirrel hunting to the back of the bus, then out the door."

The tradition of squirrel hunting, which had been passed from adults to young hunters, was broken.

Squirrel hunting participation fell as fast as deer hunter numbers rose.

During the 1981-82 hunting season, almost a quarter-million people (231,229, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department data from its Annual Small Game Harvest Survey) hunted squirrels in East Texas.

That number fell below 100,000 by the mid-1990s.

In the 2004-05 hunting season, 70,000 squirrel hunters — less than one-third the number of barely 20 years before — went afield in anticipation of a meal of fried squirrel, biscuits and gravy.

Accelerated harvest of bottomland hardwoods in East Texas — the last refuge of squirrels and squirrel hunters — over the past couple of years has only added fuel to what increasingly seems a funeral pyre.

No one but squirrel hunters seems to care.

No longer a priority

TPWD, which has population monitoring programs for most game and some non-game animals, hasn't tracked squirrel populations for decades.

In 2005, the agency removed squirrels from the annual Small Game Harvest Survey, a move seen as underscoring the abandonment of squirrels and squirrel hunting to their apparent fates.

But squirrels and squirrel hunting remain the center of the universe at the camp on Iron Ore Creek. On opening day this year, a couple-dozen hunters showed before dawn, scattered into the woods and returned with around 100 squirrels.

"That's the fewest we've got on opening day in a long time," Royce Johnson lamented.

Still, it was plenty for a big meal of fried squirrel and squirrel mulligan with more than enough left over for Johnson to distribute later to a network of elderly East Texans who treasure eating squirrel but have no hunters left in their family to provide it.

Tradition runs deep in the Iron Ore Creek camp. One of the most enjoyed happens the afternoon of the first Sunday of the season when dozens of friends and family gather at the camp for a huge meal. Squirrel, of course, is the main course.

"They bring peas and desserts and a little of everything else, and we provide the fried squirrel," Johnson said.

Such has been the cycle on this piece of the Piney Woods since the Iron Ore Creek camp was established in 1974.

"There used to be squirrel camps like this all over this country," Johnson said. "They're all gone now. This is the last one, as far as I know."

And its future, like the future of squirrels and squirrel hunting in East Texas, is not promising.

The only decent squirrel habitat remaining on tracts leased by the Iron Ore Creek group is found in three creek bottoms. Everything else has been converted to pine plantation.

"All three of those bottoms — the places we hunted this morning — are scheduled to be cut in the next nine months," Johnson said. "I don't know what we're going to do next year."

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CHASING SQUIRRELS NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS

WAYNE Willoughby had heard the deer hunters with whom he and other local squirrel hunters shared a San Augustine County lease chuckle, dismissing squirrel hunting as too easy or beneath their talents.

"They thought squirrel hunting was simple — nothing to it. They laughed at us taking our shotguns after squirrels," the lifelong East Texas resident and hard-core squirrel hunter remembered. "So we invited them to try it."

The deer hunters, Houston-area residents with no experience chasing East Texas squirrels, agreed.

"We took them still-hunting. They took their .22s," Willoughby said. "Every now and again, you'd hear those .22s ping! ping! ping! all morning long."

"They never got a single squirrel." They were equally unsuccessful on their second try. But they were hooked on squirrel hunting.

Wild squirrels are challenging game animals, as different in behavior from their careless urban cousins as wild deer are from their park-dwelling, human-acclimated relatives. Wild squirrels are wary, fast to run, just as quick to put a tree trunk between them and an

approaching hunter and very tuned to identifying and evading predators.

Being a successful squirrel hunter requires use of every basic hunting skill — the ability to move quietly through the woods (and find your way out), blend into the forest, sit quietly and patiently, understanding the natural history of your quarry, games' behavior under different conditions, how to shoot and when.

"Squirrel hunting teaches all the hunting skills — things you can learn only by spending time walking and hunting in the woods," said Carl Frentress, native East Texan, squirrel hunter and career wildlife biologist.

"You can't be sloppy. You learn woodsmanship. You see and learn and eventually understand the nuances that most people never even notice."

"The skills you develop to become a good squirrel hunter transfer to other forms of hunting. If you're a good squirrel hunter, you're a good hunter, period."

While East Texas has seen most of its squirrel hunters and squirrel habitat evaporate, low-cost or no-cost, accessible opportunities are out there for experienced squirrel hunters and those new to the pursuit.

Pockets of good squirrel habitat can be found in some of the national

forests in East Texas and on scattered tracts in the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Public Hunting Lands program.

Perhaps the highest quality public squirrel hunting is found in units of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

But hunters, particularly novices, shouldn't expect to take their 10-squirrel daily limit even in the best of squirrel woods.

"Those deer hunters learned that squirrel hunting ain't so easy," Willoughby said. "The squirrels were the ones that ended up doing most of the laughing."

— SHANNON TOMPKINS