

Thoroughly Modern Squirrel Dogs

By Larry Hines

In today's fast-paced world, most hunters tend to specialize. Whether due to time constraints or limited budgets, hunters seem to focus on the type of hunting for which they have the most passion. Specialization usually leads to a high degree of proficiency. Special gear, high levels of strategy, and highly trained, well-bred dogs are the tools of the trade for most specialists. Bow hunting, turkey hunting and waterfowl hunting are just a few that have been brought to such a high level of specialization.

Most people would never think of something as common as squirrel hunting as ever becoming a hunter's specialty. Squirrel hunting is something in which most hunters in West Virginia claim to participate, but they don't spend many hours doing so. After all, for most Mountain State hunters, squirrel hunting has become something to do when out scouting for deer for the upcoming bow season. But over the last decade or so, squirrel hunting has been taken to a new level of specialization thanks to a new phenomenon. Actually, the new phenomenon is an old dog -- the squirrel dog.

Just as many hunters have turned to the old ways to enhance their chosen specialty, such as deer hunting with primitive weapons, modern squirrel hunters have brought the squirrel dog back to a whole new level of popularity.

Squirrel hunting with dogs is a time-honored Appalachian tradi-



Steve Shaluta, Jr.

Feist, a popular, energetic breed used for squirrel hunting.

tion that has been around since the first pioneers ventured into the mountains. In those days everyone, including the dogs, had to earn their keep. The job description for those early dogs included hunting game, herding livestock and guarding the camp or homestead. The dogs that performed these duties well were given special attention. Those that did not perform well were not kept. This was a selective breeding program that more closely resembled natural selection.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s squirrel dogs were starting to become scarce.

Thankfully, a few die-hard squirrel dog breeders kept some good lines of dogs going. They would seek out the best dogs to include in their breeding programs and tested their selections by hunting them hard. Their hunting ability was preserved

and passed on to today's dogs.

Technically, any dog that locates a squirrel and indicates their location by barking up a tree can be called a squirrel dog. Many types of dogs have been used for this job including farm shepherds, bird dogs, rat terriers and even coonhounds. But the breeds of dogs most commonly used to hunt squirrels today are curs and feists.

Given a squirrel's spastic movements from tree to log to ground to tree, it is amazing, even to experienced hunters, that any dog can figure out such a maze of scent molecules.

Both curs and feists have similar characteristics. Curs are the larger of the two breeds and average 35 to 40 pounds. Feists usually weigh less than 25 pounds. Both breeds are compact and well muscled. They come in a variety of colors and some are born with bobtails. They are



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Raven Mouser, 15, of Hedgesville with her dog Shilob, a squirrel dog champion.

very alert with good eyesight and hearing. Most make excellent family pets and are excellent watch dogs.

Make no mistake, these are not your great-great-grandfather's curs and feists. Today's squirrel dogs are the results of many generations of selective breeding based on selecting

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Steve Shaluta, Jr.

A black Mountain Cur, left, and a Mountain Cur with brindle pattern.



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An owner releases his Mountain Cur during a timed treeing contest.

the best hunters tested in the woods by hard hunting and tough competition in field trials. Several breed registries exist that record pedigrees and competition titles. The breed registries also sanction the competitions that include the field trials or 'hunts,' treeing competitions and bench shows. There is a big demand for well-bred curs and feists. Pups usually start at around \$150. Started, or broke dogs, go for \$500 to \$1,000. Top dogs sell for several thousand dollars.

Squirrel dogs have a busy and entertaining hunting style. They busily search the woods ahead of the hunter, stopping occasionally, usually on a log or other vantage point, to look and listen for any squirrels that may be moving about. If their quarry is located, a hot chase will usually end up with the dog barking

on a tree. If no squirrels are located with their senses of sight and hearing, they then use a third tool, their sense of smell. Once a squirrel track is located, the dog will scour the area checking trees to locate the one in which the squirrel is hiding. Given a squirrel's spastic movements from tree to log to ground to tree, it is amazing, even to experienced hunters, that any dog can figure out such a maze of scent molecules.

Once the dog has 'locked down' on a tree and is busily barking to the world that he has done his job, then it becomes the duty of the hunter to locate the squirrel. This is often the hardest part of the hunt. If there are lots of leaves or holes in the tree, the squirrel more often than not will escape. Even in a tree with no leaves or cavities a squirrel has an uncanny ability to disappear. Sometimes a squirrel will decide to 'timber out' of an area as the hunter approaches. This is when the squirrel jumps from one tree top to the next in an effort to get to his den tree. An experienced dog will follow the squirrel with his eyes and attempt to cut off its escape. Many times a squirrel will just bail out in what looks like a controlled fall or glide. When it hits the ground the squirrel turns into a furry blur as it

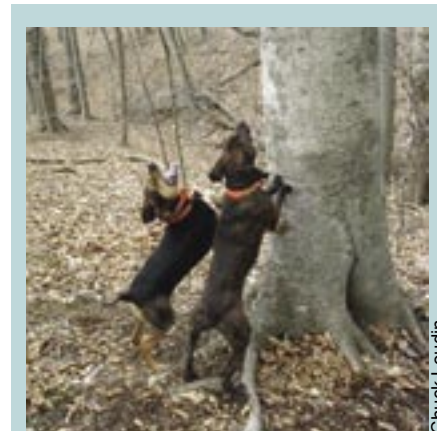
scampers to its den tree. When a squirrel employs this tactic, escape is usually certain.

Squirrel dogs usually hunt close and continually check back in with the hunters. This is important in today's squirrel woods as more hunting territory is fragmented by development and posting.

Squirrel hunting with dogs is an excellent way to introduce kids to the hunting lifestyle. The combination of kids and dogs is a natural and there is usually loads of entertaining action. Shooting opportunities can be very controlled with ample time to reinforce firearm safety.

Squirrel dogs are truly a living piece of Americana that has survived the test of time. Considering that West Virginia is 79 percent forested and squirrels are our most popular small game, it is a safe bet that come autumn, many squirrel hunting specialists will be heading to the woods with their favorite .22 rifle, a good squirrel dog and a taste for squirrel gravy and biscuits.

Larry Hines is the wildlife manager for Sleepy Creek Wildlife Management Area.



Chuck Loudin

Two Mountain Curs owned by Adam Loudin of Buckbannon.

Information about clubs, breed registries and competitions can be found on the internet by logging onto www.sqdog.com.