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A thoughtful gift awakens memories of cherished times.
As I sit back and enjoy reading the latest issue of Virginia Wildlife, I am reminded of the overall contributions of Virginia’s wildlife-based recreational and hunting opportunities, both to the Commonwealth’s economy and to our quality of life. I am excited to see what the future holds, and with your support, look forward to addressing the many challenges before us.

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To Protect Virginia’s Snapping Turtles

NEW REGULATIONS
After searching for a nesting site, this female snapping turtle lays a clutch of 25-55 eggs.

By Jo Ann Abell

One day last fall, the dogs were raising a ruckus in our front yard. Their loud, insistent barking told me they had discovered something that, at least in their minds, didn’t belong there. Living in a very rural part of Rockbridge County in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, we have a lot of venomous snakes, and my fear was they had cornered a rattlesnake or copperhead, but as I got closer, I saw that it was a far less dangerous critter—a snapping turtle.

Unlike box turtles that can pull their head and legs inside their shell when confronted by a predator, the snapping turtle’s plastron (lower shell) is small, leaving much of their body exposed. On land, they make up for this lack of body armor with an aggressive temperament. They are active from late March through October, but snapping turtles can be found in water any month of the year. They’re most often seen in late spring when females search for nest sites, and in early fall, when hatchlings emerge from their eggs to negotiate terrestrial habitats.

Today’s snapping turtles are related to Proganochelys, an ancient turtle that lived 215 million years ago. In comparison, the age of dinosaurs was approximately 150 million years ago, 100 million years after the earliest turtles. Proganochelys had most of the features of today’s turtles, including an armored shell formed from bony plates fused to its ribs and a semi-beak-like structure for gnawing plants. Additional plates around the bottom of the shell protected its legs. Turtles were one of the few reptile groups that survived the impact of a six-mile-wide asteroid that struck the Earth about 65 million years ago and the nuclear winter triggered by the event.

Their bite may not be venomous like a pit viper, but it can still be quite painful. My husband, standing back a healthy distance, tapped the turtle’s beak with a stout stick. The snapping instantly took the bait, clamping down and latching onto it, and even when he pulled on the stick, this guy wasn’t letting go. With the business end of the snapper occupied, we were able to lift it onto a tarp, load it in a wagon, and move it a short distance to the creek in the front field where it, and the dogs, would be safe. We watched as it waddled away, continuing its (or her) journey.

The snapping turtle, Chelydra serpentina, is the Commonwealth’s largest freshwater turtle, and the second largest freshwater turtle in the United States. A full-grown snapper can top over 50 pounds. The state record in Virginia is held by a 51-pound male with a carapace length of just over 18 inches.

Snappers are long-lived and slow to reach maturity until approximately 6 to 7 years of age. Female turtles lay a single clutch of 26–55 eggs annually on average. There is a high nest failure rate, with most of their eggs eaten by raccoons, crows, hawks, skunks, coyotes, dogs, foxes, and a host of other predators. Hatchling survival rate is only 6 to 9 percent in Virginia, but if they make it to adulthood, the rate of survivorship is high.

A Modern-Day Link to Dinosaurs

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Previous page: A common snapper paddles around the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. © Stephen David Johnson

The snapping turtle spends most of its time underwater only leaving to change locations, search for a mate, or lay eggs.
clumsy and slow, and, hence, more vulnerable. As a child, I ran across a young snapper on Theodore Roosevelt Island in Washington, DC. Thinking it was a box turtle, I picked it up. Within seconds, I watched in horror as it extended its head and long neck backwards over top of its shell, its large, open jaws reaching for my hand! My immediate reflex was to drop it, which is exactly what I did. After a moment to collect my thoughts, I was happy to see it waddle away, unhurt.

The Biggest Threat to Snapping Turtles is Man

While snapping turtles are the embodiment of turtles who shared the planet with dinosaurs for a time, they are now obliged to share it with the human species, a far bigger threat to its survival. Each year many females are hit by automobiles in their search for nesting sites, and hatchlings on their way back to the water are frequently run over. Often vehicles will not stop, and some drivers deliberately hit the turtles because they dislike snapping turtles or just enjoy running over them. Nests on roadsides and in gravel pits are often destroyed by vehicles and road grading.

Added to the gauntlet of obstacles snappers face, the species is a game animal in Virginia, and many are harvested each year for the food market. Increasing demand for turtle meat, both in this country and abroad, mainly China, presents a real and present threat to this species. In some states, snapping turtle harvest coincides with the egg-laying season, which hampers reproduction. Females are mostly shipped overseas to augment their aquaculture programs. Males are butchered, canned, and exported as processed meat.

Lack of meaningful regulations and overharvesting over the last decade has taken its toll on Virginia’s snapper population. In 2013, more than 125,000 pounds of snapping turtles were commercially harvested from Virginia’s waterways (actual harvest, including recreational collection, is likely higher). Based on annual permit reports, the 2013 harvest (7,926 turtles) almost doubled the 2012 harvest, and represents a nearly 1,300% increase in annual recorded harvests since 2002. High turtle prices, combined with tighter restrictions in neighboring states and weak regulations in the Commonwealth, have contributed to an increase in the number of commercial harvest permits sold to out-of-state watermen over the past 15 years.

From 2009 to 2013, out-of-state harvesters represented one quarter of the total number of permits issued, while responsible for as much as 70 percent of the annual harvest (approximately 360,000 pounds). As reported in the Richmond Times-Dispatch a few years ago, one of the harvesters that turned to Virginia’s waters when regulations were tightened in their home state was Tommy Fletcher of Rock Hall, Maryland. Having harvested about 22,000 pounds during the June-through-September season the previous year, Fletcher was quoted as saying, “I’d say you have plenty of snappers. How could I work away from home all summer after year if the harvest wasn’t staying consistent?”

“There’s definitely a mentality that there are plenty of snapping turtles out there,” says J.D. Kleopfer, a herpetologist (reptile and amphibian expert) with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), the state’s primary wildlife regulatory agency. Actually, local populations of the snapping turtle have declined significantly in recent years from overharvesting. Kleopfer points to other iconic and once-plentiful turtle species, like the Central American river turtle, the pig-nosed turtle, and the alligator snapping turtle, that have experienced steep population declines from overharvesting and are now at historically low levels across much of their ranges.

“We knew from looking at the snapping turtle harvest numbers that current harvest rates were unsustainable and that local populations were being decimated,” says Kleopfer. “We were also receiving a lot of complaints from Virginia harvesters and other concerned citizens about the number of turtles being taken by non-residents.” In response, the Department launched a multi-year study into the sustainability of Virginia’s commercial snapper harvest.

In 2013, researchers from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), with funding from DGIF’s Nongame Fund and VCU, began a four-year study on the impact of commercial harvesting on snapping turtle populations in the state. “Team Snapper,” led by Benjamin Colteaux, Ph.D., with VCU’s Integrative Life Science program, spent many months catching and tagging turtles and collecting and recording indices of health and growth to determine the impact of wild turtle harvesting. In addition to the impact of commercial harvesting on the snapper population, the team also looked at the toxicology of the turtles, as these animals can show heightened levels of mercury depending upon age and life stage and location and are being exported into the human food market.

Based on study data, combined with information on harvest rates, survival probability, and reproductive output, the researchers could model population growth under various harvest pressure scenarios. According to their models, if harvest levels were reduced, the turtles, being naturally hardy creatures, would have a fighting chance. “Once they get to the adult stage, they are bulletproof,” Colteaux explained in an article in VCU News (October 25, 2017). “Their estimated rate of survival at that point is about 94 percent, but getting them to that point is really tough under current harvest months.”

New Harvest Regulations Effective March 1, 2019

- Minimum curve-line carapace length shall be 13 inches.
- Only Virginia residents shall be eligible to commercially harvest snapping turtles.
- Only 25 permits per year shall be issued.
- No longer will auto renewal be allowed; permits shall be issued on a “first come, first served” basis.
- Permit applications will not be accepted earlier than March 1st. Applications received before March 1st will be discarded.
- Only 20 traps shall be operated per harvester/permit.
- Set poles (unattended baited lines) will no longer be permitted as a method to commercially harvest snapping turtles.
- Copies of sales receipts should accompany annual reports submitted by permit holders. 
or significantly reduced and see how ecosystems where apex predators, such as wolves and sharks, have been removed. "Their impact as an apex predator in these aquatic systems is not fully understood, but we can look at other ecosystems in which these turtles live," says Kleopfer. "Their aggressive behavior when on land. Would you mess with this old girl?"

New Regulations in Effect for 2019

Armed with the science gained from the VCU study supporting a strong need to curb the decline on turtle populations, DGIF adopted a series of new regulations that went into effect on March 1, 2019. (See sidebar on pg. 9 for the complete list of regulations). The most significant changes included raising the minimum curved carapace length from 11 inches to 13 inches, restricting the number of harvesters, and limiting permits to Virginia residents only. Implementation of the new regulations will allow the continued harvesting of snapping turtles, while giving their populations time to recover and increase.

Like many other animals to which people have had little exposure, snapping turtles suffer from an image problem. Most people have heard exaggerated tales about the turtle's irascible disposition. Take the claim, for instance, that they have strong jaws and can bite, a claim proven to be false. While they lack teeth, they will fight back if threatened—but it's understandable that any animal that spends 95 percent of its life in water, where it is king of its domain, would feel vulnerable on land and would act to defend itself. The Commonwealth's snapping turtles are valuable to maintaining the ecological balance in the areas where they live. They are wonderful pond scavengers and garbage collectors that will eat any dead or dying fish and decomposed organic matter they come upon. Studies show that they don't significantly impact fish or bird populations, mostly because they only prey upon diseased, weak, or very young animals.

Snapping turtles have been living in our North American wetlands almost unchanged for millions of years. Having witnessed the drift of continents, dramatic changes in climate, the birth of islands, and the rise and fall of mountain ranges, they are one of the greatest success stories of our North American wetlands almost unchanged for millions of years. Having witnessed the drift of continents, dramatic changes in climate, the birth of islands, and the rise and fall of mountain ranges, they are one of the greatest success stories in all of nature. 

In Ann Abel has been writing about wildlife for 20+ years. She lives on a farm in Lexington with her husband, three dogs, chickens, and honeybees.

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Mystery Birds of the Marsh

I had been coming to the great marsh off Wachapreague on the seaside of Virginia’s Eastern Shore for more than four decades. Over the years, U.S. 13 that runs up the center of the peninsula changed from a check-your-tank byway to a thoroughfare lined with Food Lions and Mickey Ds. But the great marsh on the oceanside remains unchanged, a wonderfully wild place between the mainland and the barrier islands, a place hosting more than 400 bird species, including Rallus crepitans, the clapper rail, AKA marsh hen—my quarry.

Marsh hens are mystery birds, often heard but seldom seen. Its “kek-kek-kek” call is a familiar sound to anyone who spends time near the marsh, but few could tell you its source. Marsh hens are more reclusive than a stool pigeon in witness protection. Staying alive means staying out of sight. Its strategy for survival is to sit tight and hide, or run or swim away from danger. If forced to use its stubby wings, it pops up like a grasshopper and stays...
aloft just long enough to reach the nearest patch of cover—up, flutter-flutter, plop and gone.

With a little imagination, you can see how a clapper rail came to be called a marsh hen. The dusky brown to cinnamon-tinged bird, 14 to 16 inches from beak to tail, has a passing resemblance to a washed-out Rhode Island Red, overlooking the long, curved beak, spindly legs, and anorexic physique. Populations have been stable for as long as anyone has been keeping track. If a spring storm wipes out a nest, marsh hens will re-nest as many as six times with 2-16 eggs. Both parents share responsibilities for incubation and brood rearing, another plus for a robust population. Chicks are out of the nest within a day after hatching and are introduced by their parents to a meaty diet of clams, crabs, spiders, slugs, and other marine life.

**Sport of Kings and Strong Backs**

John J. Audubon called marsh hen hunting “the sport of kings” when he first observed it in the salt marsh off Charleston, S.C., in 1831. His characterization likely came from seeing a traditional hunt: At high tide a gentleman gunner sat comfortably in the front of a wooden skiff, while a “pusher” stood in the stern with a long cedar pole and bent his back to drive the heavy boat forward to flush the birds.

Today, marsh henning is done much the same way, although perhaps more democratically. Two hunters may share the pusher and gunner roles, switching places at agreed upon times. Or, a single pusher-hunter drives the boat and switches from push-pole to shotgun on the flush. In any case, the basic ingredients are the same—a boat, a pole or paddle, and a shotgun.

Hunting success for marsh hens depends on high tides. The tides are highest during the few days around the full moon and new moon, and therefore are the most promising hunt days. An easterly wind will drive extra water in from the ocean and produce an even higher tide than predicted. A strong westerly wind makes for a negligible tide. However, tide charts and weather forecasts give predictions, not guarantees. What a tide makes on any given day is a crap shoot. Mother Nature can be a fickle lady. Hunting strategy is straightforward. At high tide, look for the high spots where marsh hens will congregate. Ease up the pusher and gunner roles, switching places as agreed upon times. Or, a single pusher-hunter drives the boat and switches from push-pole to shotgun on the flush. In any case, the basic ingredients are the same—a boat, a pole or paddle, and a shotgun.

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Use your least favorite small-gauge gun because saltwater rust will appear before the hunt is over. Marsh hens succumb easily, so an open choked 20-gauge with #7 steel shot is heavy enough. Old timers say, “Marsh hens die at the sound of gunfire,” which is far from the truth. In fact, if a downed bird starts fluttering on the water, hit it again before it dives and disappears.

Four Decades of Chasing

When I started chasing marsh hens 40-some years ago, I was young “like a rock,” as Bob Seger sang. I would charge out of Wachapreague running hard against the wind, alone in a 17-foot Chincoteague scow, to the low marsh off Paramore Island where I'd cut the motor upwind of good cover, jack the prop out of the water, and wield a 16-foot cedar pole to manhandle the scow for a good drift. Maybe I'd jam the pole into the mud to secure the boat and take a shot, maybe not, but as soon as the drift was done, I'd drop the motor and do it all over again.

Years passed and a road bike tumble and a butt-slide down a Blue Ridge slope altered my lower back such that my scow poling days were done. I moved down to a slim duck boat and then to a lightweight canoe to ease the pushing and paddling load. Four years ago my back finally convinced me that my marsh henning days were done. The lower back torque required to push any skiff or paddle any canoe changed my end of the hunt day ritual, and
Indian Summer Feast

Marsh hens once again are part of my Indian Summer Feast. It’s the annual meal that celebrates the remnants of game in the freezer from last season, like venison and duck, and game fresh to the larder, like marsh hens and dove. Marsh hens have a taste all their own, a cross between dove and woodcock with a hint of salt marsh. I like them in a choucroute that keeps them moist and flavorful. Big Virginia wines brightened the feast—Horton Syrah for the venison, Stone Mountain Cabernet Franc Reserve for the dove and duck, and Whitehall Viognier for the marsh hens.

Old Sport, New Craft

It felt good to be back in the big marsh that October morning, even after the first marsh hen caught me day dreaming. I put some upper body muscle into my strokes to move to new cover and the Pursuit proved its promise of speed, tracking, and maneuverability. Some kayakers might fault the swivel seat for losing a smidge of paddle power as it swings a few degrees to either side with each stroke. I like it as a plus, since the slight swivel keeps my back aligned with my hips as I paddle—no twist, no torque, no problem.

As the tide rose, I worked the kayak inside the line of marsh grass in no more than three inches of water to discourage the birds from slinking away from the gut. A larger craft would have to stay in the gut’s deeper water.

As I neared the end of a long sliver of marsh grass, I saw two rails far ahead swimming low in the water for the marsh line on the other side of the gut. I was about to go after them when two more popped up out of the short grass off the bow and broke left. I shipped the paddle and reached for the pump-gun as I had practiced. I swiveled the chair 45 degrees to the left and caught up with the first bird. I’d like to say I took a fancy double, but the second bird folded its wings and plopped into the grass before I could rack another shell.

The flood tide held for 90 minutes and I put six more marsh hens in the boat, working the guts, swiveling the seat to line up on the birds, left or right. As soon as the tide dropped a few inches, the marsh hens moved off the high spots and became ghosts in the tall grass once again.

During the morning I’d heard distant shots from my old go-to marsh off Paramore Island. Back at the dock, a burly young waterman who had pushed his 18-foot Carolina skiff for two Maryland hunters lamented on their morning, “They shot okay, but not much tide and pretty darned few birds. Got three.” He did a quick double-take when he saw my seven marsh hens, but only nodded, “Nice boat ya got there.”

“You bet!” I said as I stood arrow straight and hoisted the Pursuit onto its trailer all by myself.

John Shingren is a freelance outdoors writer and editor living in Cumberland County. He will have a new book out later this year on fair chase wild boar hunting in the southeast.

© John Shingren

BE SAFE HUNTING FROM A KAYAK!

- Don’t forget to wear your life jacket.
- Tell someone where you will be and when you expect to return.
- Wear and bring along sunscreen, sunglasses, and a hat.
- Don’t forget bug spray for those nasty flies!
- Bring water to stay hydrated.
- Always control the muzzle of your firearm.

RESOURCES

- For information on the Pursuit kayak: www.nucanoe.com
- Boating equipment regulations: www.dgif.virginia.gov/boating/equipment-regulations
- Hunting seasons and bag limits: www.dgif.virginia.gov/hunting/regulations/migratory-gamebirds/#rails

not for the better—salt oysters and Dogfish Head ale gave way to heating pads and Ibuprofen. It took three days to stand up straight.

When I told my tale of boats and back woes to Todd Sadler, the fishing and boating manager at Green Top Sporting Goods, he pointed me toward the new Pursuit kayak by NuCanoe. It’s a sleek, super stable 13-foot kayak with enough features and accessories to please any fisher or hunter. But it was the Pinnacle 360 seat that got my attention. The seat redefines sit-on-top, with a 7- to 11-inch adjustable height, serious lumbar support, and a full 360 degree rotation. On a Pursuit floor model in the store, I found I could turn the high seat sideways and easily get in and out, and turn it 180 degrees to reach gear in the stern without any body twisting. The seatback seemed low enough to paddle with my upper body, not my lower back. Sadler and I agreed, the proof would be in the paddling, so to speak, and I was off to the Eastern Shore to see how the Pursuit and I would get along.

The author collects his quarry making three of seven clapper rails for the day.
The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries maintains 44 management areas totaling more than 225,000 acres for a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities. For more information on how you can visit our wildlife management areas, go to: www.dgif.virginia.gov/wma.
Today, the Smith’s browns are benefit-
ing from creative fisheries management
by the Virginia Department of Game and
Inland Fisheries (DGIF). Al Kittredge,
secretary for the Smith River chapter of
TU, explains that one of the most bene-

ficial acts has been moving browns from
several places near Philpott Dam, where
they are densely populated, to below Mar-
tinsville Dam where they are not.

“This transfer has been a huge suc-
cess,” says Kittredge. “Several years ago,
we [TU volunteers and DGIF] started
doing this with a few hundred fish placed
in regular coolers. This fledgling effort
morphed into a formal program when
[DGIF fisheries biologist] George Palmer
took over responsibility for the Smith. He
lined up an empty stocking truck com-
plete with aerator and cooler.”

Kittredge says the majority of trout
captured near the dam were thin and only
four to seven inches long because of a lack
of food.

“The browns were then measured
and weighed, but instead of being re-
leased in the same area, their adipose fins
were clipped prior to being transported
by truck to several release points below
Martinsville Dam where there is more
food,” continues Kittredge. “In a summer
of 2018 sample, we collected a good
number with clipped adipose fins. They
were all fat and in the 10- to 14-inch range
which shows that food matters.”

The second management strategy oc-
curred in 2011 when DGIF placed a slot
limit on the 31-mile stretch from Philpott
Dam to Mitchell Bridge. No brown 10 to
24 inches can be kept and only one longer
than 24 inches can be creel daily. Please note that the slot does not apply to other trout species. Kittredge believes the slot is working.

"I'm sure there have been some violations with people still creel- ing fish within the protected slot but I have not personally seen any of it," he says. "We now have a Conservation Police Officer dedicated to Henry County. The word soon got out that he was actively patrolling the Smith.

"If there is a problem with the slot limit, it is convincing fishermen to keep trout smaller than 10 inches. Folks are thinking why would they want six fish that are only 6 to 8 inches long."

Kittredge adds that an upside for folks who like to keep trout is that many of the stocked rainbows tend to be a foot or so long, and he has caught 'bows up to 16 inches.

The third management activity was the stocking of fingerling triploid browns below Martinsville Dam in any number; however, we have collected small browns below Martinsville Dam in any number; however, we have collected them since stocking began in 2015.

Floating the Smith

To me, just as exciting as the management program is that the Smith River now boasts a series of excellent access points with boat slides, gravel parking lots, and kiosks detailing where an angler is, where the access points are, and the miles between access points. Henry County Parks and Recreation deserves a great deal of credit for accomplishing this.

This past July, Mark Taylor and I took the South Martinsville to Frith Road float of about two miles. This excursion is typical of many on the river with riffles, Class I rapids, and the Marrowbone Creek to Mitchell Bridge float of about 3 miles.

A crucial aspect of floating or wading the Smith River is to be aware of Philpott dams during periods of non-generation. The water is too skinny and boaters may end up pushing or pulling their crafts over rocks and shallow areas.

Fly Patterns

As many river smallmouth and trout anglers believe, Al Kittredge feels that "how you fish is more important than what you fish." That said his go to pattern is a fly he developed, the Smith River Alliworm.

"If you have a nymph that is to the Smith will fall in love with it. And people who fall in love with the Smith will advocate for it. That's a very good thing for any river."

Size 16 Zebra Midge

"I fish it under a strike indicator all year long" explains Kittredge. "I hang or drop a Size 16 or 18 zebra midge below it. Lately, the zebra midge is taking more fish than the Alliworm. I have found that trying to match the hatch does not work for me. I just plod along with a nymph (any dark one will do) and a dropper.

Douglas Jessie, past president of the Smith River TU chapter, says that the Smith River TU chapter, says that nymphs, especially the Slumpbuster and Parachute Adams, work most of the year. See accompanying sidebar.

Summer Up

Mark Taylor says DGIF's management program and Henry County's access point kiosks have combined to be a real plus for Martinsville and Henry County.

"Anything that helps a fishery and a river will help not only fishermen and the paddling community but also the economy of an area," he says. "The Smith River is near Roanoke and it's not far from other places in the Piedmont and Western Virginia. Anybody who comes to the Smith will fall in love with it. And people who fall in love with the Smith will advocate for it. That's a very good thing for any river."

As many river smallmouth and trout anglers believe, Al Kittredge feels that "how you fish is more important than what you fish." That said his go to pattern is a fly he developed, the Smith River Alliworm.

"I fish it under a strike indicator all year long" explains Kittredge. "I hang or drop a Size 16 or 18 zebra midge below it. Lately, the zebra midge is taking more fish than the Alliworm. I have found that trying to match the hatch does not work for me. I just plod along with a nymph (any dark one will do) and a dropper.

The second part of his go to pattern is the Soft Hackle Pupa which he says is a fly he developed, the Smith River Soft Hackle.

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Douglas Jessie, past president of the Smith River TU chapter, says that
Fox Squirrels on the REBOUND

By Ken Perrotte

When Marc Puckett returned home after a stint in an Army airborne unit, his father asked if there was any special meal he’d like. While a tender, juicy steak or some fancy seafood dish might be a common request, Puckett had his heart set on squirrel gravy and biscuits.

“My dad used a pressure cooker to first tenderize the squirrels. He’d then flour, salt and pepper them, and fry them in an electric skillet. We’d then make gravy from the juices and a little bacon grease,” Puckett recalled. “I’m told they are really good if slow cooked in a crock pot, but we never got past the squirrel gravy and biscuits.”

Today, as the Department’s Small Game Project Leader, Puckett is attuned to all of Virginia’s many small critters, feathered and furred alike. But fond memories of setting out in early autumn with his father, looking for choice hickory trees where they could return at daybreak to listen for the sounds of squirrels in the treetops cutting nuts make him a big fan of bushytails.

Puckett said four subspecies of Eastern fox squirrels were once found throughout Virginia, the most common being the “Mountain Variety” or Eastern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger vulpinus*).

“They’re fairly common now along the west slope of the Blue Ridge and are becoming more common out into the western Piedmont counties with occasional confirmed sightings in Central Virginia,” Puckett reported.

A second variety, the reddish fox squirrel, (*Sciurus niger rufiventris*) is found in the extreme tip of Southwest Virginia and is coming from the Midwest. The third variety is the Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger cinereus*), recently delisted as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but still listed by Virginia as a “Species of Special Concern” in the state’s Wildlife Action Plan.

Habitat is crucial to recovery of these treetop trophies.

Fox squirrels, such as this southeastern variety, prefer to forage on the ground where there is open understory. © Todd Pusser
Virginia tries to give hunters ample opportunities to hunt squirrels without hurting the population, limiting hunting to times when most young squirrels have been weaned. Virginians can hunt squirrels of some kind almost seven months out of the year. Check the hunting digest for specific seasons and bag limits.

Hunting with small dogs that can tree squirrels has many fans. A .22 LR rifle is usually the preferred firearm, although shotguns are also popular. Modern air rifles often have sufficient power and accuracy to capably take squirrels.

Hunters are asked to share all fox squirrel sightings with the Department in an effort to better document their range. For additional information see the bottom of page 26 and thank you for any help you can provide!

A successful harvest provides enough for squirrel gravy and biscuits!

Eastern fox squirrels don’t have the dark mask of their southeastern cousins and represent the most hunted of the fox squirrels.

Numbers Slowly Rebounding

Today, there is cause for optimism in many parts of the landscape and Puckett sees expanding opportunities for fox squirrel hunting. “We see fox squirrels populating parts of the western Piedmont, and when we feel they have reached numbers to support harvest we may open a limited season. That could still be several years down the road,” Puckett said, adding, “We are also working on reintroducing Southeastern fox squirrels to try to stimulate their population recovery as well.”

North Carolina has a very limited Southeastern fox squirrel season, with a limit of one per day and ten per year. Puckett noted, “That season has generated a lot of interest. It’s almost like a trophy experience for hunters who’ve never seen fox squirrels before.”

Puckett’s own boyhood experiences convinced him that squirrels are an ideal introductory species for young hunters.

Squirrels really build woodcraft. A young hunter learns to know what squirrels’ claws sound like on hickory bark or what cutting or grinding sounds like. Here’s a hint: you can use two quarters, rubbing the rough edges together sharply, to mimic a feeding
squirrel and sometimes call in another squirrel or make one look at you from around a tree,” Puckett said.

It doesn’t matter if fox, gray or red squirrels are the quarry; each offers unique challenges, the biologist noted. Good squirrel
hunters learn the differences in each squirrel's calls. Fox squirrels hide and sit still for long periods, requiring hunter patience. Gray
squirrels, when spooked, will flee with treetop dashes, quickly
crossing several trees. But they move more and are often easier
to spot. Red squirrels, with their small size and seemingly hyper
behavior, seldom hold still long enough for a shot.

“Each presents a great quarry that I wish more young people
went after,” Puckett said.

Ken Pevette is a King George County resident and the outdoors columnist
for Fredericksburg's Free Lance-Star newspaper. Contact him at
Kevociate@gmail.com.

Fox Squirrel Facts and Figures
- Weigh 1.5 to 3 pounds.
- Love open, mature woodlands, woodlots, and the
farmland edges. Open, long-leaf pine forests favored in
more southerly regions.
- Tend to have a lower, more guttural, choppy “bark”
than gray squirrels.
- Have 4 large, upper molariform teeth, compared to 5
for gray squirrels.
- Their bones, teeth, and soft tissues contain a substance
called uroporphyrin, which produces a pinkish tint in
bones and other tissues.
- Have one of the most highly varied coats of any North
America mammal. Their fur can vary in color.
- Usually have from 1 to 6 young per litter with 2 to 4
being common. Tend to breed in winter, with young
born in mid-late February. More likely to have one litter
annually, compared to gray squirrels which often have
two.
- Young fox squirrels are weaned at 12 to 13 weeks. Fe-
male do all the rearing of the young.
- They’re hearty. If they make it through their first year,
survival rates are high.
- Large hawks and owls and furbearers such as foxes,
coyotes, and bobcats prey on fox squirrels. But lack of
suitable habitat, not predation, limits their numbers.

FOX SQUIRREL INFORMATION NEEDED!
The Department would like to know if you’ve seen fox squirrels in any of the blue counties
depicted on the accompanying map. These squirrels are approximately 1.5 to 2 times bigger
than a gray squirrel and have markings in orange, red, black, and white. There is additional
information in the latest Hunting & Trapping Digest on page 47. In an effort to better
document fox squirrels in Virginia, please report any sightings via photographs and/or GPS
coordinates, and a description of the location to: Small Game Project Leader,
Marc Puckett at: marc.puckett@dgf.virginia.gov.
Included here are updated maps of the western region of the state where the Department is actively managing for trout. As always, streams are delineated as: stocked trout waters, wild trout waters, and special regulation waters. Special regulations include delayed harvest, fee-fishing, catch-and-release, special creel limits, size limits, and other restrictions. Remember, detailed information about special regulation waters as well as the Department’s entire trout management program can be found online at www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/trout and inside the fishing digest, published in January.

TROUT STOCKING OVERVIEW
Defined by Areas 1-5
CRAIG COUNTY
1. Barbours Creek (NF)
2. Meadow Creek
3. Potts Creek (NF)
4. Dismal Creek (NF)
5. Johns Creek
6. Little Stony Creek
7. Meadow Creek
8. Big Stony Creek (NF)
9. Wolf Creek
10. Craig Creek (NF)
11. Pandapas Pond (NF)
12. Poverty Creek (NF)
13. Toms Creek
14. Burks Fork
15. Goose Creek
16. Howell Creek
17. Laurel Fork
18. Little Indian Creek
19. Mica Fork
20. Rush Fork
21. W. Fork Little River
22. Big Reed Island Creek
23. Chestnut Creek
24. E. Fork Crooked Creek
25. E. Fork Little Reed Island Creek
26. Elk Spur Branch
27. Little Snake Creek
28. NF & SF Stewarts Creek
29. Snake Creek
30. Stewarts Creek
31. Lovill’s Creek
32. Venrick Run
33. W. Fork Reed Creek (NF)
34. Big Wilson Creek
35. Little Wilson Creek
36. Mill Creek
37. Quebec Branch
38. Wilburn Branch
39. Chestnut Creek
40. Elk Creek Lower
41. Elk Creek Upper
42. Fox Creek (NF)
43. Hales Lake (NF)
44. Helton Creek
45. Middle Fox Creek
46. Middle Fork Powell River
47. Norton Reservoir
48. Bear Creek Reservoir
49. Powell River
50. Martins Creek
51. North Fork Powell River
52. Indian Creek
53. Big Moccasin Creek
54. Big Cedar Creek
55. Laurel Bed Creek
56. Big Brumley Creek
57. Big Tumbling Creek
58. Brumley Creek
59. Green Cove Creek
60. Straight Branch (NF)
61. Tennessee Laurel
62. Valley Creek
63. Whitetop Laurel (NF)
64. Beartree Lake (NF)
65. South Holston Reservoir
66. Cove Creek
67. Roaring Fork
68. Little Tumbling Creek
69. Maiden Spring Creek
70. Laurel Creek (NF)
71. Lake Witten
72. Lincolnshire Lake
73. South Fork Powell River (Dunford Park)
74. Comers Creek (NF)
75. Cressy Creek (NF)
76. Dickey Creek (NF)
77. Hurricane Creek (NF)
78. Little Laurel Creek
79. Middle Fork Holston River (Chilhowie)
80. Middle Fork Holston River (Marion)
81. Middle Fork Holston River (Upper)
82. Big Moccasin Creek (NF)
83. Staley Creek
84. South Fork Powell River
85. Big Tumbling Creek
86. Brumley Creek
87. Green Cove Creek
88. Straight Branch (NF)
89. Tennessee Laurel
90. Whitetop Laurel (NF)
91. Beartree Lake (NF)
92. South Holston Reservoir
93. Cove Creek
94. Roaring Fork
95. Little Tumbling Creek
96. Maiden Spring Creek
97. Laurel Creek (NF)
98. Lake Witten
99. Lincolnshire Lake
100. South Fork Powell River (Dunford Park)

Stocked Trout Lakes
Stocked Trout Reaches
Fee Fishing
Put and Take
Special Regulation
Urban Fishing Program
Youth Fishing Only
Delayed Harvest
Fee Fishing
Put and Take
Special Regulation
Wild Trout
Youth Fishing Only
DGIF WMAs
National Park
National Forest
Area 4

Area 5
Every year at Holiday Lake, during Hunter Ed advanced training, now retired Game Warden Captain Mike Ashworth would read “The Letter.” He would do this at the beginning of his class on muzzleloading. The letter was from a soldier, during the Civil War, writing to his wife while he was entangled in the bitter struggle that it was. The soldier relayed in reflective detail the love for her, his family, and his longing to be there, present, in familiar surroundings. Its poetic flow and elegant pen was such that is seldom seen these days. The letter, without a doubt, renewed a connection between the two, a stirring of remembrances and emotion of a passion separated by distance and time.

Do I dare compare that letter with the one I received? Not written with pen and paper but painted on a window of canvas, taking me back to days afield with Lab and gun. This painting, gifted to me at Christmas by my wife, son, and daughter, was composed by my wife’s sister, Brenda Sylvia of Reedville, Va. On the face, it depicts Kate, our 10-year-old Lab and her proud retrieve of a cherished black duck near the Chickahominy River. It captures her excited anticipation, as she awaits the next toll of fowl to circle the marsh.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. If that’s true, this work is worth a thousand more. It draws me in, beyond what is there; I feel the chill of the winter marsh, accompanied by family, friends, a good dog, and the occasional visit of whistling wings. I reminisce as the sun breaks through the canopy and illuminates a stand of bald cypress trees standing at attention to the break of dawn. I see the frost glistening on the marsh grass; the icy crystals break and fall into the water as a red-winged blackbird takes rest on the blade. In the distance, over the river, I hear Canada geese transitioning from restful waters to their feeding grounds. And then, as if on cue, a pair of black ducks enter the stage. They circle the hide in perfect unison but do not commit. Will they consider another pass? Not today... as they continue out, over the trees to bigger water. Yet, the day is won. A front is in the forecast, a prediction of cold wind and falling weather. Will this turn the tide and bring favor to our love of the hunt? The anticipation of another perfect morning is set... and then... my skin begins to warm and I hear the familiar sounds of home. The symphony of the marsh is over, for now, but it makes no difference, as I know the score, and the players. A black iron skillet is removed from its heat, the aroma of sage and thyme fill the room as a day’s past harvest is relished. The window opens slightly; the song is extended for a moment until it fades.

These days, Kate is much slower and often needs a boost in the truck or boat. We were hopeful she would accompany us for one more season, however, her hunting days have ended. An unforeseen ailment will preclude her from ever going afield again. Knowing this, Kate’s last retrieve comes to mind. I recall it vividly, as she swam the creek, searched the reeds and returned, as fate would have it, with a beautiful black duck. Had I known at the time, I would have lingered in that moment just a bit longer. This season will be different; a hole not filled, a glass half empty. Even so, I will always be grateful for the gift and the blessing of memories, transferred by brush, as she looks skyward, standing sentry to the window on the marsh.

A priceless painting is worth a thousand memories of times in the marsh and a beautiful Labrador named Kate.

B.I. Bell, hired as a Virginia Game Warden in 1994, is an avid waterfowler and currently a Conservation Police Sergeant assigned to DGIF Headquarters.
The Rail Bird Hunter's Bible
Walter ‘Joe Guide’ Dinkins
Virtual Bookworm Publishing
Photos and Illustrations
www.virtualbookwormpublishing.com
amazon.com

“If you pursue this unique and sporting marsh bird with passion next season, or later in your life’s adventures, whether in your home waters, or in a neighboring state’s coastal salt marshes, you will see for yourself why so many people who love rail hunting try to keep it a secret from the waterfowling community; you’ll soon realize just how addicting rail hunting can be.”

– Walter Dinkins

This book is truly a labor of love. Walter Dinkins, aka ‘Joe Guide’ (a nickname bestowed on him when he was five years old by legendary outdoor writer Havilah Babcock), was for many years acutely aware of a large gap in the range of current sporting manuals. Where were the books on the nuts and bolts of contemporary rail hunting? Where could the novice and experienced waterfowlers go for information and inspiration? Since no such books existed, Dinkins decided to take action. He wrote and published The Rail Bird Hunter’s Bible himself.

Dinkins’ can-do attitude isn’t surprising. He grew up in and around the marshes of South Carolina’s low country. He’s a Presbyterian (PCUSA) minister, and a retired U.S. Navy Chaplin, with multiple deployments in five different combat zones under his belt. Having been stationed in Norfolk, Virginia Beach, and Little Creek, he’s hunted rail along Virginia’s eastern salt marshes and agrees that Wachapreague is the ‘rail hunting mecca of Eastern Virginia’. He’s an experienced fly angling and waterfowling guide, and also just happens to be a really good storyteller.

The storytelling aspect of his personality is integral to the book’s flow. Dinkins began his book between deployments to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and he finished the book well after retirement. While there are chapters dedicated to specific concerns: The Atlantic Flyway, History of the Marsh Hen, Shotguns, Shells & Accessories, Boats, Retrieving Dogs, and Hunting Gear, the narratives also include unexpected switchbacks, and you never know where an important aside about an environmental concern, or a fond memory of a specific rail hunting trip will emerge. The book is less your standard guide and more a conversation with an old friend passionate about rail and the natural worlds in which they thrive. By the end of the book, you’ll learn how rail are hunted in the traditional manner with skiff and pole, how flood tides relate to a successful rail hunt, where to hunt, and what gear you’ll need for the trip. You’ll also gain important insights into current habitat conservation efforts and the need for more rail banding to enhance scientific research.

The writing is informal in tone, but the book has been painstakingly researched, and there is much about the history of rail hunting in America that will be new information to most waterfowlers. For readers hungry for more, Dinkins includes a comprehensive bibliography and four tasty recipes, including Rail Bites and Sora PEPP Pie.

The Rail Bird Hunter’s Bible

2020 Photography Showcase Deadline:
Monday, February 3

NEW CATEGORY!
Virginia is for Outdoor Lovers

Don’t Forget Your Duck Stamps and HIP Registration

WANT TO LEARN TO HUNT?

HUNTER SKILLS WEEKEND
September 6-8

YOUTH & APPRENTICE HUNTING WEEKEND - September 28 & 29

YOUTH & APPRENTICE BEAR & TURKEY HUNTING WEEKEND - October 12 & 13

YOUTH & VETERANS WATERFOWL HUNTING DATES - October 26 & February 8, 2020

For more information: www.dgif.virginia.gov/events

2019 Virginia Migratory Waterfowl Conservation Stamp artwork © Guy Crintenden
Sixth Annual Trapping Workshop
Join Virginia Trappers Association certified instructors to learn basic trapping skills.

October 12, 2019
Meherrin Vol. Fire Dept.
64 Moores Ordinary Rd.
Meherrin, VA 23954
8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

YOU MUST REGISTER!
Call (434) 392-9645 by October 6.
No walk-ins.
This free class is limited so sign up ASAP!
Meherrin Fire Department will be cooking lunch; menu will vary and proceeds will benefit the fire department!

In addition, we accidentally left out several anglers who should have received recognition in our 2018 Angler Hall of Fame which appeared in the May/June issue.

2018 Anglers of the Year
Bowfin, 11 lbs. 0 oz.; 31” - Andrew Bagwell, Henrico, All other waters, 7/12/2018
Rainbow Trout, 9 lbs. 14 oz.; 25.25” - Billy Bean, Sr., Pelham, NC., Roanoke River, 7/03/2018

2018 Experts of the Year
Yellow Perch, Raymond Misseri

Again, we are very sorry for these omissions.

Congratulations to Lauren D. Tilson, of Marion, for her cool photograph of a pileated woodpecker feeding on sumac berries. This image was captured with a Nikon CoolPix P530E camera, ISO 280, 1/500, f/.9. Lauren also has a photograph of her dad in our fox squirrel story. Way to go Lauren!

For contest rules go to: www.dgif.virginia.gov/kidsnfishing

For more information: Judy Thomas, jmthomasbotart@gmail.com
Laughter, anticipation, and excitement filled the air as students waded into the cool waters of the Rapidan River in the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries’ (DGIF) Rapidan Wildlife Management Area. Whether it was flipping over rocks, exploring the local ecosystem, snorkeling, electro-fishing, or casting dry flies into pools, students had fun learning about brook trout, cold water conservation, and fly fishing at Trout Unlimited’s (TU) Tri-State Conservation and Fly Fishing Youth Camp.

Trout Unlimited and DGIF have worked together closely over the years to conserve, restore, and promote cold-water fisheries across the Commonwealth. As a conservation partner, Trout Unlimited has expended great effort in restoring brook trout habitat and promoting sound riparian zone management across Virginia’s trout fisheries. Fisheries biologists from DGIF and TU have both been heavily involved in the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture, a multi-state and non-government organization fish habitat partnership. TU has also worked alongside DGIF to open up public access and to improve trout fisheries through restoration in rivers such as Mossy Creek, Buffalo Creek, and the Upper South River. Over the years, TU’s Virginia Council has assisted in the development of DGIF’s Stocked Trout and Wild Trout Management Plans. Often, Trout Unlimited members join DGIF biologists in the field sampling streams, stocking fish, installing habitat, and discussing plans for new projects.

Trout Unlimited is also an essential outreach and education partner of the Agency. This effort has developed programs like Trout in the Classroom and the Tri-State Conservation and Fly Fishing Youth Camp held for the past 15 summers on the banks of the Rose River at Graves Mountain Lodge in Syria, Virginia.

Working together, both Trout Unlimited and DGIF will continue to improve trout fisheries across the state. If you would like to get involved, consider becoming a Trout Unlimited member today by visiting www.tu.org/get-involved.
Dear Luke,

I just acquired a great looking English pointer from a well-known breeder in the Midwest. I plan to hunt both grouse in Michigan and pheasant in the Dakotas. The dog has been microchipped. Can I hunt him without a collar?

Sween A., Poy Sippi, WI

Dear Luke,

I’ve been working on blind retrieves with my new puppy. Is there an easy way to build his confidence when trying to retrieve a training dummy when he has not seen it thrown?

Jeremiah J., Ashland, VA

Dear Jeremiah,

What Of’ Jones did, when teaching me blind retrieves, was to take a white wooden stake and then he would throw dummies so that I could see them landing near the stake. He would then line me up facing the stake and send me to retrieve. It didn’t take me long to figure out that wherever the white stake was, that was where I would find the dummies.

After a bit, he would move the stake further away which increased the distance of the retrieve. Once I got used to making longer retrieves, he did not let me see the dummies to the stake. I still knew, however, if I could see the stake, I would find the dummies. Then he would lay the stake on the ground but always placed the dummies where the stake was. Eventually, I learned that wherever he lined me up—if I went far enough in a straight line—I would find a dummy.

Remember, go slow with each new training lesson. The point of this exercise is to build not only your pup’s confidence in himself, but also his confidence in you. The end result is a team you can count on!


A lifelong naturalist and wildlife photographer, Mike Roberts enjoys sharing his knowledge with others. You can reach him at return2nature@aol.com.

A Walk in the Woods

Column and photograph by Mike Roberts

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Let’s GRoW

Column and photographs by Carol A. Heiser

Ambient light painting differs from the typical light painting techniques where an artificial light source is used at night to “paint” light on a tree, barn or other subject. Instead, ambient light painting occurs during the day and uses a combination of slow shutter speeds and slight camera movements to create abstract compositions. The results resemble a Monet painting.

For those who abhor using a tripod, you are in luck. Ambient light painting allows handholding the camera. Start by setting the camera’s native ISO to its lowest setting, which for most cameras is anywhere between 64 to 200. To further slow the shutter speed, use an aperture of f/11 or f/16 and attach a polarizer, which not only helps pop the colors, but further decreases the shutter speed by a stop or two.

Using a focal length between 24mm to 70mm, adjust for the exposure has been completed. It’s that simple! Press the shutter button and stop moving the camera only after the shutter speed, use an aperture of f/11 or f/16 and attach

ambient light painting occurs during the day and uses a combination of slow shutter speeds and slight camera movements to create abstract compositions. The results resemble a Monet painting.

In the digital darkroom, I adjust levels, add some saturation and use special filters such a tonal contrast or bleach bypass to fine-tune contrast in the highlights, shadows, and midtones.

Give ambient light painting a try. Some folks will think you are a bit odd when they see you moving your camera up and down while you are photographing, but remember, Mr. Claude Oscar Monet will be so proud!

A past president of the North American Nature Photography Association and former contributing editor for Outdoor Photographer Magazine, Jim is the nature photography instructor at the Chincoteague Bay Field Station, Wallops Island, Virginia. Visit Jim at: www.jimclarkphoto.com or visit him on Facebook.

Resources

Recipe by Paige Pearson  ●  Photo by Meghan Marchetti

When you think of eating squirrel, well, you may ‘squirrel’ around a bit! Classic Brunswick stew is always a crowd pleaser but adding squirrel and a little smokey barbecue sauce really makes it fun! Since squirrel is similar to chicken in texture and taste, you can’t even tell the difference! So, put all those days of squirrel hunting to good use and whip up a big pot of squirrel stew! Everyone will love you for it!

See more of our fare game recipes in each issue of Virginia Wildlife, or visit www.dgif.virginia.gov/faregame for more ways to bring your hunting experience full circle.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 tbsp. butter
- 1 ½ cups diced onions
- 2 cloves minced garlic
- 1 ½ cups fresh or frozen lima beans
- 2 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 2 14-oz. cans diced tomatoes
- 3 tbsp. BBQ sauce
- 2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tbsp. brown sugar
- 1 tsp. fresh ground black pepper
- ½-1 tsp. cayenne pepper
- 2 cups cooked pulled or shredded squirrel meat
- ½ cup fresh chopped parsley

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large dutch oven, melt butter on medium heat and add onions and garlic, stirring until translucent.
2. After about 5 minutes, add lima beans, corn, diced tomatoes, and chicken stock then, bring to a boil.
3. Once the vegetables have cooked through, add BBQ sauce, Worcestershire sauce, brown sugar, cayenne pepper (to taste), fresh ground black pepper, and cooked meat. Mix together and cover.
4. Let cook on low-medium for at least 1 hour.
5. Add parsley for garnish and serve. Even better, add a side of cornbread! ENJOY!

This is also an easy crockpot meal! Add all ingredients, stir, and cover. Cook on low for 6 hours or high for 4 hours.

For those chilly days ahead, squirrel hunting provides a great ingredient for this delicious stew.

Squirrel Stew

Now you can stay safe and stylish.
Blaze Orange or Blaze Pink?
The choice is yours!

Either of these hats will keep you safe and highly visible in the outdoors. And when you purchase yours from ShopDGIF.com, a portion of every sale goes to support programs that connect kids to the outdoors!