

# ATTENTION SQUIRREL HAWKERS

NAFA REGIONAL MEET

FEBRUARY 23-26 2017

CAMDEN, ALABAMA

In the interest of promoting the 2017 NAFA Regional Meet in Camden, Alabama, I think it fitting that I describe my Camden, Alabama experience.

Last February I had the honor of being invited to be the guest speaker at the Alabama Hawking Association's annual field meet. It would be my first visit to Camden, Alabama, but I can assure you, it will not be the last. The honor was greatly enhanced when I was awarded an Honorary Lifetime Membership in the AHA! Those of you who know me, and never known me to be short on words, will be shocked to know that receiving that honorary membership rendered me speechless. Fortunately, they waited until after I had delivered my presentation to present the award. It now occupies a prominent place on my office wall.

The AHA 2016 meet was put together and run by Alabama falconer Michael Moore (no, not the jackass in Hollywood). Michael picked me up at the airport in Mobile, Alabama and saw to it that my every need was supplied throughout the four day meet. I have spoken at meets in many states over the years, including NAFA. All of them well run, but none any better organized than this Alabama Hawking Association 2016 meet. It became immediately obvious to me that this was going to be a special experience for this old squirrel hawker.

My excitement began as we drove in to Camden, Alabama, a very small rural town like the one I live in. From the air, you would see this small town hacked out of the huge state sized forest that was ever vigilant in trying to reclaim Camden. You could roll down the window and smell the squirrels! Then, my heart was warmed with nostalgia when we pulled in to the parking lot of what would be my place of residence for the duration of my stay. It was an older single story "park at your door" motel with a restaurant in the parking lot named "The Southern Inn". Just like the old days. No "high rise" with elevators, requiring that you unload and load everything from your vehicle every night and morning. Your truck could be backed right up to the door. All your stuff was right outside your window. The rooms were of a good size and very clean.

The following morning we all gathered in the parking lot for the first day of hawking. It was barely cool enough for a jacket. I live on practically the same latitude about a thousand miles to the west where our average winter temperature is forty degrees. We have some bitter cold days separated by periods of mild temperature such as this. The sun was shining, the wind was low, and the squirrels would be very active, because they like this kind of weather too. It is the last weekend in February, so a lot of the “bucks” would be feeling amorous, and looking for a girlfriend.

I was informed that the vast majority of the forest (thousands of acres) was managed for timber production. I had noted from the air that the land was not flat, but rather it was rolling hills with creeks and streams laced through, much like home. The pines tend to dominate the tops of the hills where there is dryer soil, but do not do so well in the bottoms, which is dominated by the moisture loving hardwoods. This ecological makeup is perfect for sustaining a high concentration of squirrels.

In years where mast production is lower than normal, the squirrels can move their feeding activities to the pines, stripping the pine cones for their seeds to supplement their needs. As a result, there is always an abundant supply of food. In an unmanaged forest dominated by hardwoods, a couple of squirrels can be sustained on an acre of ideal habitat, but with this type of management, you can double or triple the number of squirrels. Squirrel territories become smaller and overlapping.

As we milled around in the parking lot waiting for the last stragglers to arrive, we all introduced ourselves and immediately began passing around squirrel hawking stories. Everyone present had two things in common...redtails and squirrel hawking. I do not know what any of these other squirrel hawkers did for a living, or where they came from, if they were rich or poor, or whether they were married or single. We were all as comfortable with each other as if we had known each other for a long time. Irrespective of all those other less important things, we were all enjoying being together with people that were just like us, and with the same passion. Unlike talking to people on the “outside”, we did not have to explain things. We could just talk, and everybody “got it”.

Soon, Michael arrived with the last few guys and we divided into groups. The local land owners had opened up all their land to us, and some of them were going to act as guides. The different groups along with their guides left out for an amazing day of squirrel hawking. The land owners would take their group to a location they thought would be good, while pointing out other potential hot spots along the way. They would stay with us as long as they could (as outdoorsmen themselves, they were very interested in what we were doing), but if they got called away for any reason, we were to “make ourselves at home”. They would catch up with us later. True southern hospitality.

Upon arrival at our first location choice, we gathered together to decide who would fly first, second, etc. The criteria was first the hawk’s weights, and then consideration for

anyone who may have to leave early. Once we had everything laid out, the first bird went up. Squirrel chases were immediate. In addition, the density of squirrels was unlike anything I had ever seen. If anyone's hawk was not on its game for whatever reason, they would pull them down and let the next guy put his bird up. They would get another chance later on. Everyone was considerate and friendly. By the end of the day a lot of squirrels had been bagged, and we had not gotten more than a couple of hundred yards from the trucks! In addition, it was obvious by the number of squirrels we saw that were not being chased (because the hawks were preoccupied with another), we would be able to hit this same spot the following day and expect the same results. In fact, that spot was good throughout the entire meet.

Friday night Michael had arranged for us all to have a private room at a local family owned restaurant. It was an old (at least 100 years) "plantation" style house located out in the "boondocks". The entrée choices were chicken or fish. The food was good, and the price was very reasonable. It did my heart good to see the club trying to help the local Camden businesses to benefit from our gathering. There was about 80 of us at the dinner, which did overwhelm the staff a bit, but gave us all a lot of time to visit and get to know each other. Considering the number of meals they had to cook and serve, and the amount of kidding around of our people with the staff, I thought they did an outstanding job.

On Saturday I jumped on with another group so I could meet some more people, but it was not because the action ever slowed at the first spot. Everyone was instructed to meet for lunch on some property owned by one of the land owners. It was an outdoor education facility with a small museum and a large metal pole barn. The land owners were grilling hamburgers and hot dogs for us. There was no charge for eating, but if you wanted to make a donation of any amount it would go to the children's hospital. They also had a huge log on the property and for five dollars you could try and guess the number of chords of wood the log would produce. The winner would receive a nice prize, and the proceeds would also be going to the children's hospital.

They had invited a local outdoor radio celebrity to eat lunch with us on Saturday, and interview me regarding falconry and squirrel hawking. I felt completely at ease during the interview. I had no doubts that you would be hard pressed to find anyone within a hundred miles of this place that was not pro hunting. I would guess that there was over a hundred people, (men, women, and children), at the lunch gathering. I do not now where all of them were hunting, but I am confident that Michael had them all taken care of. After lunch, we were back out hawking.

Saturday night we gathered at an old American Legion lodge that had been made available to us. There was about eighty in attendance, which I am told was a record turnout. Barbeque was the entrée, with tater salad and beans as the sides. Sweet tea, was included of course. The raffle was awesome, and for the first time ever in my long falconry life, I cleaned up at a raffle! The end of the banquet was the end of my experience in

Camden as I was to leave for the Birmingham airport the following morning. I hated to see it end.

At the banquet, Michael informed me about a NAFA sponsored Regional meet to be held in Camden the following year. I was both shocked and excited by that news. Only 14 or so years ago NAFA did not even consider squirrels legitimate game! A NAFA sponsored meet east of the Mississippi River is extremely rare, and a NAFA sponsored meet deep in the southeastern woodlands, where the primary quarry is squirrels, is a completely new and radical concept.

In years past, I had spoken at a couple of meets that were attended by Daryl Perkins, who would later become president of NAFA. Daryl is a falconer first, and a goshawker second. He is as committed to goshawks as we are to squirrel hawking. He went out with a group of squirrel hawkers and was able to witness some extreme squirrel hawking. He was very impressed with the chases, the techniques, the equipment, and the falconer involvement.

Daryl would later become president of NAFA. If you do not know Daryl, he is anything but “establishment”. He is a free thinker. Apparently, he never forgot his experiences with squirrel hawking, and thought it was a travesty that a squirrel kill would be awarded a “miscellaneous” game pin at a NAFA meet. I believe it was the NAFA meet of 2002 in Kearney, Nebraska during one of Daryl’s terms as NAFA president. He was determined to right this wrong, and did. He gave me a “heads up” to be at the meet although he would not tell me why. He wanted it to be a surprise.

It was a bitterly cold meet in Kearney that year. We managed to get out and chase a few squirrels, but even the squirrels were miserable. It was hard to talk through my snot frozen mustache with lips that did not want to move. I even had to put my then 16 year old handicapped daughter in the truck with the heater on after she told me she was not having fun. In fact, I had to keep reminding myself that I was having fun to keep going. The Saturday night banquet made it all worth it. To a rousing standing ovation Daryl announced that from that date forward, a game pin would be awarded for squirrel kills at NAFA meets.

A lot of falconers are not aware of the journey squirrel hawking and the redtail have taken to get to where it is today. There was a time when the taking of a squirrel with a trained raptor had a very negative connotation. I am almost positive that there had to be guys in the east that were doing it, even before I took my first squirrel, but it just wasn’t talked or written about. The only thing you would see in print regarding squirrels was in the off season club news regarding someone whose hawk received what was probably a minor bite followed by three or four paragraphs on the evils of squirrels and how that anyone who would intentionally fly their birds on them was not only unethical, but also grossly negligent.

After two years of intense effort to succeed at falconry in a traditional way, and avoiding squirrels, I experienced an epiphany. During my first year as a general class I went down south and trapped a couple of hen Harris' Hawks. On one cool fall morning I was flying over a rose field looking for rabbits, when my hawk began acting strangely. She flew ahead of me and did not turn back around. I called for her to come to the fist, but instead she made another move, looking into the canopy of the surrounding woods. Not being experienced enough to understand her body language, I brought out the lure and swung it. She looked over her shoulder and then flew off further into the canopy. Hurdling rows of rose bushes, I chased after her. Once in the woods I saw what was going on. She was chasing a large fox squirrel. Our fox squirrels here get up to 48 ounces, and are, gram for gram, the strongest mammals on earth. They have teeth like a beaver, and claws like a cat. Unlike a rabbit, which once it realizes it is over, goes into a catatonic state and accepts its fate, they fight to the death.

I was horrified. I frantically followed the chase, swinging the lure and blowing the call. She was one hundred percent focused on the squirrel. After a brief intense chase and crossing from tree to tree a couple of time, the squirrel ran out onto the end of a limb, pulled up his haunches, and prepared to make a long leap to another tree limb. Having seen this move a couple of times already, she was ready for it. The squirrel and the hawk both launched simultaneously and met in midair. As the squirrel outweighed her by at least a pound, they came crashing down to the forest floor. A hell of a fight followed with the squirrel on top at times, and the hawk on the top otherwise.

I had been advised that if my hawk ever engaged a squirrel in a ground battle, to stay out of it, as going in on her might distract her. I squatted and watched, heart pounding. After what seemed like a long time, she overcame him, and collapsed on top of him. After catching her breath, and gaining a little strength, she stood up on him and began picking at him. I moved in on them. Nervously, I checked her over for injury and there was none. Relieved, I sat back and gave her some time to enjoy her conquest. It seemed as though two years of frustration drained out of me as the life drained out of the squirrel. I was finally able to admit to myself that what I had just witnessed, was the answer to my problems. I could find squirrels any day of the week. I determined that I would pursue squirrels regardless of outside opinion. I would do everything I could to make it safer, but my falconry life was about to change, and it did...overnight.

Over the next few years I finally gained the support of my own state club. In the meantime, changing from Harris' Hawks to redtails was a big step in stacking the deck in favor of the hawk. I fell in love with the redtail and committed my life to them. I found that if you flew them like a fat, slow, lazy hawk not suitable for falconry, but a bird with which an inexperienced novice could be trusted, (which was the common evaluation of redtails at that time), that is what you would get. But, if you applied the same discipline, management, and attention to details to a redtail that you would never consider not

applying to any other more “traditional” or “exotic” hawk, you will have a tough, durable, and reliable killing machine. I would commit my life and efforts to proving that.

The status of squirrel hawking and the status the redtail have completely changed over the last 20 years. During that time, NAFA gradually came around to recognizing squirrels as legitimate quarry, but has stopped just short of endorsing it, as evidenced by their failure to identify this Regional Meet as a Regional Squirrel Hawking meet. You might think I am splitting hairs, but I would hate for some falconer to load up his falcon or goshawk and drive six or seven hundred miles only to find that the only quarry at this location is squirrel. Anyone who lives in the southeast and east of the Mississippi River should have a clue, but they are most likely squirrel hawkers anyway.

If you are a squirrel hawker and would like to attend a meet that caters precisely to your needs, this is the meet for you. A typical NAFA meet is going to be strategically located to produce the most “traditional” quarry such as ducks, upland game, cottontails, and jack rabbits. If you were a squirrel hawker you were on your own to work out your own problem, or just hunt what is there. A successful squirrel hawker (and most of them are) can only take so much walking and beating grass looking for a brief opportunity, while trying to hear over all the traffic noises of a nearby highway before he begins to miss the serenity of a walk in the woods and the frequent long and complex chases of the forest back home.

We have always excused it by saying that, “I do not go to the meets for the game, I go to see people that I haven’t seen in a year.” That is all fine and good, but what if I told you that you could go to a meet where the needs of people just like you are catered to. Plenty of access to hawking grounds and an abundance of game. I commend NAFA for realizing this and coming across that Mississippi River to be a part of such an event. I would just appreciate it if they would call it what it is... a squirrel hawking meet.

If you are a squirrel hawker, and long for a meet that provides ideal hawking conditions, great accommodations, friendly landowners, southern food and hospitality, and be completely surrounded by others just like you, this 2017 NAFA Regional (squirrel hawking) meet will fulfill your needs. Experience Camden and you, like me, will vow to be back.

There are two motels located in the heart of Camden. One is the Southern Inn, a single story park at your door motel with approximately 40 rooms available. The Southern Inn can be contacted at (334) 682-4148. There is a very good Mexican restaurant located in the parking lot of the Southern Inn.

Across the street is the American Inn, a two story park at your door motel with approximately 60 rooms. The phone number to the American Inn is (334) 682-4555.

The reasonableness of these rooms will shock you. Don’t tell them I said that.

There are also cabins available for rent at the Roland State Park located about two miles from town. The state park cabin rentals can be contacted at (334) 682-4838.

Finally, there is a campground and RV park about 8 miles from town. Miller's Ferry Campground and RV Park can be contacted at (344) 682-4191.

There is a gas station located close to the motels that serves a pretty good breakfast. There are also a couple of fast food establishments if you are worn out from all those squirrel chases, and want to take the food back to your room.

I am expecting a big turnout, so make your reservations early. I look forward to seeing you there.

GARY L. BREWER