



Float-Hunting Squirrels on the Apalachicola River

Tucked away in the backwaters of Florida's Apalachicola River is a small neighborhood of houseboats where, every fall during the bushytail opener, friends reunite to hunt, cook, and hang out

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4 Comments

Down You Go Allan Richards (left) and the author look for squirrels to shoot—and for Dixie to fetch. Photographs by Tom Fowles

Up the Apalachicola River, in the pitch black before sunrise, Allan "Wood Duck" Richards jumps on plane and blazes his small johnboat—navigating by memory. Richards wants to secure a spot before the rest of the hunters on the river even wake up, and it's only after he turns into a narrow side channel, darkened even further by a canopy of cypress and oaks, that he finally eases back, motoring more slowly but now with greater focus.

We pass a boat with two hunters standing in the dark, each holding a shotgun. The silence and darkness on the river enhance the primal competitiveness that comes with opening day, and we cruise by without a word spoken. Only when we're out of earshot does Richards ask, more to himself than me, what the hell they're doing in one of his spots. We go another hundred yards, around a bend, then Richards kills the motor. Dixie, his black Lab, who has been sitting quietly by, comes to life. Her nails click on the aluminum hull as she paces in anticipation. Richards strokes her head.

"Easy, Dixie," he says. "Easy."

For 15 minutes we float there—in total silence—and listen. At first all we hear is Dixie's tap-dancing to the birds' morning songs, but soon there's scratching in the treetops and the scurrying of claws on bark. Branches silhouetted against the yellow-orange awakening sky sway and bounce.

Squirrel season in Florida is about to begin.

Like Dixie's, my nerves start to show—though mine manifest themselves in the white of my knuckles gripping the Beretta 390 20-gauge. They're just squirrels, I tell myself, but Richards's intensity is rubbing off on me. He shifts on the bench seat, and I turn to see him slowly lift his shotgun toward the left shore. I follow his lead, pointing my gun in the same general direction.

"There he is," Richards whispers. "See him? Shoot him. You better shoot."

I peer into the low light of sunrise, but before my eyes can pull a gray squirrel out of the tree's same tone of gray, a flame shoots from the end of Richards's 20-gauge, and a squirrel thumps to the ground. "Now watch this," he says.

Richards starts the motor and eases toward the bank, but before the boat hits land Dixie leaps for the shore and works through the thick undergrowth. Just as quickly, she's back in the boat with a squirrel held tightly in her mouth.

"You ever see anything like that?" Richards asks, laughing. "A Lab that fetches squirrels? I don't even have to get my feet wet."

Life on the Water

Richards has wet his feet plenty in the Apalachicola River. Over the years, the river has offered him both a life and a livelihood. When Richards was a kid, his father gave him a boat and motor, as well as the freedom to explore. From that point on, Richards quickly made Apalachicola his second home and, over the years, pulled a living from it. He plumbed the murky backwaters for cypress timber that had sunk from the giant rafts that used to float downriver when the area was first logged a century ago. Those he didn't sell he sawed into lumber, which he used to build a house and a houseboat.

About 16 feet wide and 40 feet long with a screened porch on the upriver end and an open deck opposite, Richards's cypress cabin is moored to the bank with wrist-thick ropes that he found along the river. The faded plastic lawn chairs and the picnic table set on the low oak ridge behind the cabin were also gifts from the Apalachicola's flow. "The river will always give you what you need," Richards tells me. "Sooner or later, it will just float on by."

Richards has long since given up diving the river for timber, though he still carries a swimmer's rosy muscles on his compact frame. There aren't enough logs left, and he says it's not worth the risk. Now he makes his living as a fishing guide and is known along Florida's Forgotten Coast as Wood Duck—shortened to just Duck by his close friends. Richards spends his spring and summer putting clients on pompano, redbait, and speckled trout in the saltwater just outside of Apalachicola Bay. The river, though, he keeps to himself, and his floating cabin serves as a welcome retreat he escapes to as often as possible—especially during hunting season.

I first met Richards on a fishing trip in 2012. We anchored inshore and cast for whiting until the wind and rain drove us off the water. The next day, when a heavy fog covered the bay, Richards took me upriver. Each bend in the Apalachicola held another story, which Richards shared as he snaked up thin streams to show me 1,000-plus-year-old cypress trees and abandoned shacks where tupelo honey was once collected. As we passed his cabin, the first of many lining both banks in a kind of itinerant community of hunters, anglers, oystermen, and river rats, he extended an invitation—not as a guide, but as a new friend—to return once hunting season started.

"Come up in November for the squirrel opener," he said. "These camps will be full of people. Boats all day and night. The river will get crazy, but we'll have a good time."

The Local Scene

The night before the opener, as Richards and I stoke our campfire, that craziness he mentioned on our fishing trip is going strong in the cabin across the river. The later it gets, the rowdier those guys become. The staccato of semiauto handgun fire crackles at least once, and I'm pretty sure that I hear fireworks, too.

"Some of these folks wait all year just for the squirrel opener," Richards tells me. "Then they won't even get out of bed in the morning." Sure enough, as we motor past their cabin in the predawn, no one in that camp so much as stirs—though the fire is still burning as if the last reveler has only recently gone to bed. A few hours later, when Richards and I come out of the backwater with 14 squirrels in the boat, the camp's residents are up but moving slowly.

Most of the bushytails we've killed were spotted first by Richards, who'd give me a second or less to work out his whispered directions before shooting them himself. I did manage to hit a few of my own—usually when a squirrel made a mad scramble through the limbs after Richards missed. But he didn't miss often.

We load our squirrels at the cabin, tossing the entrails overboard. I jokingly mention what a good chum line we're laying, which reminds Richards of the trotline he hung the other day from a snag just downriver. Before I can join him, he jumps in the boat and motors away. Not a minute later, he roars back, and in a flurry of motion, but without a word, he quickly ties up, runs into the cabin, then gets back in the boat and speeds downriver. When he returns, he flops a giant flathead onto the picnic table. "I couldn't get him into the boat," Richards says. "I had to come back for some rope."

I lift the catfish from the table, then hand it over to Richards. We pass it back and forth a few times, gauging its heft, before we finally settle on 50 pounds. "Catfish and fried squirrel," Richards says. "We're going to eat good tonight."

That afternoon, Richards gives me a tour of the neighborhood, buzzing me by a cluster of cabins moored on both sides of the river. Each one reflects just how tied to the river its owners are—literally and figuratively. Camps that appeared abandoned the year before when I fished with Richards are now populated with two or three boats. Small lawns have been carved from the wilderness, and campfire smoke settles through the trees. The residents who aren't napping in the shade wave to us as we motor past them.

There's decay as well: cabins in the process of being reclaimed by the river; a giant houseboat, most cleaved and windows shattered, is half sunk in a muddy bank. Passing by, I can't help but feel like an extra in Apocalypse Now.

Just around the corner, we come to a camp with a giant American flag strung between two tall cypress trees. The flag, and the long gray cabin floating in front of it, belongs to Richards's longtime friends Charlie Galloway and Joel Norred. We decide to drop in for a visit.

Inside the cabin, an SEC football game is playing on an old tube TV. Galloway gives me a quick tour, pointing out both "the snoring wing and the CPAP wing." A young man in his 20s makes me feel right at home when he rolls out of a bunk bed and immediately reaches into a cooler and hands me a cold Natural Light. I ask him where he's from, and he says formerly Apalachicola, but now Pensacola. In that lament common to all expatriates of small towns where jobs are hard to come by, he confides: "I spent my childhood trying to get out of Apalachicola and now would do anything to come back."

Across the gangplank to shore, Galloway introduces me to the rest of the group. They're fun, welcoming guys who seem like they'd make the most of any opportunity to escape their blue-collar jobs, if just for a few days upriver during squirrel season. When I ask, many of them admit they're not really here to hunt but rather to attend what is essentially an annual reunion.

The banter between these guys is constant and, to a stranger, seemingly harsh. One man limps up the dock and receives no shortage of ribbing for a misstep he took the night before. He handles it well, and Galloway leans to me and says, "Haven't we all been there?" I see my own friends and family in many of these people. Everyone has his own motivations for why he hunts, but mine always go back to the social aspect—the camaraderie and fast familiar bonds that form between hunters who have only just met.

More and more at ease, I start to settle in for the party, but before I can crack another beer, Richards ushers me back to his boat. I can tell he'd like to stay longer, but he also wants to return to his place before it gets too late.

Waiting back at the cabin are two more of Richards's friends, who introduce themselves as the Bailey brothers. Despite this self-designation, Chip Bailey and Taylor Bailey are actually uncle and nephew. Chip is a fishing guide, and Taylor is between jobs. As the fire burns into the night, Richards sneaks to bed. I soon follow, having started to nod off listening to Taylor and Chip discussing whether or not they should go swimming. As Richards and I head out the next morning, Chip is asleep close to the fire, and Taylor is laid out on the picnic table, his clothes drying on a line strung between the trees.

Apalachicola Surf and Turf

Any squirrel that survived the opening-day salvo apparently got the hint and has disappeared. "Happens every year," Richards tells me. "After opening day, they move to the middle of the islands, far away from the river." There are more hunters on the water, too. Those who slept through Saturday want to get out for at least a few hours. "So they can tell their wives they actually did go hunting," Richards says.

Many of Richards's best spots now hold at least one boatload of hunters, so he moves to harder-to-access places, sliding the boat into a skinny channel almost hidden from the main river. We have to work for the squirrels, but we still manage to find a few that haven't yet fled the shoreline. Today I'm having an easier time seeing them, but I still struggle to connect—using the borrowed shotgun as my lame excuse. Of the nine squirrels Dixie retrieves, Richards accounts for the majority.

Even though we're still shy of our limit, the river is just too crowded with hunters for Richards. He utters an expletive, then looks at me and asks, "Want to go fishing?"

After stopping at the cabin—where there is no sign of the Baileys—to swap shotguns for fishing tackle, Richards navigates downriver, coursing through side channels and squeezing through one shortcut no wider than his boat that had been hand-dug through a thin island. Timber gives way to marsh thick with sawgrass and neelidrush as we get closer to the saltwater. Just above a small island, Richards cuts the motor and drops anchor. He hands me a rod rigged with a jig and soft plastic. "Throw it into that seam," he says. "Let it swing a bit and slowly reel it back to the boat."

Within a few casts I'm hooked up, and a nice speckled trout comes over the side of the boat. Before I can say anything, Richards has the fish off the hook and in a cooler. "Cast back to that spot," he says. Soon, there are five specks on

ice, more than enough fish for Richards and me—and any friends likely to stop by his cabin.

And indeed the Bailey brothers, Chip and Tayler, have returned to replenish our beer and whiskey supply, along with several bags of ice they were sure we'd need. Chip tells us that Charlie Galloway had dropped by earlier to invite us to a fish fry, so we hop into Chip's 23-foot Parker and head upriver.

The camp is half as crowded as the night before, since much of the gang has left for home and work. Galloway and Joel Norred are still there, and the two of them, along with their friend James Hicks, an old oysterman and longtime shucker at Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill in Apalachicola, are working over a pair of fryers. Richards dives in to help cook, too, and soon I'm handed a plate heaping with catfish and Hicks's hush puppies, which are famous around Apalachicola. There's a big pot of greens, too, and a bottle of hot-pepper vinegar for dousing. As we eat, Richards tells everybody about my abundant misses, and they all pile it on, asking if we have squirrels in Nebraska or if perhaps I left my glasses back home. I check my ego and take all I'm given. If I were a new pledge just 24 hours before, I'm now being treated like a member of the fraternity. The rest of the night continues with more good food and drinks, more laughs, and more stories.

Back to Normal

Tools (and fuel) for butchering (left); fried Apalachicola squirrel (right).

The next morning, the party on the river is over. The revelers have all gone home. When I planned this trip, Richards encouraged me to stay until Monday so we could have the river to ourselves for one more day of hunting. As promised, we never hear another shot, and the few boats we do see are all headed downriver toward the boat ramp. The squirrels must sense the difference, too, as they're back on the riverbank. Richards and I take advantage and keep Dixie busy retrieving bushytails as we pick them off limbs.

"There's a squirrel," Richards says. "See him? On that limb over the river."

Richards cuts the motor and we drift to a stop. I catch the flicker of a gray tail and raise my shotgun, but I still can't make out the squirrel's body.

"You better hurry, son," he says. "I'm going to shoot."

I put the bead on a quivering bunch of leaves and pull the trigger. A squirrel drops at the edge of the river, and Dixie hops ashore and heads to the right of the giant oak.

"Dang it, Dixie," Richards says. "What are you doing girl? It's over there." Richards whistles and tries to send Dixie to the opposite side of the tree. She looks up, shoves her snout back into the tangle, and returns with a limp gray body in her jaws.

"I swear that squirrel dropped on the other side of the tree," Richards says.

On cue, Dixie goes back to the shoreline and begins working through the cover left of the oak. Within seconds, she's back on the boat, a second squirrel in her mouth. Only at that moment do Richards and I realize that we shot simultaneously, aiming at two different squirrels. Dixie, of course, knew it all along.

Heading back to the cabin, we pass Charlie Galloway's camp. The flag is gone. "The first thing that goes up and the last to come down," Galloway told me the night before. The only evidence of the weekend's reunion is some trampled grass along the shore. Farther downriver, the rest of the neighborhood is shuttered as well.

With everyone gone, the river belongs to Richards again. After he and I leave, he'll return in a day or two, back to hunt more squirrels and take whatever else the river has to give.

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