

OPERATION SQUIRREL

Operation Squirrel

Some time ago, LIFE magazine featured a full-page picture of a squirrel peering quite competently into the viewfinder of an Exakta camera mounted on a tripod in a Florida forest. The photograph attracted an unusual amount of attention everywhere. It was taken by a team of photographers attached to the Florida State Commission of Game and Freshwater Fish. Now one of the members of that team tells the story behind the now-famous shot; in addition, he sets down for other Nature lensmen some practical hints about camera-work in this special field. In his own words, B. E. "Jake" Johnson tells about "Operation Squirrel."

As a wildlife photographer for the Florida State Commission of Game and Freshwater Fish, it is my job to help capture on film as complete and continuous a record as possible of all living things in the vast area under the Commission's jurisdiction. Wildlife management areas cover well over four million acres throughout the State.

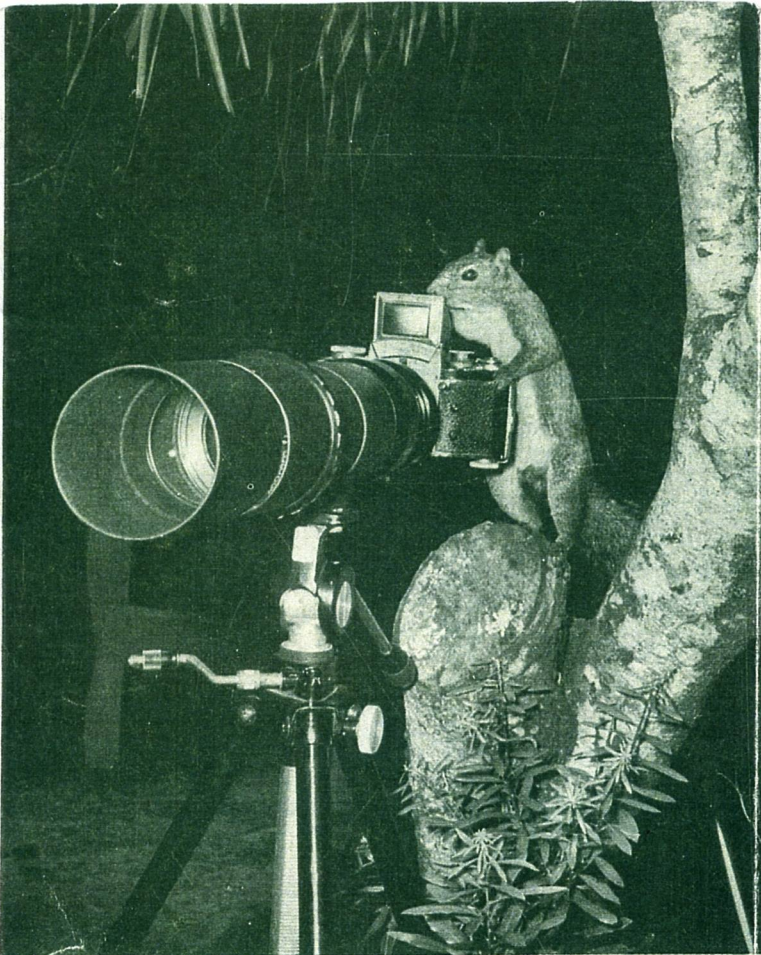
The primary purpose of the pictorial record which I am involved in maintaining, is to help educate the public in the fields of conservation and game sports. Some of the pictures appear in our own publication, called "Florida Wildlife." Many are sent to various sports writers, hunting and game columnists, and game and nature magazines, in order to acquaint people with our activities.

Of late, my work has mainly been concerned with the photographing of different types of animals found in the State, mostly mammals. The forests of Florida abound in panthers, black bears, deer, raccoons, gray foxes, wild boars, opossums . . . and squirrels.

Not long ago, while on a photographic assignment with a colleague deep in one of the larger Nature preserves, we found ourselves quietly and swiftly preparing to take some telephoto shots of a group of wild boars. As usual, I was equipped with several Exaktas plus a full complement of telephoto and other lenses. All set, I then began to shoot the unaware tuskers as rapidly as I could, using an Exakta with 400-mm. attached, mounted on a tripod.

Desiring even more mobility, I set the tripod-mounted Exakta down next to a large tree. Picking up my second Exakta, I proceeded to make shot after shot, taking advantage of the camera's extreme adaptability and ease of handling, until I had exhausted the film. Glancing to my left, I was startled to notice that while my partner and I were each busy with our wild boar project, a bold, brown squirrel had climbed up the tripod next to the tree, onto the lens, and was looking into the viewfinder of the Exakta, peering into it with an intentness worthy of a pro photographer!

The idea immediately occurred to me that it would make a



terrific picture and a wonderful story if we could get that remarkable shot! But knowing the nervous wariness of the wild squirrel, we realized that the slightest motion would send him scurrying away... out of our lives and out of the shot forever. It happened exactly as we feared; a slight motion sent him speeding off his photographic perch.

However, on more than one foray into the Florida game wilderness we had taken note with considerable, fond amusement of the characteristic of extreme curiosity on the part of the bushy-tailed squirrel family. Of all the woodland creatures, the furry little fellow is perhaps most inclined to assume a posture of tentative, cautious friendliness towards human intruders into his forest homeland. We were also aware of Mr. Squirrel's occasional boldness in the matter of accepting food from man.

Quickly conferring, we made our plans and immediately started to put them into effect. From my pocket I took a peanut (I am seldom without them on my trips into the wilds) and

carefully placed it atop the barrel of the 400-mm. telephoto lens attached to the tripod-mounted Exakta beside the huge tree. Mustering all the patience that long experience had proved we must have in Nature photography, we sat down to our vigil, extra Exaktas at the ready.

Fortune must have been smiling down on us that day, for hardly had we settled down, when old Sam Squirrel cautiously poking his head around a nearby tree-trunk, apparently decided to have another go at it... and perhaps at the peanut as well. After two abrupt approaches, during which it almost seemed as if he were going to change his mind, he finally scampered up the tripod, paused to look into the viewfinder and proceeded to go for the peanut.

Shutters clicking like crazy, we shot until the creature decided to take his leave. As you may know, the best photo of the lot was sent off to LIFE magazine in New York, which, to our delight, they accepted for publication, with what results, you know.

Some Observations on "Conservation Photography"

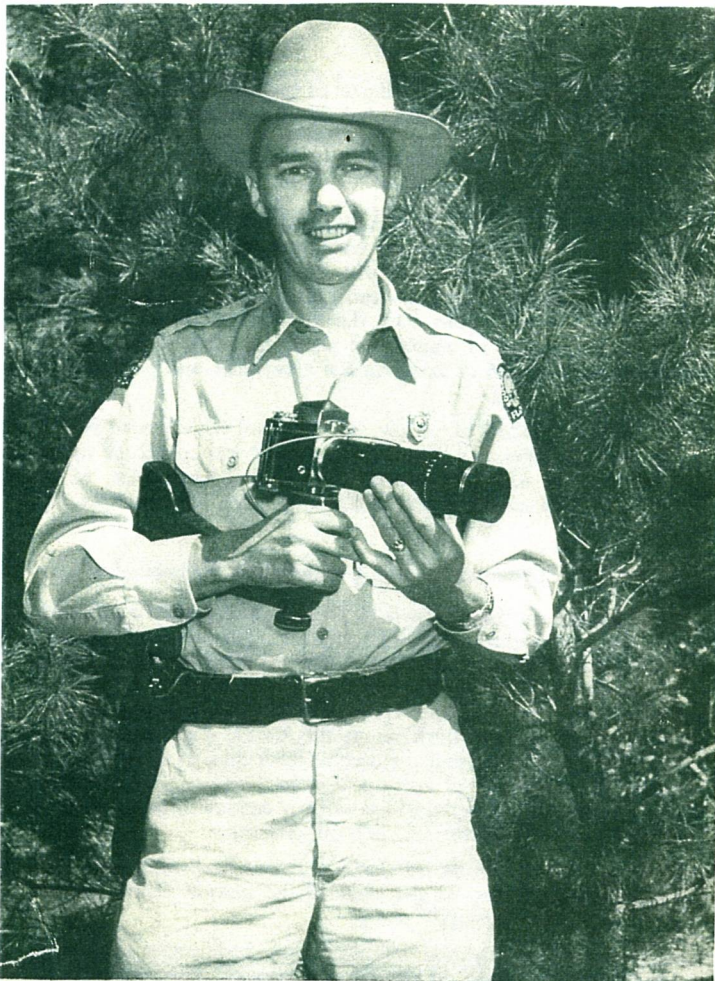
It should not be assumed by the beginning nature photographer that "Operation Squirrel" was a freak, a one-in-a-million shot dependent only upon pure luck. Nothing could be further from the truth. While it is true that chance plays a large part in setting the stage, the fact is that, for the alert photographer in the woods, in the marsh or on the beach, such opportunities will be found to present themselves from time to time. This has been the experience of every professional and seasoned amateur exploring natural surroundings with a camera. The trick is, to know how to capitalize on such opportunities.

It is a matter of record that we have often used our native four-footed denizens to get shots of the unique caliber seen in the "Operation Squirrel" photo.

As for myself, I would here urge a word of caution to the new photographer intent on animal photography amid natural settings. It is wise to exercise some measure of common sense under these conditions. Do not put yourself in a position where you will be too close to your untamed, unpredictable subject. More than one incautious lensman has learned this lesson to his sorrow in the woods.

I myself try to deal with the more "domesticated" woodlands creature when it is necessary to get so close for a shot that complete control of the situation is no longer in my hands. For close work, I prefer to pose animals that, like the squirrel, use their front legs in the same way we use our arms, which is what my qualified term "domesticated," in the preceding paragraph refers to.

Emphasizing the conservation aspect of my work, it is interesting to note that when I am in the woods on a photographic assignment, I also act as a law-enforcement agent at the same time, charged with the duties of regulating hunting and fishing wherever I go. Thus, my official duties bring my camera into play along these lines, too. (To indicate the physical scope of



B. E. "Jake" Johnson

the conservation area, of Florida's nearly fifty-nine thousand square miles, over four thousand square miles are inland water; in the central part of the State, there are some 30,000 bodies of water.) When the pictures taken on these missions are published, they serve to inform people of what to do and what not to do, when they are in the woods.

For those who wish to take wildlife pictures, it is imperative that they should understand basic photography. Wildlife photographers must possess determination, imagination and patience. They must be forever alert and knowledgeable about the woods and should know enough never to handle or disarrange the natural habitat of the animals.

The basic problems of shooting pictures in Florida are about the same as those elsewhere along the eastern coast, with some qualifications, determined by geography and climate. Florida

forms the eastern boundary of the Gulf of Mexico, extending further South than any other state in the Union as it juts out into the sea for more than 400 miles, earning it the name of "The Peninsula State" in the geographies. Another nickname given Florida brings to mind one of the nation's most noted wildlife areas: "The Everglade State." And yet a third nickname, gracing the license plates and proudly angled towards vacationers and tourists, indicates the favorable natural lighting conditions available to the photographer of outdoor life in Florida: "The Sunshine State." The latter name derives, of course, from the unusual number of sunny days occurring in the average year. The out-of-state photographer must be cautioned that he may encounter trouble in exposing for winter scenes and beach scenes here. In the summer, we may have a very contrasting day. Accordingly, I use a fill-in light, flash or strobe wherever possible, to balance it. In the winter time there is no great difference insofar as film and exposures go. For color wildlife photography, I prefer to use a 35-mm. camera with a rapid lever-wind, camera all loaded with Kodachrome. If black-and-white pictures are required, I have found that Panatomic-X film is best here. I find that I get better blow-ups and enlargements with both of these films than with others.

On a normal day, I use 1/100th at f/16, or 1/100th at f/32 or perhaps f/11. I use 1/100th mainly to capture the movements of wild animals. If I should use a faster speed, I would freeze the movement and the animals would look artificial. I try hard to avoid the "frozen look," and I don't want to stop all the action, by any means. A bit of movement *must* be apparent, for my purposes and desires. If you freeze the picture altogether, you don't have a good picture.

More than a good knowledge of photography is necessary, to obtain superior wildlife photos. One must employ an absolutely dependable camera. For a long time I have been getting excellent results with my Exaktas. The viewfinder eliminates a great number of your problems, enabling you always to see what you are going to get, because you actually view through the lens itself.

With the Exakta, I use five lenses of different focal lengths, which complement the Exakta perfectly. These lenses are the 50-mm., 90-mm., 150-mm., 400-mm., and 500-mm. Due to the invariable and sudden emergencies which arise on my wildlife photography project, each of these has its special place in the kit. Together, these lenses enable you to make the proper approach to your untamed subjects, undetected as far as possible.

Wildlife photography is a challenge to those who are always looking for pictures which are different and as arresting as the "Operation Squirrel" shot.

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