

Lunker's New Buddy

Before I tell you the story of how I came to be friends with John "Lunker" Johnson, let me introduce myself. I'm a short, furry critter with a brown back and a flaming orange belly and tail. Folks holler, "There goes Red!" when they see me scamper by.

It was an Indian summer day in the Ozarks, not far from Branson...

Spread-eagled on the hickory tree limb, I watched the flight of the flashing fishing lure. With each cast the spinner blade got closer and closer to my ambush. The fisherman stood braced against the pedestal on the front deck of the bass boat as he trolled under the overhanging limbs along the bank. I had watched this fellow in action before, bringing up a hiding bass to suck in the lure, just as it hit the surface.

He was hard to miss with his sandy blond hair combed back over his sun-baked ears and face. His fishing outfit always was the same—tan shirt and pants. The shirt had an emblem of a large striking bass sewn above the pocket. The man's name, "Lunker," was stitched there too.

The spinner whooshed toward my hickory tree limb. I was

ready. I couldn't resist trying to swipe a shiny new "hot" lure for my collection. It took only a small hop on the branch to snag the lure. He glanced up but didn't see me hunkered down on the limb. As he whipped the rod to free the lure there came a mighty yank that caught me by surprise. It wasn't a pretty sight, my pausing there in mid-air, about to become a flying squirrel. Whoa! Down I went, right on his back. Holy jumping acorns! This guy was a giant of a man!

His long arms thrashed as he tried to knock the demon off his back. Instead, he knocked his rod and reel overboard. He could really cuss! I leapt for my life and ran along the edge of the boat, jumping to the top of the towering black motor.

I stood tall, whipping my tail, as the hairs on my back rose like a thousand quills. I aimed at his face and spit what was left of a hickory nut at his nose. The look in his eyes said "Only one of us is going to leave this boat alive." He grabbed a paddle and swung. Wham! That hurt! Now I had a hunk of hair out of my tail and an ugly bend right in the middle of it. That bend would never come out.

Mom's teaching flashed to my mind: "Act like you're possessed by the devil when cornered." So I charged. I grabbed the man's leg, scratching and clawing up his side. His eyes bulged like two big hickory nuts. I jumped for the tree. He staggered, tripped over the paddle, and fell overboard. I dangled from the limb, watching as he came up spitting water. He swam to the bank and crawled to his

feet, stomping and mumbling under his breath.

"Darned squirrel. Why in the heck did you have to do that?"

I raced to the far side of the tree and peeked back at the crazy man talking to a squirrel.

"Look what you've done! Best rod at the bottom of the lake, boat heading down the lake, and I'm sitting here soaking wet. Got a wedding to go to. Nobody is going to believe me when I tell them a squirrel knocked me out of my boat. You know, Red, all I ever wanted to do was marry Millie Como and be the best bass fisherman in the world. That's why I'm out here practicing, on my wedding day. I'm going to set the world bass tournament record. Catch twenty-four pounds more and I've got it. Gotta get to a road, quick."

Lunker stared at the steep bluff that bordered the south side of the lake, looking for a path to the top. He took a deep breath and started up through the brush and trees. His feet dug at the dirt and loose rocks as he struggled toward a sheer rock face, halfway up the bluff. He moved up, hand over hand, rock to rock, tree to tree, and finally paused to catch his breath. He rested with his foot braced against a small tree. Again, up he climbed toward the ledge below the rock face. With only a foot to go, he reached with one hand to grip the edge.

The rocks under his feet broke loose. He tore down the

hill; his butt hit the rocks as he bounced back and forth between standing and sitting. His fingers scraped the bark of the trees as he ricocheted off their sides. He was going about as fast as I've ever seen a man move, when he hit the water and disappeared. It took forever before he shot up, spitting water and wiping his eyes.

"Don't know what I'm going to do after I get to that ledge, Red. The cliff is straight up. Be easy for a squirrel. Not for me. Hope somebody's fishing; that's going to be the only way I get off this bank."

A good bit of the afternoon passed as he tried again and again to climb the steep cliff. I watched as bass boats raced along the far side of the lake. Lunker waved his arms and shouted, trying to get their attention. No one noticed. He sat a bit and then paced back and forth along the narrow bank.

"She's the best thing that ever came along in my life. Been putting up with my being late—can't remember for how long. This'll be the last minnow in the bucket for me."

The sun was rushing to find the horizon when a boat finally came up our side of the lake. Well, maybe it was a boat. As it got closer, I saw it was eight aluminum canoes tied together with rusty bailing wire. The canoes looked like they had been over some really bad white-water rapids. A dozen warped boards were strapped across the top, with a tiny motor chugging on the back. One man sat on the boards,

working on his fishing pole; the other rocked in an old gray chair, fooling with something I couldn't make out. The wind was behind them, blowing right up my nose.

"What's that smell?" Lunker asked. "Smells like a pig pen."

The motor burped and popped, sounding like it would quit at any moment. It kept coming. I could hear them talking.

"Your mama told you to wash that stink out of them overalls before you come home, Junior," said the tall skinny one, rocking in the chair.

"How am I gonna wash them overalls, Roy? I don't have nuthin' else to wear."

"Jump in the lake with some of Mama's homemade lye soap and paddle your fat self around," said Roy, flapping his arms like a beached carp.

"Can't do that. Can't swim. Besides, it ain't my fault they stink," said Junior, as he sniffed the top of his overalls.

"Dang nab it, Junior! I told you that sow and all them pigs would never house break."

I froze when I spotted the squirrel rifle braced against the rocking chair. It was then that I recognized the "old-boys." Squirrel killers! I prayed Lunker would keep still about our run-in.

"Over yonder, Junior! Fellow waving at us. I think he wants us to stop."

"You know our mama said to never pick up no hitchhikers," said Junior, shaking his head.

"That's on the road, stupid. Turn on over there."

As the short fat dude steered the boat toward the bank, the skinny one stood up from his rocker, tugged at his bibs, and scratched his dirty bare chest. I remember tales from the other squirrels of how he's the one to watch out for. He'd throw rocks behind the tree to spook a squirrel hiding there. Young ones would scurry away from the crashing rock sound and get shot dead, right on the spot.

"Howdy, boys."

"Howdy, mister." Roy's two front teeth stuck way out when he smiled. "Ain't you that Lunker pro fishing man from over at the dock?"

"Reckon so. You the Taneys from over at Skunk Creek Cove?"

From a squirrel's point of view, they should have stayed in Skunk Creek Cove with all their stinking relatives.

"We is. I mean, we are those. Yes, sir, we are the brothers Taney. I'm Roy; this here is Junior. He's my forty-eight-

year-old kid brother."

"I need a big favor, boys. I'm going to miss my wedding if I don't get over to the boat ramp at the Table Rock Dam, quick."

"We'll take you over there in our speedboat," said Roy.

Lunker climbed on the rickety "speedboat" and watched Junior wrap the rope around the top of the tiny motor. It took about a dozen yanks before the motor made a sound. It finally popped and belched to a start; off they headed across the wide lake. I swished my tail in relief.

They got about fifty tree limbs away when the motor missed a bunch of licks. It kept going and made it to the middle of the lake before its last lick. It burped twice, belched a cloud of gray smoke, and ground to a halt.

"Grab somethin'. Paddle, Junior," Roy ordered.

"Got nuthin' but fishin' poles, Roy."

I wanted to shout, "Use your squirrel rifle! Paddle with it, you idiots!" Maybe they would drop it, and it would sink to the bottom of the lake. I climbed higher in the tree.

"I'm sorry you have to hold your nose, Mr. Lunker. Junior stinks real bad. Tell him how come, Junior."

"Roy sent me to the pound to get a good coon dog. I came back with a tracking sow pig instead, 'cause a man there sold it to me. Said, 'when the dog gets old you still have to feed him, you could eat the pig.'"

Lunker shook his head and sat with his face buried in his hands. They sat, drifting in the middle of the lake. Lunker must have been desperate, 'cause he stood up and ripped a board from the top of the canoe boat and tried to paddle with it. It was slow—way too slow. Lunker was going to be late for his wedding!

"Mr. Lunker, what kind of bait you gonna use in the big Lilly Bean Fishin' Tournament?" Roy asked.

"I'm sorry, boys. Can't stay to talk. I'm going to swim for it. Tell you what—when you get her going again, how 'bout rounding up my bass boat and towing it over to the marina? I'll make it up to you later. We'll head up to Springfield; get some lures at the Bass Fishing Shop up there."

Lunker tied his shoes together, looped them around his neck and dove into the lake. As he swam for the far shore, I climbed to the tiptop of the tree to watch. It would be a long swim.