



# Annual Squirrel Bowl swells into gigantic fundraiser for Project Third Day, plus helps honor veterans

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
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**TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN NEED**  
**PROMOTE YOUTH HUNTING**  
**HONOR OUR VETERANS**



CARLINVILLE - A weekend that started as a small squirrel hunt competition among friends about a decade ago has swelled into one of the top charity fundraiser events in the Carlinville area each year.

Squirrel Bowl was started by volunteer Jared Cottingham, who professionally is IT Director/HIPAA Security Officer for Carlinville Area Hospital.

“About five years ago, I had an idea to have a bigger squirrel hunt and try to raise money for a worthy cause,” he said. “Project Third Day was new in town and I knew of it because I work at Carlinville Area Hospital and I was seeing this small group of people filling up bags of food for kids. Once I learned more about what exactly they were doing, my core group of buddies decided that would be our charity. Project Third Day is a 501c3 Not For Profit charitable organization.”

The Squirrel Bowl is held each year a week before the NFL Super Bowl, which helps even more to engrain the tradition in participant’s minds. Everything is done according to Illinois Department of Natural Resources rules and is held within time of squirrel season.

The event has grown by extraordinary amounts, Cottingham said.

“This started as a way for me and my buddies to have some friendly two-man competition to hunt squirrels,” he said. “I worked with Tanya Kissinger and thought Project Third Day would be a good project to help out. Our donation has grown from \$1,400 in the beginning to about \$32,000 this year. It is just amazing how it has grown.”

“People can hunt on their own ground or wherever they have permission to hunt,” he said. “We have not only the adult, but youth divisions. “I have a great team of people behind me and the input and reaction we get from people in the community and region is they couldn’t be more proud. The donations are unbelievable. We are branching out to the Alton-Godfrey region and it has spread all over the area. This has spread by word of mouth and it just gets bigger every year. We have close to 500 people on both Friday and Saturday attend with live music and vendors. It is awesome.”

### **Squirrel Bowl progression of success over recent years:**

Squirrel Bowl 1 - 2016 - Friday night registration party at Lake Rinaker. Saturday hunt and weigh-in and ceremony at Lake Rinaker. Twenty-six teams and the group was able to donate \$1,400 to Project Third Day.

Squirrel Bowl 2 - 2017 - "Same format, Friday and Saturday," Cottingham said. "This year we moved it to Wild Pickins Winery. It was all outside, but the weather was gorgeous. We had 70 teams and we were able to donate \$10,000 to PTD."

Squirrel Bowl 3 - 2018 - "Same format, Same venue. Added a live auction with Auctioneer Mike Crabtree with Mike Crabtree Auctions. "We had 109 teams. We grossed \$28,000 and were able to donate \$20,000 to PT," Cottingham said.

Squirrel Bowl 4 - 2019. "Slogan- To Support Children in Need, Promote Youth Hunting, and honor veterans," Cottingham said. "The venue had to be moved a week and a half before the event due to the weather predictions showing near zero temps," he said. "We called McLintocks Saloon and Steakhouse about using their banquet center. They not only agreed to host the two-day event, but they donated the hall to us because they knew it was for a great cause. We grossed \$45,500, net income was \$38,700. Project Third Day will receive \$32,000-plus, Honor Flight will receive \$5,000."

### **This year this was the plan:**

**Friday night** - Registration, Food, Live music by Hunter Sharp and Vendor Fair. Vendors included. Land of Lincoln Honor Flight, Tarrant and Harman Real Estate, Just Dip It, Craig Camerer Custom Knives, Carlinville Ducks Unlimited, Macoupin County Whitetail Unlimited chapter, Clay Busters, Southwestern Archery, Otter Creek Quails Forever, Cubby Hole, IFOR (Illinois Federation for Outdoor Resources), Migratory Waterfowl Hunters Inc.

**Saturday** - "Due to the cold and change of venue, we had 107 teams register, but our event numbers went way up," Cottingham said. "A total of 450-500 people came through Friday and/or Saturday. Lunch on Saturday was served from 11:00 to 2:00 p.m., It was catered by Fat Alberts BBQ.

"We try to encourage anyone to come to support the event even if they are not hunting," Cottingham said. "Squirrel weigh-in was at 1:00 p.m. The prizes are determined by weight of the squirrels in the different categories. Our Mega Raffle and presentation began at 2:00 p.m. We then called up all veterans in attendance to come up front and be recognized and they got a standing ovation. Each veteran was given a veteran pin. On the back of the pin was a number. We drew a number and that veteran was given a handgun that the top slide of the gun had been dipped in American Flag screen by Just Dip It. Navy Veteran Dale Lowrance, who also is a on the Squirrel Bowl Committee, was the lucky recipient."

"At that time, we called up two representatives from The Land of Lincoln Honor Flight program which is not for profit that flies World War II, Korean and Vietnam vets out to

Washington, D.C., to be honored and visit their memorials,” Cottingham said. “I had asked the Honor Flight organization to join us because my dad, Butch Cottingham, who is a Vietnam veteran, and I got to go on the Honor Flight in June of 2018 and it in a way changed my life and really opened my eyes of just how important this trip is for these vets. The night before the flight, they have a preflight dinner with all of the vets and their families.

“It is then when they have individuals, organizations and businesses come up and donate to the Honor Flight. I remember thinking to myself, ‘I want to be on that stage someday handing over a nice donation to such a great cause.’ The Honor Flight itself was something I will cherish forever. To see how these veterans were received and honored made me proud to be an American and proud to be the son of a veteran. I felt compelled to try to help LLHF spread their word about their program and if we could figure out a creative way to get some funds directed their way without taking anything away from Project Third Day which is the charity to which Squirrel Bowl was created to help.”

Steve Wheeler and Joan Bortolon came up to discuss the Land of Lincoln chapter of the Honor Flight program and gave some statistics. Some highlights - 2019 will be their 11th flying season, so far they have flown 4,110 veterans to D.C., in 2018 they flew 501, they have 700-plus vets on a wait list now, they stressed the importance of “running out of veterans before they run out of money”. Flight and bus rental costs are staggering.

“We then had a surprise for them,” Cottingham said. “We had them stay on the stage while we had auctioneer Mike Crabtree auction off three donated patriotic items donated by Scott and Debbie Brooks, Chris Reynolds and members of Project Third Day. These items went for \$2,900, which Steve Wheeler then announced is enough money to send six vets to D.C. The place then erupted in cheers and applause, it was awesome! Since our event did so well, we will be donating \$5,000 to Land of Lincoln Honor Flight. The Squirrel Bowl committee has been asked to present the check to them on April 1st at the pre flight dinner in front of the vets and their families.”

Next, Tanya Kessinger from Project Third Day got up to speak to explain what PTD does and to give some information on how the donated funds are used to help children. “This is the fourth year Tanya has talked at our Squirrel Bowl event, and what I love about this event is that during her talk, you can look out in the crowd filled with hunters, kids, outdoorsmen and their families, and there won’t be a dry eye in the house,” Cottingham said. “She explains how desperate the need is in our area and it really hits home to everyone in attendance. Although some of the information she gives can break your heart, this is my favorite time of the event because it lets you know what we are doing truly is making a difference in the lives of children in need in our area.”

## **Tournament winners were as follows:**

(Winners are based on squirrel weights))

Adult/Youth division- 1st place Devin Jenkins and Sam Terneus, 2nd place Harry Kasprzyk and Jake Ferguson, 3rd place Don Burke and Brady Twyman.

Adult division- 1st place Justin Frankford and Blake Leefers, 2nd place Eric Rheude and Savanah Rheude, 3rd place Chase Fletje and Mike Riegor.

Big Gray Squirrel winner Adult Youth - Phillip Cox and Maddax Coffey.

Big Fox Squirrel winner Adult Youth - Devin Jenkins and Sam Terneus.

Big Gray Squirrel winner Adult - Derek Hinrichs and Garrett Gericke.

Big Fox Squirrel winner Adult - Zach Ring and Michael Millard.

Awards were also given for Vendor Raffles, SB Raffles, and Silent Auction winners.

Then the event is concluded by a Live auction by Mike Crabtree Auctions from donated items that raised nearly \$10K.

## **Key Sponsors**

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**Squirrel Bowl Committee members** - Jerod Cottingham, Dale Lowrance, Ryan Jennings, Jeremiah Newby, Randal and Danita Suhling, Justin Barnett, Tyler Burrow,



Buzie Bertagnoli, Mike and Tammie Hammann, Dan and Jan Brown, Matt Brown, Joe Lewis, Patrick Mills, Jordan and Blake Leefers, Amy Barnes.

Project Third Day members - Jason and Tanya Kessinger, Ryan and Myra Tosh, Clay and Toni Proctor, Chris and Melissa Williams.





