The Market in Birds

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“The snipe is a pansy, the woodcock the rose of summer,” Merritt proclaimed as he waxed poetic about the American woodcock’s charm. When in flight, the bird was “the most perfect picture of beauty . . . the flower of the air.” His rapid, twisting maneuvers while airborne suggested an exquisite “rhythm of movement” expressed in the “cadence of flapping wings.” On the ground, his track was “as smooth as if pressed in molten glass” and as straight as if drawn with a rule on paper. The woodcock was a master of concealment, able to remain hidden in dense thickets until the hunter was nearly upon him, only to burst out explosively, almost underfoot, with whistling wings. He was the “most sagacious” of birds, in Merritt’s estimation, endowed with a “system of telepathy” that allowed him to “divine the intentions” of the hunter, “whether they were good or bad.” To the lifelong wildfowler, the woodcock was the epitome of all game birds—“the cock of the forest”—at once both an adversary to test the hunter’s skill and a muse to awaken the watcher’s imagination. “You want him,” averred Merritt, “you are not debating how you might get him nor what he is worth, but you want him, and so the plot thickens.”

As a hunter, Merritt could prize the woodcock for its nature. Merritt the businessman, however, could afford no such prejudices, since market hunters
and game dealers had to make more-rational calculations balancing production and profit if they wanted to succeed. On the production side of the equation were a multitude of biophysical factors that determined what could be hunted or harvested: the variety and availability of avifauna, the accessibility of their habitats, the physiologies and behaviors of different species, the vulnerability of wildfowl to various hunting methods, the seasonality of avian movements, the variability of the weather, and other environmental realities. On the profit side of the balance, consumers’ desires weighed most heavily. Buyers could be fickle and, as Merritt conceded, “fashion” ultimately “set the prices for all game birds.”

Luckily, in the late nineteenth century, consumers’ desires for wildfowl grew exponentially, especially among urbanites. “The business was very profitable” in those decades, Merritt insisted, mainly because of “the active demand for game birds of every description.” Except for periods of commercial disasters between 1893 and 1896, game dealers easily found buyers for their stocks. “Game dinners” were regular fare in every “first class hotel or restaurant worth the name.” As market hunters exhausted wildfowl populations in
one region, commercial pressure increased “on the remaining field of supply.” In “nearly all the states west of the Mississippi the industry flourished,” Merritt observed. The market in birds converted wildfowl into “a cash article” that “could be sold for cash as readily as government bonds.”

Simple laws of economics guided Merritt’s business decisions. Seeking the nexus between supply and demand, he sought out the best market conditions for his stock by tracking prices in distant cities, monitoring his game-dealing competitors, judiciously choosing shipping times, and limiting quantities to avoid glutting urban markets. His choice of prey was determined by economic considerations, as well. He found small- to medium-sized game birds such as woodcock, snipe, and prairie chickens to be the most remunerative. Consumers preferred portion-sized meat birds, and these found ready sale in dealers’ stalls and restaurants. Geese and large ducks were less attractive, according to Merritt, because they were “generally unprofitable,” with the mallard being “the cheapest duck in the market.”

Keeping an eye on the vagaries of the business and exercising keen economic acumen, the Kewanee game dealer ensured the profits that made up his entrepreneurial bonus.

Yet biology figured equally into Merritt’s bottom line. Merritt’s dismissal of geese and ducks as unprofitable prey, for example, was due not only to economic considerations but also to the biological facts that these larger birds were heavier to carry and more likely to spoil in warmer weather. His choice of avian specialties, such as his favored woodcock, were as much a calculation about the availability, accessibility, and anatomies of these birds as they were about the laws of market supply and demand. Seasonality influenced Merritt’s business as well. Since meat birds harvested in the fall to midwinter were generally in better condition than those killed in the spring, he worked to maximize his stocks of fall birds. At times, Merritt tried to pass off spring-shot fowl to unsuspecting buyers, not always successfully. In one instance, six barrels of canvasback ducks he sold to dealers in New York were refused by the city’s up-scale Delmonico’s restaurant, whose owners recognized the order as inferior “Spring birds.”

The balance Merritt tried to strike between environmental and economic realities was replicated many times over in the market in birds. Clearly, avian physiology and behavior, distribution and migration patterns, and species variability shaped the contours of wildlife consumerism in the late nineteenth century. But economic logic, along with biophysical dynamics, governed the
wildfowl market. Avian entrepreneurs, armed with cutting-edge technological and financial tools, were able to transform avian biological diversity into economic commodities, creating, in the process, new patterns of human-wildlife interaction that were mediated by the market. That market in birds refashioned wildness into new forms suited to a modern American consumer culture.

The Nature of the Market

Merritt’s preference for wildfowl was typical among turn-of-the-century market hunters and game dealers. Although professional hunters pursued mammals such as deer, bear, squirrels, and rabbits, wild birds made up the overwhelming bulk of commercial game sales in the period. In many ways, wildfowl were biologically fitted for this kind of extensive exploitation. Avian distribution, diversity, physiology, behavior, mobility, and other natural characteristics combined to make wildfowl widely available, particularly vulnerable to hunters, and easily marketed by dealers. In short, birds’ natures shaped the nature of the market.

Sheer numbers and varieties of birds were perhaps the most obvious biological factors facilitating wildfowl commercialization in the late nineteenth century. Long before the market hunting era, the richness of the New World’s avian environment drew the fascination of observers from Columbus to Audubon and, in the process, produced a distinctive North American ornithology. Early European explorers, describing the immense flocks of birds that “obscured the heavens” in North America, concluded that “in all the world the like abundance is not to be found.” The “wild Pidgeons” in seventeenth-century Virginia migrated in flocks so large that one “could neither discern beginning or ending, the length nor breadth of the Millions of Millions.” English naturalist John Lawson identified fifty-six types of land birds and fifty-three kinds of waterfowl in his 1709 book, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, claiming these were birds “more beautiful than in Europe.” A few decades later, Mark Catesby’s two-volume, lavishly illustrated natural history of the Carolinas, Florida, and the Bahamas listed one hundred bird varieties that Catesby believed encompassed the extent of American avifauna. The publication of Alexander Wilson’s multivolume *American Ornithology* in the early nineteenth century, which cataloged over 250 birds including 39 new species, was later eclipsed by John James Audubon’s masterful *Birds of America*, issued in serial form between 1827 and 1838, which identified nearly 500 avian species.
Historical assertions about the bountiful and diverse avian environment had some basis in fact. Modern comprehensive listings of North American birds identify more than one thousand native species. Adding in migratory avian forms, the numbers rise to more than two thousand. This total, however, is dynamic, changing as new species are added or deleted, as natural or introduced arrivals appear, as extinctions occur, and as new findings are discovered in obscure records. Particularly troublesome to categorize are those bird occurrences described as accidental or species identified as vagrants or visitors. Total bird populations are also difficult to pin down. Twentieth-century estimates have ranged from 2.6 billion to 10 billion breeding birds in the United States. With migratory species added, the total rises to nearly 20 billion birds. Seeking historic population numbers produces even greater uncertainty, but the accumulated evidence suggests staggering sums.

In the market hunting era, wildfowl were ubiquitous, despite noticeable localized declines in certain populations and some early extinctions of species such as the great auk and the Labrador duck. Major waterways, even those located near expanding cities, attracted large numbers of migratory wildfowl in the mid-nineteenth century. In Washington, DC, innumerable soras and reedbirds (bobolinks) frequented the surrounding tidal wild rice marshes of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers in early fall, and different varieties of waterfowl arrived later in the season. Wild ducks were so commonplace on the city’s rivers “that people used to throw stones at them,” though this method was not particularly useful for bagging them. At midcentury, expansive marshes still bordered Chicago, offering prime habitat for curlews, snipe, and other wading birds in fall and spring. Snipe were so plentiful around the city that “you could not walk a rod without flushing one of the long-bills.” As one chronicler reported, Chicagoans of the 1870s “could walk a mile from the corner of Dearborn and Washington Streets and shoot prairie chickens and quail,” and early settlers were able to shoot “wild ducks on a small pond on the site of the present City Hall.” Going a bit farther afield, a hunter might easily bring down “partridge, grouse, prairie chickens, every variety of duck, wood duck, plover and widgeon” in a single day’s outing. Passenger pigeons in immense flocks continued to visit midwestern urban centers in great numbers until the 1870s. This avian diversity was directly related to the great variety of environments available. Impo
be variously distributed across the continent. Wherever one stood in North America, one was sure to find all sorts of birds.

Patterns of avian mobility added to the array of wildfowl available across the continent at any given time and provided market hunters with a rotating smorgasbord of prey. Every bird species exhibits some type of migratory behavior, with at least a portion of the population moving away from breeding territories to forage, for postbreeding dispersal, or in response to environmental changes. Each migrant species possesses its own patterns of movement. Best known are those long-distance seasonal travels between breeding and wintering locations, even though only a minority of bird species worldwide undertakes this kind of extensive travel. Several species of northern breeding shorebirds and upland birds, for example, migrate in circular paths, gathering in the fall along northeastern Atlantic shorelines preparatory to their nonstop flights over to wintering areas in the Caribbean and South America. Some shorebirds that breed in arctic regions follow elliptical migration routes, traveling in a clockwise motion between their far northern breeding grounds in spring and winter homes in South America in the fall. Broad latitudinal highways where multiple individual migration routes converge are called flyways, a concept first conceived in the 1930s by Frederick C. Lincoln of the US Fish and Wildlife Service after extensive waterfowl banding studies allowed researchers to map specific migration routes between breeding and winter grounds onto broad geographic zones of avian movement. The North American waterfowl flyways—Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic—funnel birds generally from north to south, serving as migration channels for not only ducks and geese but also many shorebirds and land species. Long-distance migrants benefit from increased space for nesting and enhanced food availability in their summer habitats. Hence, the timing of birds’ migratory travels is closely tied to their preferred food sources; insectivorous species tend to migrate earlier in the fall than do seed eaters, for example.

Other, shorter-distance migratory behaviors keep most wildfowl in motion at least part of the time. Some birds find seasonal habitats through altitudinal migration, that is, simply by moving up or down a mountainside. Climate and weather also influence avian movements, prompting some species, such as white-winged doves in the Rio Grande Valley, to vacate breeding areas during heavy summer rainstorms or hurricanes. Adverse weather along the coasts tends to channel migrating birds down shorelines and cluster them on
peninsulas and points. Changes in social interactions or food sources can also cause variable migrations away from breeding territories. Cedar waxwings and blue jays are just two types of winged wanderers or “nomads” that travel irregularly, moving on when the food runs out. Some species exhibit partial migration behaviors, with certain individuals departing from their summer resorts in the fall while others remain in place. Even so-called resident or sedentary wildfowl display some form of localized daily or seasonal mobility, either singly or in flocks.

All these configurations of avian distribution and movement shaped the geography and timing of market hunting. Not surprisingly, commonly hunted birds varied by region, and market hunters specialized in the types of game that were locally abundant. Around Washington, DC, and Baltimore, sora rail shooting was perhaps the most celebrated. During fall migrations in the nation’s capital, wrote naturalists Elliott Coues and D. Webster Prentiss in the 1880s, a single gunner could “secure from twelve to twenty dozen Carolina [sora] rail and as many reedbirds.” Also available nearby were numerous cedar waxwings, pileated woodpeckers, great horned owls, and marsh hawks, all of which made regular appearances in the city’s markets and restaurants. Baltimore-area commercial hunters could “make a comfortable living” in the Chesapeake’s “far-famed ducking-ground.” In Massachusetts, locally common yellowlegs were harvested in large amounts on Cape Cod to be sent to Boston game markets. Market hunters shot plentiful long-tailed ducks on the Niagara River in the 1880s, while they lasted. In the Midwest, commercial hunters exploited still plentiful prairie chickens, while waterfowl were major targets for professional shooters in the South. Plume hunters were prominent in the Gulf states, where they harvested breeding egrets, gulls, and grebes. San Francisco–area market hunters plied the region’s estuaries, bays, and the vast wetlands of the Sacramento–San Joaquin river delta for abundant ducks and geese as well as the commercially popular California clapper rail (Ridgway’s rail). Gunners took down band-tailed pigeons along the Pacific coast range, and plume hunters and egg collectors invaded Pacific island seabird rookeries.

Although variable avian ranges and species distributions narrowed the availability of prey within a particular region, seasonal migrations temporarily broadened the array of birds to be had. Market hunters were keenly aware of the annual ebb and flow of migratory populations that set the timing and locations of wildfowl harvests. Fall and spring migrations brought hordes of
waterfowl, shorebirds, cranes, doves, pigeons, woodcock, and snipe through the major flyways and tributary migration routes crossing the continent. As flocks traveled, they became targets for new rounds of market hunters, especially at traditional stopover locations, and dealers had a near year-round variety of “seasonal food” to sell. In late-nineteenth-century Washington, DC, game markets offered woodcock, snipe, and swans in January; geese, ducks, and pigeons in February and March; plovers in May, June, July, and August; larks, woodcock, reedbirds, and rails in September and October; and woodcock, snipe, and wild ducks in November and December. Other cities had similar patterns of wildfowl availability, which revealed the extent to which the market’s seasonal nature was a consequence of biology rather than economics.

Erratic migrants such as passenger pigeons presented professional hunters with a different kind of economic timing. Seemingly random seasonal and daily movements—the birds’ biological logic—governed the ways they could be harvested and marketed. Massive pigeon nesting colonies shifted several hundred miles from one year to the next, prompting amateur and professional pigeoneers to descend upon the communal roosts. Although some expert pigeon netters claimed they could “tell with considerable accuracy” where a nesting was likely to occur, others argued that “even the pigeons themselves could not tell you now, where they will spend next winter.” When the birds did appear, local and regional markets felt their impact. Simply put, erratic migrations produced erratic markets. The great nestings in Shelby, Michigan, in 1874 and 1876, for example, revived the local economy and overwhelmed markets as far away as Chicago, where the sudden glut dropped prices to fifty cents a barrel. Within a week of the start of another major nesting—this one in Wisconsin—New York market prices plummeted more than five dollars per dozen, slashing the profits pigeon hunters and game dealers expected.

Seasonal and daily avian movements, even among more-predictable migrant species, were as changeable as the weather, quite literally. The “business of shooting for the market was, of course, seasonal,” wrote J. Kemp Bartlett of his early market hunting days, but “each season varied with the weather and the flight of ducks.” Weather conditions influenced the timing of avian arrivals and departures, the routes taken, the use of stopover points, and daily foraging movements. Experienced waterfowl shooters who knew how to “read the weather” generally agreed that windy days with little rain or sleet were best for ducks, a notion supported by current research in avian ecology.
In the winter, ice hole shooting could be used to kill birds congregating at open water holes on frozen lakes and ponds. “Like an omnibus,” wrote one 1897 contributor to Forest and Stream, an ice hole “always has room for one more.” It was like “a mine which [was] exhaustless for that day.” The variability of ocean tides affected some species’ availability to hunters. During extremely high tides, sora and clapper rails, for example, depend on access to elevated marsh grass environments for refuge where they are far more vulnerable to hunters. In the nineteenth century, newspapers and magazines published special “rail tides” timetables to draw professional and amateur gunners alike to these events. “The more tide the most Rail, always,” averred Charles Hallock of Forest and Stream.

Birds’ vulnerability to hunters also varied by time of day. Evening and night hunting as birds traveled to and from feeding grounds proved extraordinarily deadly for waterfowl, particularly for usually wary species. At twilight, flying birds were silhouetted against the skies while hunters on the ground or water were concealed in darkness. Resting waterfowl were prime targets for night-hunting commercial shooters who used Big Guns or batteries of guns to rake rafted ducks or geese with a hail of ammunition. Lamps, lanterns, or torches could be used to mesmerize birds at night, freezing them in place to allow the hunter to approach within netting or shooting range. “Shining,” “fire-lighting,” or “fire-hunting” methods were especially effective for taking waterfowl from punt or sneak boats, for shooting woodcock ashore, and for capturing passenger pigeons from their roosts.

Environmental patterns such as these made a great deal of difference to the birds and, consequently, to the market in them. The severe 1855–56 winter on Chesapeake Bay, for example, pushed ducks farther south than usual, creating a shortage in the local game markets and driving up the prices of “all descriptions of wildfowl.” An unseasonably warm spring in 1886 caused “a scarcity of ducks” for Chicago dealers, even though the market gunners were afield in force. Warm weather presented additional challenges for hunters and dealers struggling to keep their stock from deteriorating in higher temperatures before it could be sold. An excess of birds in poor condition worked to depress prices for all wild game in the markets.

Wildfowl behaviors shaped the market as well, since interspecific vulnerability to hunting varies considerably. Differing habits of flight influenced birds’ susceptibility to the killing methods employed by hunters and the profits to be made from them. Sporting and professional wildfowlers alike knew
that wildfowl were attracted to land-water physiographic configurations such as points and passes—areas that concentrated birds and offered especially productive shooting sites—many of which became legendary in the annals of waterfowling. Open water–dwelling sea ducks such as scoters and eiders that typically flew well offshore could be taken with the cooperative method of “line boating.” Hunters in anchored fishing boats arranged in a perpendicular line extending from the mainland could easily shoot passing ducks that had little choice but to fly between them. Waterfowl’s propensity for taking off into the wind allowed market hunters to use wind direction to their advantage, sailing upwind of a waterfowl concentration and then turning abruptly downwind toward it. Gunners could often come within range before the birds—especially heavy waterfowl and diving duck species that needed long distances for take-off—became airborne and swung aside.

Gregariousness, another behavioral factor, likewise mattered when it came to which species could be commercially exploited most easily. For market hunters, flocking wildfowl like mallards, pintails, and many geese varieties were far more profitable targets because they could be killed quickly in large numbers. Conversely, solitary whooping cranes, spotted sandpipers, swans, and goldeneye ducks, along with wary and swift-flying species such as the black-bellied plover and Wilson’s snipe, were more difficult to hunt in economically efficient ways. Gregarious behaviors also determined the effectiveness of calls and decoys as hunting tools. Pigeon netters deployed “fliers,” live birds tied by a cord and thrown into the air, or “stool pigeons,” tethered to a platform to attract their prey. Waterfowl hunters staked out cripples and used the wounded birds’ calls of distress to lure their companions within shooting range. Dead birds could be propped into lifelike postures to attract others of their kind. Many commercial gunners used artificial calls, home-made and manufactured, to imitate natural avian vocalizations with great felicity. The efficacy of such deceptions, though, varied by species. Sporting writer William Hazelton claimed that bluebills and ringbills were the easiest to decoy, while pintail and canvasback ducks had the reputations of being more difficult to fool than mallards. Among the ducks, the redhead was regarded as being especially vulnerable to market shooting because of its propensity to gather in large, dense flocks and also because of its attraction to decoys.

Another behavioral variable that played a role in the wildfowl market was the extent to which different species were able to adapt to human activities,
including hunting. Many birds flee human contact; others seem reasonably tolerant. Expansion of grain farming in the nineteenth century proved to be a boon for some species of waterfowl, most notably the mallards, pintails, and Canada geese that were drawn to farmers’ fields. These preferences were well known by experienced hunters who baited areas with corn, wheat, and barley to lure waterfowl. Orin Sabin, an old market hunter, recalled that professional gunners paid farmers to harrow the margins of prairie sloughs so that they could lace the mud flats with grain to draw plovers. Spring-migrating plovers also gathered on burned-over prairie lands to feed on insects, and a few enterprising market hunters took to igniting grass fires near shallow sloughs to further their success. Pigeons and doves could be convinced to land on ground strewn with salt. The human invention of wildfowl refuges at the turn of the century paradoxically encouraged commercial exploitation by attracting substantial numbers of wildfowl and equally substantial numbers of market hunters who waited patiently just outside the sanctuaries’ borders for unsuspecting birds. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the wariness of migratory birds sought for commercial and recreational purposes increased in proportion with hunting pressure, a point sportsman-writer Gasper Howland affirmed in 1893. “All kinds of wild fowl,” he argued, were “more wary than ever before” because of the incessant shooting by market hunters and sportsmen. As a result, birds experienced in the ways of hunters were “more difficult to circumvent and capture.” Twenty-first-century banding studies of game birds tend to bear out these historical observations, showing that older birds are less vulnerable to capture than immature individuals. Although some of the difference can be attributed to lesser physical development, including power of flight, the limited exposure of younger birds to humans makes them less cautious than adults who have survived earlier confrontations with hunters. Vulnerability to hunting, then, is likely higher for younger individuals—a biological factor from which professional shooters of the past profited.

Biology also governed market hunters’ choices of prey. Feather hunters sought herons, egrets, and other plumage species in their breeding colonies at the times when their “nuptial” plumage was most colorful. Breeding behaviors that attached nesting birds strongly to their eggs and fledglings left them exposed to capture. Colony-nesting marine birds such as the gannet and tidal water birds such as the clapper rail were particularly vulnerable to egg hunters. Clapper rails laid large clutches of eggs and commonly renested if
their first nests were destroyed, characteristics that made them attractive for commercial exploitation. Conversely, nesting colonies perched on inaccessible cliffs or on rugged offshore islands were more likely to escape severe commercial hunting pressure.\textsuperscript{72}

Not surprisingly, the growth of market hunting affected bird biology adversely, though its negative effects varied by species and by the type of exploitation each one faced. Eggers caused perhaps the most direct disruption to bird reproduction by removing potential progeny from the population. Disturbances caused by egg hunters caused nest abandonment, destruction of young, and other negative avian health effects. In some cases, colonies were virtually destroyed in but a few days of egg collecting.\textsuperscript{73} Plume hunters disrupted birds’ breeding behaviors and success, since the peak season for plumes coincided with the breeding, egg laying, incubation, and fledging periods. Plumers routinely killed nesting birds, destroyed nests and eggs, and created immense commotion that upset the reproductive activities of the entire colony. Since plumage colors were generally sex specific, hunters selectively shot males for their brightly colored feathers, destroying in the process the long-lasting pair bonds that sometimes formed between mates. The loss of a mate could thus potentially wipe out years of future offspring.\textsuperscript{74}

Game bird populations subjected to commercial harvests were similarly harmed by widespread spring shooting practices that killed large numbers of young birds, upset breeding and migration patterns, or eradicated local avian populations. Intensive hunting during migrations interrupted birds’ customary flight paths and disturbed them at stopover points.\textsuperscript{75} Market gunners’ concerns for efficiency led to wasteful hunting because professionals considered their time too economically valuable to spend it looking for downed and crippled birds.\textsuperscript{76} Intense hunting pressure in bird-rich environments diminished or diverted avian populations over time, effectively circumscribing birds’ former natural ranges and shifting the geography of commercial wildfowling to new, untapped regions. Favored species disappeared around cities first, especially those with active game markets and high concentrations of sport hunters. Birds inhabiting regions within easy reach by rail or water went next. When Merritt sent his son Clarence to Nebraska in the 1880s, it was to find species that had been hunted to near extinction in Illinois in the years before.\textsuperscript{77} At the end of the century, blue-winged teal were almost gone from New England and the mid-Atlantic states, places where they had once been “very common indeed.” Once the map of wildfowl haunts had been redrawn, professional
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amateur hunters had to travel to “the inaccessible sloughs, grown with wild rice,” in the Midwest or the lagoons of the lower Mississippi Valley to see any flights of wild birds.78

For avian entrepreneurs, profiting from birds was as much a biological endeavor as it was an economic one. Birds’ natures made their commercial exploitation possible. Abundant, diverse, and broadly distributed wildfowl pop-

Plume hunter Leigh M. Pearsall poses with a black-crowned night heron on Florida’s Santa Fe Lake early in the twentieth century. Commercial plumers in southern Gulf states exploited breeding colonies, harvesting egrets, herons, ibises, and other species when clad in their “nuptial plumage.” Plume birds were often shot while sitting on their nests. Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory (Creative Commons PDM 1.0)
ulations meant that nearly every locale in North America was home to some variety of winged species in numbers that could be harvested for commerce—at least for a time. Breeding, nesting, and feeding behaviors concentrated avian resources in ways that market hunters could easily and efficiently harvest. Above all, biological mobility, particularly seasonal migration habits, brought millions of birds to hunters across the country almost year-round. Provided with an available and vulnerable array of prey, market hunters and game dealers like Merritt were able to transform wildfowling from a short-term diversion into a large-scale, modern capitalist enterprise. Yet even in this industrialized environment, outwardly governed by a capitalist logic, the production of wild birds for the consumer market could not escape the biological logic of birds’ lives.

The Avian Economy

Of course, production was only half of the economic equation. Consumption played an equal and complementary role in creating the modern market in birds. Merritt’s observation that “fashion . . . set the price of all game birds” was an explicit acknowledgment of the new patterns of consumption shaping the wildfowl market in the late nineteenth century. As avian entrepreneurs harnessed novel technologies to circumvent the biophysical constraints that had previously limited the market’s reach, they expanded the distance between wildfowl producers in the field and urban consumers. Frozen game and dealers’ storage facilities worked to stretch the biological timing of the seasons so that buyers could forget birds’ seasonal mobility. Consumers sought out new avian products, and sellers obliged by advertising and delivering the latest fads in wild merchandise.

Wildfowl migrated from the countryside to cities in these years according to a capitalist logic. Birds traveled along routes mapped by a complex economic network that extracted birds from the biophysical contexts in which they were embedded; alienated them from the hunters, processors, shippers, and sellers who produced them; and stamped them with a price. The late-nineteenth-century market in birds cut avian ecological diversity into neat packages that could be easily bought and sold. Converted into different “species” of economic commodities, wildfowl reappeared to American consumers as meat, eggs, feathers, decoys, targets, or specimens in ever-increasing quantities. In short, the avian economy fundamentally changed the ways in which many Americans encountered wild birds.
Commodified birds were most widely distributed as food for consumers’ tables. Eggs were seasonal features of late-nineteenth-century markets, though their commercial sale was geographically limited and never approached the extensiveness of the meat bird market. Fragile and perishable, wild bird eggs sold close to where they were harvested during periods of intensive egg laying. The egg trade in the Farallon Islands, thirty miles offshore of San Francisco, served the gold rush town’s hungry populace beginning in the 1850s when domestic food supplies were scarce and expensive. Consumers particularly coveted the large and uniquely colored eggs from the common murre, a penguin-like seabird, during “their peculiar season.” Used commonly for baking, murre eggs were “considered to be very nutritious,” and some Californians deemed them “a great delicacy.” One San Francisco resident averred that fried murre eggs were “a delicious dish,” though they needed a little whiskey to “take away the strong taste” that was reminiscent of fish if the eggs were even slightly stale. Others found the sight of the cooked eggs unappetizing, with transparent yolks “of a fiery orange colour—almost red.”

By far the wildfowl commodity most familiar to consumers, however, was meat. Long before the height of the market hunting era, merchants throughout the country sold a wide variety of birds including the now-extinct Labrador duck. At first, biological factors largely governed supplies of meat birds, and market hunters worked mainly during the colder parts of the year when migrants were plentiful and meat preservation was simpler. There was a “proper season” for the consumption and marketing of each species, as the New York Times noted in 1878. Geese, for example, could be eaten from October until the end of January only. After that, their flesh became “stringy” and they were “not generally so appetizing.” Birds eaten “out of season” were considered “unfit, unwholesome, and even poisonous” by some. Consumer demand was conditioned by the seasonality of the supply in those earliest years, with purchasing interest highest during the “social season” and winter holidays from October through March, when local wildfowl was available and at its best. Summers were slack times. As Merritt’s midcentury experience in Illinois demonstrated, before the modern game market developed, “nobody seemed to think there was any market for any game anywhere, except in cold weather.”

Although the market in birds retained much of its seasonal character in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, refrigeration technologies and faster transportation vastly expanded game availability and extended the seasons of consumption, in the process transforming the consumer market in
“Scottie ‘the Egger’ South Farallon Islands, July ‘96.” Eggers made a practice of destroying all the eggs on their first visit to ensure the freshness of the eggs collected on subsequent trips. Arthur L. Bolton © California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco

avian meat products. Mechanical considerations—the efficiency of storage facilities and communication, access to transportation—combined with biological dynamics to modernize and industrialize the avian economy. Railroads brought wildfowl from near and far into urban game markets that, in turn, offered customers an expansive array of birds for their tables in numbers that would have been unimaginable but a few decades earlier. Passenger
pigeons were arguably the most numerous of commodified species to migrate by rail to city markets in the mid-nineteenth century. At the end of April 1851, seventy-five tons of pigeons were shipped to New York City just from the western counties of Steuben and Allegany. Nesting sites in the Michigan counties of Oceana, Newaygo, and Grand Traverse sent one thousand tons of squabs and nearly two and half million adult pigeons to markets in 1874. During the great 1878 Petoskey, Michigan, pigeon roost, 128 barrels of dead birds and 108 crates of live birds shipped from one railroad station in a single day. These numbers did not include the pigeons sent by steamers from ports on the Great Lakes. This kind of modern intensive marketing was no different, argued Chicago game dealer E. T. Martin in 1879, than the agricultural trade, for passenger pigeons were “as much an article of commerce as wheat, corn, hogs, beeves, or sheep” and it was “no more cruel to kill them for the market by the thousand” than it was “to countenance the killing at the stock yards.”

The advent of refrigerated transport and commercial freezers in the 1870s and 1880s only added to the range of available wildfowl to be consumed. Refrigeration preserved the quality of meat birds into the warmer months, though, to some, frozen game held little appeal at first. Much like the domestic livestock trade, frozen wild meats initially generated negative reactions from consumers accustomed to buying freshly killed animals. To the fastidious, the freezing of game birds destroyed their special allure or, even worse, rendered the meat toxic. The “thousands of birds served in Eastern cities,” wrote ornithologist Daniel Giraud Elliot in 1897, had “been frozen, tossed about perhaps for weeks like lumps of ice and then thawed out before being cooked.” It was little wonder, then, that the “most toothsome morsel in the world, after such treatment, could not be expected to have much more flavor than a dried chip.” Yet the novelty of frozen wildfowl that could be consumed in any season soon overcame customers’ reluctance to eat meat that was months or even years old. Freezing made “it possible for those people who can afford to pay for the luxury to have their table supplied with anything in the way of game at any time of the year.” Restaurants sold frozen wildfowl to people unfamiliar with “its true flavor when eaten in the field.” Consumers who ate wildfowl because it was “fashionable to do so” began to expect their favorite game birds to be more readily obtainable in any season, albeit for a price.

Prices for game species quickly became a topic for publication in newspapers, magazines, and government reports. Generally, the unit of sale was based on the species’ size. Large birds such as geese and cranes were sold indi-
vidually, medium-sized birds like most ducks were priced by the pair or “brace,” and smaller shorebirds, rails, doves, and others were priced by the dozen. In a few instances, very small birds including reedbirds (bobolinks) or redwing blackbirds were sold by the bushel or bag. Market values for both resident and migratory birds directly competed with the prices for domestic fowl, causing farm-raised poultry sales to slacken during periods of wild-fowl abundance. Prices also varied by species, as Charles Hallock’s regular listings of New York game market prices in Forest and Stream showed. From 1874 to 1876, Hallock’s systematic survey showed that the highest-valued species per pound, adjusted by live weight, was the woodcock at $1.62, followed by Wilson’s snipe at $1.14, the diminutive bobolink or reedbird at $0.90, the bobwhite at $0.76, and the ruffed grouse at $0.47. By weight, these upland game birds cost more than waterfowl such as the canvasback at $0.44 per pound, the pintail at $0.23, or the greater scaup at $0.15. Passenger pigeons sold at price comparable to midrange waterfowl, while prairie chickens brought in from the Midwest were valued a bit higher.

Consumer preferences increasingly drove prices, which varied considerably by region. Chicago and New York markets saw higher prices for game than those in New Orleans and Richmond, Virginia. Boston’s game birds ran even higher still. San Francisco’s buyers preferred game brought in from Sacramento, which had “none of that fishy taste,” over local birds taken along the coast. Prices in other cities differed considerably, but in general, reported the US Biological Survey early in the twentieth century, “the less important the market, the lower the prices.” Regional preferences also governed price differentials between species. Along the Columbia River in Oregon, for example, most “trash ducks” were hardly marketable, sportsman S. H. Greene told Forest and Stream in 1891, while swans shot on the river would hardly “bring more than fifty or seventy-five cents.” Canvasback and redhead ducks were always sought in the eastern states, while scaups were less desirable and mergansers were scarcely salable. Chicago’s markets could sell canvasbacks for twice the price of other ducks despite the fact that they were “in no wise superior” to pintails, according to ornithologist Robert Ridgeway. Farther west, the canvasback’s appeal declined. Although it was “highly prized by eastern epicures,” in California it was “considered a very inferior bird for the table.” The same was true in Texas, where the Galveston News scoffed in 1897 at New York and Washington elites who paid as much for the “lordly canvasback” as a Texan would shell out for a yearling steer.
Wildfowl abundance in late-nineteenth-century markets meant that some sort of meat bird was within the reach of nearly every household. Even the housekeeper of moderate means could afford to “vary her table” by cooking whatever wild birds were in season and relatively cheap. Most markets carried medium-sized game birds such as partridges and pigeons along with varieties of “other small birds like sand peeps [snipe], reed birds, etc.” These smaller species were usually sold with the heads skinned, the eyes removed, “and the sockets filled with some kind of force-meat.” They could be baked and then served on buttered toast. New Orleans’ markets offered American bittern and mud hens, which were favorites of “the poorer classes” for making gumbo. In the 1880s, robins were “a staple article of food” in Georgia, and “robin pie delight[ed] the heart of the average citizen.” Ducks, geese, swans, and a variety of shorebirds from the Chesapeake, wrote sporting author John Mortimer Murphy in 1882, were “shipped by the tens of tons to the northern cities” where they sold at rates so low that even “the humblest of the working classes” could have wild game dinners “at a cost little beyond what they would pay for beef or mutton.”

As many desirable species grew scarce toward the end of the century, however, city dwellers of ordinary means found that the better avian commodities were often priced beyond their reach or not available at all. Evolving state-level game codes also constrained consumption by imposing legal seasons for wildfowl harvests and sales that reinforced birds’ biological cycles. Urban game dealers advertised what was “in season”—an implicit recognition of both the biological and legal timing shaping the market. Official hunting and commercial sale seasons altered the trajectories of market prices, lowering them in the fall when a surfeit of birds hit the market legitimately, and raising them in the late winter and spring as the game supply dwindled and the legal season ended. Illicit birds could be had during closed seasons, but not cheaply. Over time, as bird populations generally declined and as game laws were more rigidly enforced, prices for wildfowl increased. As the twentieth century approached, many agreed that “for the vast and overwhelming multitude of people of the continent,” wild game was “no longer in any sense an essential factor” for ordinary subsistence. Instead, wildfowl had become a luxury item for city dwellers, an extravagance “sold for prices that made it such.”

Across the late nineteenth century, many urban dwellers came to count the consumption of wild game as an elevated culinary experience, agreeing with Elisha Lewis’s assessment that only the most “ignorant, low-minded fel-
low” would prefer “a barn-yard duck to a Chesapeake canvass-back.” Few of the truly epicurean elite would have quarreled with Merritt’s prejudiced claim that for a restaurant to be truly great, it had to serve wild game. Game dinners and banquets became regular features at many prominent big-city hotels, restaurants, and private clubs in this era. In Chicago, the Tremont and Grand Pacific hotels were well known for their annual game dinners, which were instituted by proprietor John B. Drake in 1855 and continued until 1893. These banquets featured imaginative avian delicacies including “Wild Pigeon Compote,” “Fillet of Grouse with Truffles,” and “Pyramid of Wild Goose Liver in Jelly.” An 1886 menu, titled *Procession of Game*, listed twenty-six species of roasted game and seventeen species of broiled game. The grand meals often closed with a cold, ornamental dish such as “Stuffed coon, au naturel.”

In Washington, DC, Willard’s Hotel specialized in wild game in its early years, focusing on what was plentiful from the nearby Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River. Willard’s offered wild game at banquets and on its daily menu, from which one could order dishes such as “wild pigeon” and “two robins on toast.” Denver, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and many other cities boasted hotel restaurant fare with plenty of wildfowl delicacies such as “Becassines au Cresson” [snipe on watercress], “Broiled Plover on Toast,” and the mysterious “game pie.” Metropolitan Baltimore, according to one nineteenth-century writer, earned its “Land of the Epicure” sobriquet from its access to “the two very choicest delicacies known to the world . . . the canvasback duck and diamond-back terrapin.” New York’s restaurants were particularly well endowed with wildfowl, a consequence of the city’s extensive market. At midcentury, the Astor House menu featured a veritable gastronomical aviary that included “black duck, lake duck, meadow hen, short neck snipe, doe witches, cedar birds, grouse, plover, rail birds, mallard duck, robin snipe, [and] surf snipe.” The bill of fare at the Windsor Hotel in New York likewise featured wild birds ranging from wild turkeys and ducks to plovers and quails. Christmas dinner at the Windsor in 1890 included canvasback ducks served with “old fashioned currant jelly” along with different varieties of imported birds. “The game preserves of distant lands,” noted the *New York Times*, “had been ransacked for delicacies of the feast” that year.

Chefs at Delmonico’s, New York’s premier restaurant during the market hunting era, were perhaps the most important contributors to the wild game mystique spreading across the fine-dining landscape in the late nineteenth century. Wild birds done up in the French tradition were always a major feature
of Delmonico’s menus. Chef Charles Ranhofer’s encyclopedic cookbook *The Epicurean* (1894) contained an entire chapter on the preparation of game and an index listing what game was available in each season. Recipes such as “Blackbirds À La Degrange,” “Canvasback Ducks Roasted Garnished With Hominy” (which required Havre de Grace, Maryland, ducks), “Wild Pigeon or Squabs Poupeton, Ancient Style,” and “California Quails À La Monterey” revealed both a devotion to regional foods and the popular mixture of continental cooking with characteristically American ingredients that was the basis for the “Franco-American” culinary style. Dishes like “Plovers À La Victor Hugo,” “Partridges À La Jules Verne,” and “Salamis of Teal Duck À La Harrison” demonstrated Ranhofer’s penchant for naming dishes after famous personages, especially those who had patronized Delmonico’s. Woodcock appeared to be a favorite of Ranhofer’s, since he created a dozen different recipes for the species including “Breasts of Woodcocks À La Houston.”

If fashion set the price of all game birds, it absolutely dictated the consumption of plume species. Although feathers and down had long been harvested for utilitarian purposes such as quill pens, blankets, comforters, and pillows, the extensive use of plumes and whole bird skins for ornamentation was a turn-of-the-century peculiarity. Trends in women’s clothing and household decoration elevated avian feathers and skins to the heights of modern style during the Gilded Age. Plume dealers avidly sought extremely vulnerable wading and water birds, most notably the snowy egrets, pelicans, herons, gulls, terns, and grebes that nested in dense colonies mainly in southern swamps and marshes. Various perching birds also found their way to market, including the colorful Carolina parakeet, the diminutive bobolink, and the even smaller hummingbird—birds whose heads could be set like “precious gems” in earrings and brooches. Customers desired wild birds, often in extravagant nuptial plumage, for hats, muff.fs, collarettes, dress and blouse decoration, hairpieces, and capes as well as ornamental bric-a-brac for Victorian homes.

This growing demand for wild plume birds energized the millinery trade most of all, as stylish American women donned the latest feather-topped designs from Paris, London, New York, and other centers of fashion. In 1874, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* reported that consumers’ demand for feathers, expertly dyed and designed by craftsmen, “can scarcely be supplied.” Bonnets could be decorated with tiny, jewel-like hummingbirds, and birds of blue-gray, tawny brown, or scarlet could be posed to “perch saucily on hats with outspread wings” in order to give “a youthful stylish effect” to women’s wear. Although
Godey’s editors twinged a bit at what seemed to be a “relic of the savage state,” women’s increasing demand for dead birds was ultimately just one of those “strange vagaries” enforced by fashion’s decree.124 “The American woman, in nothing, is so whimsical as in her bonnet,” Good Housekeeping proclaimed in 1888, prompting milliners to keep pace with consumers’ desires. Those desires demanded “immense cases of small birds, wings, breasts, montures, and tufts of feathers of all kinds and descriptions.” Even “the anathema of humane societies for the protection of birds,” fashion advertisers asserted, could not diminish the popularity of feathered trimmings.125

The varieties of fashionable design available at the turn of the century were limited only by the plumassier’s imagination: “He puts the Dove’s head on the Tanager’s body, or the wings of the Woodpecker or Trogon are mingled with the plumes of Egrets, or the heads of Snipes and Plovers.” Yet women desired natural-looking birds most of all. Owls, pigeons, and gulls could not escape the hat trap when “big birds [were] all the rage.” At other times “small birds alone suit the ladies’ capricious tastes.” The plumassier and milliner were driven to come up with “endless combinations . . . to supply the endless thirst for novelty in the female heart.” Consequently, the market in plumes and customers’ cravings for wildfowl fluctuated with the whims of fashion.126

Artfully arranged in their new habitats, wild birds became a familiar sight to city folk, with fashionable urbanites in their avian accoutrements mingling in great diversity on city streets and sidewalks. A veritable ornithological catalog could be compiled from sightings of ladies’ hats—an exercise the National Audubon Society’s Frank Chapman undertook in 1886. In a single day’s observations in New York, Chapman spied over five hundred hats decorated with some twenty different identifiable species of birds. Over three quarters of the hats he recorded were decorated with some sort of bird feathers or plumes, most from unrecognizable species. A two-day observational census identified forty different species of birds on ladies’ hats. Preferred species tended to be small colorful types such as cedar waxwings, flickers, common terns, Carolina parakeets, and bobwhite quail.127 In many cases, women sported hats with multiple birds or bird parts from a variety species. Another “ornithological friend” counted the birds observed in one Madison Avenue horse car where eleven of the thirteen women in the car wore birds on their hats, including “(1) heads and wings of three European starlings; (2) an entire bird (species unknown), of foreign origin; (3) seven warblers representing four species; (4) a large tern; (5) the heads and wings of three shore-larks; (6) the wings of seven
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New York’s shop windows were, the New York World declared with only a hint of irony, “alive with birds” at the start of the twentieth century. Just how far might this “craze for novelty” go? Perhaps trend-setting women would even be willing “to sacrifice the household canary or pet parrot” on fashion’s altar.129

Birds in far fewer numbers but in even greater diversity were sought by yet another species of modern consumer: the specimen collector. Although natural history collecting had been a widely practiced avocation since the eighteenth century, the modern market transformed the practice into a commer-

shore-larks; (7) one-half of a gallinule [a type of rail]; (8) a small tern; (9) a turtle-dove; (10) a vireo and a yellow breasted chat; and (11) ostrich-plumes.”128

Bird-hat-wearing women from Seattle, Washington, in the early 1900s. The two women pictured here are sporting hats made with three stuffed Carolina parakeets each. Now extinct, the Carolina parakeet was the only parrot species native to the eastern United States. Its colorful plumage made it particularly attractive to milliners and fashionable consumers. The last Carolina parakeets died in captivity in 1918 in the Cincinnati Zoo, the same zoo that housed the last surviving passenger pigeon. Image from Charles W. Sanders Collection (2014.026.123), courtesy of Renton History Museum, Renton, Washington
cialized enterprise in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Ornithological collectors ranged from scientists to natural history buffs, many of whom took to heart Elliott Coues’s 1892 dictum “Birds may be sought anywhere at any time; they should be sought everywhere, at all times.” The market in birds opened new fields for collectors to prowl in search of rare and interesting birds to buy for public or personal collections. Audubon’s 1830 purchase of 350 passenger pigeons in New York to distribute among English noblemen was an early but by no means unique example. William Brewster, the cofounder of the American Ornithologists’ Union, was the proud owner of one of the biggest private collections in North America, with many specimens acquired from markets in and around Boston. Forest and Stream editor George Bird Grinnell frequented the markets in New York and reported on the variety of avian species he found, like the rare Labrador ducks that ornithologists snapped up “as soon as a specimen was exposed for sale.” In Chicago, the future chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, Edward Nelson, routinely engaged in a kind of macabre bird watching at the South Water Street game markets, recording his sightings of swans, widgeons, and scoters available in dealers’ stalls. Buffalo, New York’s newly appointed park commissioner in 1895 was reported to be “an enthusiastic ornithologist” with a collection of “200 sets of eggs” of which “80 came from Europe or remote places in this country.” A prize of his collection was “a set of woodcock’s eggs that date[d] back to 1864.” For professional and amateur collectors alike, the market offered access to a widening inventory of avian specimens they could never hope to amass on their own.

Commodified birds, skins, eggs, nests, and bird mounts, supplied by market hunters or natural history companies, found ready purchasers in this growing community of specimen collectors and taxidermists starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Avian species that were rare, exotic, or skidding toward extinction were particularly coveted. Labrador ducks, for example, appeared in increasing numbers in New York markets between 1840 and 1860 despite declining populations—the consequence of “far greater numbers of scientific collectors” interested in acquiring skins of this species. A good supply of eagles “killed on Long Island and brought to market for setting up as specimens” were available in New York in the 1850s, according to game dealer Amos Robbins. Furthering the trade were organized natural history clubs, journals, and catalogs for hobbyists in which avian entrepreneurs could turn a profit from their finds. In the early 1880s, one collector serendipitously purchased
seven hundred Long Island clapper rail eggs in New York markets, priced “at what they are worth for cooking purposes,” and resold them to individual collectors. His enormous stock of eggs ultimately depressed the value of rail egg specimens selling in catalogs for two years.\textsuperscript{140} Virtually all North American species were taken for specimens, including many that previously had little commercial value. In general, no species was safe from collectors, though the rarest wild birds were the most desired, commanded the highest prices, and therefore were the most exploited.

Although the wildfowl market dealt mainly in dead commodities, not all avian economic migrations occurred postmortem. Live birds made up a slice of the market as well. Some consumers sought live wild birds as pets, and sportsmen bought live ducks and geese to use as wildfowl lures.\textsuperscript{141} Advertisers in outdoor magazines offered live decoys, usually pinioned Canada geese or mallards, pitching them to recreational hunters “willing to do something practical” in order to get “more game.”\textsuperscript{142} By far the largest quantities of live wild birds consumed, though, were passenger pigeons used for recreational and competitive target shooting, a pastime that grew tremendously in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{143} Highly ritualized and almost exclusively male affairs, pigeon shoots involved elaborate rules, generated enormous wagers, and drew large numbers of spectators and gamblers.\textsuperscript{144} Domestic pigeons were sometimes used for competitions, but gunners considered wild pigeons the more sporting targets. Typical matches allowed 25 to 100 birds per shooter, but larger shoots might dispatch 25,000 or more.\textsuperscript{145} One three-day shooting tournament sponsored by the Peoria, Illinois, shooting club in 1876 killed 1,084 pigeons on the first day.\textsuperscript{146} That same year, the New York Sportsmen’s Association purchased 40,000 to 45,000 pigeons from Michigan for its tournaments. According to one estimate, competitors shot more than a quarter million passenger pigeons at tournaments in the peak-use year of 1878. The sport was widespread and quite popular in numerous cities, so much so that some game dealers, like Chicago’s E. T. Martin, made a specialty out of supplying passenger pigeons to shooting clubs.\textsuperscript{147} The expanded pigeon trade raised the sport to a level above mere butchery, according to an 1895 wing-shooting treatise, by allowing enthusiasts to “shoot at the best-flying pigeons we can procure.”\textsuperscript{148}

No matter the commodified form, birds were eminently salable. It was in their natures. For suppliers, birds’ availability—their abundance, widespread distribution, vulnerability to various hunting methods, and seasonal mobility—made them attractive targets. Avian physiology added to birds’
economic appeal. Their relatively small sizes in comparison to other game ani-
mals made them easier and cheaper to process, preserve, and transport effi-
ciently. For consumers, the widening range of avian commodities available—
from meat and eggs to feathers and specimens—made wildfowl desirable
products. It was this combination of biological and economic factors that al-
lowed for both the development of the modern wildfowl market and the evo-
lution of modern wildfowl consumers.

The Price of Wildness
To be sure, game markets of earlier eras exploited some of the same bioeconomic
conjunctures. In fledgling settlements, abundant wild creatures made conve-
nient substitutes for domestic animal products that were often more costly and
in short supply. Venison hams or wild snipe were valued in the same way as were
pork and barnyard fowl.149 American-produced deerskins made cost-effective
replacements for European domestic cowhides in the eighteenth century. Even
the highly commercialized bison trade of the mid-nineteenth century func-
tioned as an alternative source of cheap leather. In those days, wildness was
important only to the extent that wildlife was a plentiful and unowned material
resource.150

The modern market in birds, however, fundamentally changed the value of
wildness for Americans. In this newly industrialized capitalist environment,
wildfowl worth was derived in no small part from the birds’ intrinsic wild-
ness. Although the quail-dining gourmand, the plume-wearing dame, and the
pigeon-shooting partisan could be ignorant of the socio-natural relations that
brought wildfowl to the market and the ecological consequences of those acts,
they could not forget—nor did they want to—that the avian commodities they
fancied had once been wild creatures. In that way, birds were never completely
commodified. They remained recognizable as birds even as they were stan-
dardized and rendered exchangeable in the market. Remaking wildfowl into
objects of consumer desire brought nature into the marketplace in a quite dif-
ferent way and assigned it a new kind of symbolic value. In short, the market in
birds repackaged wildness for a modern American consumer culture.

Reminders of wildness always accompanied the consumption of birds.
Specimen collectors wanted nothing more than to replicate the look of a wild
bird, with “a correct and natural attitude” while museum taxidermists arranged
wildfowl “in their natural haunts.”151 Women’s hats featured birds and bird
parts “placed in natural positions.” Birds’ nests complete with “tiny pearly
eggs” nestled in the brims. Hummingbirds frolicked among strings of ribbon representing grass, and bluebirds were “placed low on the back of the bonnet as if flying down.”

Game birds were commonly sold and sometimes served in their natural states, with heads and feathers intact. Snipe and woodcock, according to one authority, “must always be served with their heads on, as the long bills proclaim them, and are highly prized.” Game dinners featured perhaps the most elaborate advertisements of birds’ wild origins. Cooked birds were sometimes situated in their native habitats and re-dressed by enclosing them in their former plumage. At such affairs, guests might find entrées such as “Blackbirds at Play,” “Boned Quail in Plumage,” or “Partridge in a Nest,” perhaps overseen by red-winged starlings perched on a tree limb. The Grand Pacific Hotel’s 1881 game dinner in Chicago featured an array of ornamental groups of “animals in lifelike attitudes.” At the entrance “was seated a large black bear” and a deer “crouching in the herbage,” while a variety of “birds were twittering in the branches of a realistic tree—reed birds, grouse and snipe.” All were “ready to eat, inside their skins,” yet they appeared animated as if they had “been stuffed by skilled taxidermists.”

Avian wildness, marketed as meat, acquired great cultural value as quintessentially American food. Lacking the studied sophistication of European cuisine, American fare could nonetheless boast of a “bounteous variety” derived from the natural abundance that had always set the New World apart from the Old. A “good American dinner” was likely to “be a revelation to many” outside the United States. Although Americans might seem to be provincial and “semi-barbarous epicures,” wrote Charles Augustus Goodrich at midcentury, their esteem for grouse, canvasbacks, brants, plover, wild turkeys, and the like was quite warranted. “One mouthful” was “sufficient to prove that there [was] a difference between a partridge and a hen.”

Wildfowl, ably prepared, was evidence of American cultural advancement in the modern age. European disdain for American cuisine could be countered with a bill of fare that included “Canvas-back ducks, the finest game in the world, and our turkeys, so far superior to those in Europe.” Indeed, English wildfowl were “uneatable when compared with those of the United States.” Other samples of “the intricacies of American cooking” involved “wild duck, squab, grouse, quail, reed-bird, plover, [and] prairie-chicken.” Among the first meals that Mark Twain desired after returning from a sojourn abroad were “Roast wild turkey, Woodcock, Canvas-back duck from Baltimore, Prairie hens from Illinois, Missouri partridges broiled.”
Twain’s geographically oriented menu reflected a growing popular admiration for regional food cultures that aligned with regional wildfowl distributions. Consumers prized dishes made from Illinois prairie chickens, East Coast rail, and California quail for their geographic distinctiveness. Along the gulf coast, the black-bellied tree duck was “considered quite a delicacy.” Early culinary innovators, like William Niblo, proprietor of New York’s Bank Coffee House, served up “Bald Eagle shot on the Grouse plains of Long Island,” wild turkeys “shot in the backwoods of Pennsylvania,” hawks and owls from “Turtle Grove, Hoboken,” and wild swans from Havre de Grace, Maryland.

No species was more closely associated with a regional food preference than was the Chesapeake Bay canvasback. Its reputation as an excellent eating bird was long-standing. Early-nineteenth-century observers noted the “great quantities” of canvasbacks “shot with long guns on the Potomac” and served up in a variety of ways. The key to the canvasback quality in the region was due, most asserted, to the “water celery” on which the bird fed, though ornithologist Robert Ridgeway argued that this theory for canvasback palatability was “wholly fallacious.” Instead, he attributed the duck’s regional reputation to “fashion and imagination, or perhaps a superior style of cooking and serving.” Nevertheless, many connoisseurs claimed they could distinguish a Chesapeake bird from those taken elsewhere. Ohio senator George E. Pugh tested this conventional wisdom by serving up a mess of Lake Erie waterfowl “to his gentlemen friends as Baltimore ducks,” who praised them as the finest of Maryland cookery. Even after Pugh confessed the deception, his friends remained unconvinced.

The market prices of wild birds in the late nineteenth century were clear measures of their cultural currency in a modernizing world where the authentic competed with the artificial for consumers’ attentions. Wildfowl’s natural authenticity—its associations with the premodern, frontier existence of backwoodsmen—captivated affluent city dwellers largely divorced from everyday contacts with the natural world and preoccupied with concerns about enervating overcivilization. Wildness, albeit purchased most often in a lifeless form, put urbanites in touch with the material reality of the nonhuman sphere. The seasonality of wildfowl available; the diversity of species appearing in game markets, on ladies hats, and in public and private collections; and the geographical specificity of avian commodities all contributed to connecting consumers to the environmental contexts from which their bird purchases originated.
The varieties of commodified avian species and the differences in their qualities gave buyers a personal connection with wild diversity. Commodified in the marketplace, that diversity, however, offered opportunities for sellers’ artifice. Dealers often disguised less desirable avian species as more palatable types when they could get away with it. Ruddy ducks could be passed off as teal, as they often were in Philadelphia markets, and unclear distinctions between canvasback and redhead ducks allowed early marketers to sell both at the same price. Washington, DC, restaurants served up bobolinks and redbirds, which were “luscious morsels when genuine,” but it was not unusual for “a great many Blackbirds or English Sparrows [to be] devoured by accomplished gourmands, who nevertheless do not know the difference when the bill of fare is printed correctly, and the charges are sufficiently exorbitant.” Consumers thus had to be knowledgeable about avian species and their natures to avoid deception. Luckily, some birds naturally offered clues to help discerning buyers. The prized canvasback duck and the blue-wing teal, for example, changed colors from spring to fall, identifying the better-conditioned fall ducks from less desirable spring ones. Other species did not reveal their ages so obviously. With values increasing for canvasbacks in the late nineteenth century, suppliers took more pains to provide “true and real canvas-back ducks” to “lovers of good eating.” Restaurateurs, however, could do more to hide the true identities of their dishes with sauces, herbs, and seasonings. A redhead duck could more easily masquerade as a superior canvasback in this way, especially if its eating were accompanied by ample quantities of champagne.

For city folk, wildness was an exotic commodity and, as wildlife populations receded, an increasingly rare one. Sellers capitalized on this scarcity to convert the trade into a predominately luxury market, and advertisers promoted wildness as a desirable commodity. A “famous epicure in Chicago,” recounted a Kansas newspaper in 1886, was so addicted to prairie chicken eggs that he managed each year to obtain “three or four dozen of this delicacy,” paying as much as sixty dollars a dozen for them (a believable claim, the reporter noted, because his informant was “not in Chicago politics”). Other types of wild bird eggs possessed exceedingly “rare qualities” that, once tasted, would cause one to lose all interest in domestic chicken eggs. The ruffed grouse egg was “simply a morsel fit for the gods.” Milliners advertised the “rare feathers” in stock for ladies’ hats, harvested from “rarest as well as gayest species,” including terns, egrets, herons, bitterns, flamingos, ibises, and all birds of “colorful
plumage.” Collectors likewise coveted the most unusual specimens, and advertisers made sure to offer them. A “very rare” yellow-throated warbler and a similarly unusual cerulean warbler, shot by a hobbyist in 1883, were reportedly the only ones ever seen on Long Island. For egg-collecting oologists, the eggs of uncommon and especially rare species represented the greatest challenges to acquire and required the greatest investment. A single “California Vulture [condor]” egg advertised in a 1904 catalog was listed for $350, while blue jay eggs went for a mere ten cents each. Even more-common species, though, could command higher prices if they produced particularly attractive eggs that collectors desired in large numbers.

This expanding consumption of avian wildness paradoxically functioned as an expression of nature appreciation, providing genteel nature lovers with a cure for the ills of modern civilization. Although actual encounters with the natural world were best for cultivating these sensibilities, commodified wildness offered reasonable facsimiles that could satisfy both scientific and aesthetic impulses. Ornithologically inclined buyers patronized taxidermy shops and natural history supply companies, searching for mounted wildfowl specimens to add to their collections. Others sought out stuffed birds for household decorations featuring the “wonderful tints and colors . . . furnished by the plumages of the many birds”—hues that could not be reproduced by any “mortal powers.” Their purchases fueled the expansion of commercial taxidermy as well as the formation of the Society of American Taxidermists in 1880. In contrast to the staid and conservative museum taxidermy of earlier decades, the modern decorative form of the art was “radical and progressive,” according to the Society, and its practitioners were “drawn to it out of a pure love of nature.” Egg collecting had its own specialized associations and periodicals aimed at hobbyists. While some magazines had educational content, others were little more than classified advertisements for individual egg sellers and commercial dealers. Two of the most widely circulated magazines were The Oologist (founded 1875) and The Ornithologist and Oologist (1881). Youngsters could start their egg-collecting pursuits with the advice of The Young Collector (1882), and The Young Oologist (1884). Several excellent bird egg identification manuals published in the late nineteenth century fast became important reference works for the growing population of specimen buyers and sellers, who numbered in the thousands by the 1880s.

Millinery decorations similarly capitalized on the aesthetic characteristics of a wide range of birds, both unusual and familiar. Common perching birds
and even larger starlings and woodpeckers provided a touch of natural, wild beauty to women’s bonnets. The contention from some that “our most desirable song birds, such as thrushes, wrens, gnatlets, and finches [were] in limited demand on account of their plain colors,” was deemed unfounded by other fashion writers. The fact was that even the drabbest wild bird added aesthetic value, a fact wryly confirmed by ornithologist William Dutcher in 1885 upon hearing reports of a woman wearing a dead crow “reposed among the curls and braids of her hair.” Dutcher opined that “if the lady in question could have seen the crow during its lifetime perched upon and feeding on the decaying carcass of a horse, she might have objected to the association.”

In all, the act of purchasing dead, commodified avian wildness in the modern marketplace functioned culturally as a symbolic interaction with nature. Experiences with wildness, both real and imagined, could be reconstructed and remembered in a game dinner, a wildfowl egg, or a stuffed bird. For sportsmen especially, wildfowl products enhanced their experiences with the wild. Shooters deemed swift-flying passenger pigeons to be the targets more sporting than domestic birds because of their wildness. Live birds, even though costly, made better decoys than artificial ones since their wild behaviors more readily lured waterfowl into gun range. The spoils of a successful hunting trip might be stuffed and placed on a mantelpiece, thus preserved as a priceless reminder of the wild encounter. Or a bird mount sold by a commercial taxidermist could stand in for the one that got away. Menus at waterfowling resorts featured wild game shot by the resort patrons or purchased from local hunters who sold birds to city “sports,” who arrived by rail and wagon. The game dinner, a mainstay of elite sportsmen’s club culture, put wildness on a plate in the form of roasted canvasbacks or “winter bay-birds” on toast; served with wine, champagne, or “a large pitcher of cocktails,” the meal was consumed by “wearied huntsmen” with “a zest they never experienced in the city.”

The elite sportsman, the bird hat–wearing woman, the avian collector, and the wildfowl epicure all continued to buy birds far beyond what was economically expedient, because they were willing to pay the price for wildness. With the cultural currency of the wild, consumers in an increasingly industrialized and standardized world could rediscover a nostalgic tie to a simpler American past or a connection to regional distinctiveness. Commodified wildness brought nature’s authenticity and aesthetics home to counter empty, modern artificiality. And it served as a reminder of wildness experiences that were
missing from urban spaces. The turn-of-the-century market promised much more than food or a fancy hat. It offered deep cultural messages about the value of wildlife in the modern age. The price of wildness was a measure of the difference between wildlife consumption and wildlife consumerism.

In the market, wildness most often came packaged in avian forms. Biology and economy conspired to make wildfowl exceptionally salable, but it was wildness that made birds especially valuable to Americans. “All good things are wild and free,” wrote Henry David Thoreau at midcentury. For the modern consumer, though, only half that statement was true. The market in birds proffered the laudable qualities of wild Nature, but they were hardly free.