The Market in Birds

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Twenty years after Henry Clay Merritt’s passing, Kewanee’s newspaper interviewed his son about the town in its early days. At sixty-eight, Herbie Merritt was a local landmark, and his reminiscences carried the weight of lifelong experience in the region. His recollections painted a picture of a landscape brimming with avian wildness. He remembered a time when “prairie chickens were everywhere” and flocks of “thousands of pigeons might be found in cultivated fields.” The nearby Annawan swamp drew a “surfeit of ducks” in those years, and “the waters of the Mississippi were congregated with them.” The flights of birds seemed endless. “As one flock was destroyed, new ones came.” Not surprisingly, many of Herbie’s wildfowl memories involved his father, the “famous hunter of his day.” Of particular note to the article’s author were the details of Merritt’s game-shipping business and his properties, including his Spoon River icehouse and the Merritt Block in Kewanee. The poultry and game storehouse, from which “choice game was shipped to the east,” still stood “near the old Merritt residence.”

Herbie’s feelings about his father appeared to have softened in the years since Henry’s death. The article revealed none of the conflicts that had roiled the Merritt family in its patriarch’s final years: the game dealer’s court battles,
his sons’ lawsuit for their inheritance money, Merritt’s remarriage to his wife’s niece, and his exclusion of Herbie and Clarence from his will. The only hint of family discontent came from Herbie’s critical observation about his father’s penchant for poetry. An inscription on one of Merritt’s buildings—a quotation, taken from a line of Lord Byron’s satiric poem *Don Juan*—“was a waste of time and money,” according to the son.2 Otherwise, it seemed that Herbie was willing to set aside his personal grievances, at least publicly, to memorialize a way of life that had disappeared.

Nostalgia kept Merritt’s reputation alive in Kewanee. He was “an outstanding figure” of the late nineteenth century, wrote E. A. Lincoln in 1934, “one of the greatest shippers of wild game in the middle west and probably in the United States.” His “famous cold storage plant” held “many thousands of wild fowl” that were sent to “the lucrative markets of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other large eastern cities” to be purchased by “dealers and consumers at fancy prices.”3 More than just a businessman in these retellings, Merritt was, according to local newspaper stories in the 1930s and 1940s, a “lover of nature and of hunting and the world lying out-of-doors.”4 His memoir revealed him to be “a genuine wild-life philosopher,” a true “lover of the wild things of the woods and streams” whose nature writing was “reminiscent of Henry D. Thoreau.”5

Market hunters of the previous century such as Merritt were eyewitnesses to an avian environment the likes of which would never be seen again. Their testimonies were invaluable as records of America’s wild heritage, and many sport hunters and conservationists were eager to document the details of the natural world that commercial hunters had inhabited and exploited. One of those was Des Moines realtor and banker Frederick O. Thompson, who re-captured market hunting’s past in a series of interviews with a number of longtime professional and amateur wildfowlers (including several of his hunting buddies) in the early 1930s. Thompson’s collection of memoirs chronicled the turn-of-the-century world of market hunters, “duck special” trains, and game law evasions.6 Two of Thompson’s informants, Fred Gilbert and Richard Harker, appeared in midwestern newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s as current target-shooting champions with market hunting pasts. The *Des Moines Register* acknowledged that Gilbert, known locally as the “Wizard of Spirit Lake,” had started out as a commercial gunner, though that was “a perfectly legitimate vocation in those days.”7 Minnesota’s Harker was likewise identified as “a market hunter in the old days,” but he was better known in the 1930s as “one of the greatest wing shots in the middle west,” according to the
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Minneapolis Star. Outdoor columnist Jimmy Robinson explained that “thirty or 40 years ago, market hunting was not considered anything terrible” and the market hunter “was recognized as a hero in his section of the country.” The reminiscences of Louisiana ex-market hunter Captain Theodore Johnson constituted a significant “document in American wildlife history,” noted the US Fish and Wildlife Service in a 1941 press release, important enough to warrant the interior secretary’s, as well as the public’s, attention.

Though culpable for the destruction of wildfowl in years past, many of these old-timers had been transformed into “our most rabid game conservationists.” Since former market hunters could attest to the efficacy of state and federal wildlife policies, their conservationist conversions lent an air of legitimacy to such measures and support for new ones. Louisiana’s Captain Johnson provided just this kind of ammunition to wildlife authorities. It was “a darn good thing the Federal Government started regulatin’ the bag limits and seasons,” he reportedly said to US Fish and Wildlife representatives, “or else there wouldn’t be many ducks and geese left to look at today.” These kinds of twentieth-century transformations from market hunter to game warden, bird sanctuary creator, or some other “disciple of conservation” were clear evidence that a sea change in environmental consciousness had occurred.

To be sure, some things remained the same. Despite the legal abolition of commercial wildfowling and a federal migratory bird law, avian populations continued to shrink in the first half of the twentieth century. Widespread drought conditions and land reclamation practices in the 1930s contributed to the decline as migratory waterfowl numbers in North America plummeted from 150 million in 1900 to less than 30 million by 1934. In Iowa, conservationist Aldo Leopold described the once-waterfowl-rich landscape as a “veritable cemetery of dead lakes and ducking grounds” in the 1930s. The situation grew so dire that some proposed a one-year moratorium on waterfowl hunting in 1935 to offset the effects of “legal hunting, commercialization, drought, drainage, and other causes” on “the plight of ducks.”

Adding to the problems were unreformed market hunters who continued to ply their time-honored trade surreptitiously in many areas of the country. Known as “duckleggers” in the 1920s and 1930s, illicit hunters like California’s “Dillinger of Duck Hunting,” Howard “Bluejay” Blewett, sold their game on the sly to locals, stores, and “swanky restaurants” and faced incarceration when they were caught. Major wildfowl “bootlegging” activities persisted well into the postwar era and were answered by some equally major game law enforcement
operations. A two-year probe into a loosely organized market hunting network in 1956 along the upper Texas gulf coast, led by undercover US Fish and Wildlife Service agent Tony Stefano, resulted in fifty-three indictments for violations of the migratory bird law. Posing as a wholesale jeweler and syndicate game buyer near Houston, Stefano purchased 3,000 ducks and geese destined for sale at local restaurants and nightclubs. More than fifty agents from eight states took part in the raids and mass arrests, which brought in rice farmers, oil field workers, ranch hands, restaurant owners, and even a town constable to face federal charges. Stefano’s 1958 operation against market hunters based in East Peoria, Illinois, resulted in arrests in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois and broke up a “ducklegger ring” that was handling about 250,000 ducks annually. Observers declared that “no penalty [was] heavy enough” for these “commercial killers.” Roundly criticized as “low-lifes,” twentieth-century market hunters could no more escape the public blame for wildlife destruction than could their nineteenth-century predecessors.

Sportsmen, too, received their share of the blame as the battle between “real conservationists” and “shotgun conservationists” raged in the first half of the twentieth century. Conflicts over public shooting grounds in federal refuges and bag limit reductions fractured and realigned wildlife interest groups in unexpected ways in the 1920s and 1930s. Conservation purist William Hornaday campaigned against game refuges, while the National Association of Audubon Societies opposed reductions in federal bag limits on migratory birds. The US Biological Survey stood behind efforts to establish public shooting grounds, whereas the Emergency Conservation Committee opposed them. The editor of Outdoor Recreation threw stones at the “double-crosser” and “four-flushing” Will Dilg, editor of the Izaak Walton League’s publication, Outdoor America, for his “betrayal of the Shooting Grounds Bill.” Manly Harris of California’s Wild Life Development League challenged federal authority to lower duck bag limits, while Emerson Hough, once a champion of the sport hunter–conservationist alliance, called for a halt to all sport hunting, claiming that, “of the alleged true sportsmen of this country, not 10 percent have practiced the creed which hypocritically they profess.” Sport-hunting commercialism had replaced game market commercialism, critics argued, with similar destructive consequences for wildfowl.

National Audubon Society president T. Gilbert Pearson tried to steer a middle course between the moral purity of the radical conservationists and the proprietary attitudes of activist sportsmen. Fearing “the extremists on both
sides,” he sought to rebuild the conservation coalition of earlier years. Enlisting the more “level-headed crowd”—which included Ray Holland, now editor of *Field and Stream*—Pearson promoted “a new doctrine of game administration,” hoping to “stem the battle between bird-lovers and sportsmen.” But his brand of “conservative conservation” (labeled “compromised conservation” by detractors) ran headlong into rival versions of wildlife use and value. At the heart of the conflict over these differing visions of proper human-wildlife relations was, in Hornaday’s words, “the scourge of guns and commercialism.” Sportsmen and game conservation organizations had entered into unholy alliances with gunmakers, ammunition suppliers, guide services, and other recreational hunting businesses. Conservationists like Hornaday and Hough grew disillusioned with what seemed a fatal disconnect between sportsmen’s high-minded rhetoric and their profligate actions. Preaching self-restraint, hunters all too often “practiced self-indulgence.”

Advocating alternative forms of nonconsumptive engagement with living wildlife, anti-hunting conservationists touted a whole host of intangible advantages modern Americans derived from wildfowl. The mere “contemplation of birds as possessors of pleasing form and plume, cheerful manner, and attractive song” brought “refreshment to the mind” and made them a “community asset.” Birds, especially, offered great aesthetic value to wilderness-starved urbanites, who could encounter avian wildness in their backyards, in public parks, or along waterways. Wildfowl also contributed “inherent value” to children’s education, supplying lessons on ethics, compassion, and nature appreciation. According to educators, there was “no subject better adapted to develop the moral or humane features of a child’s character than the subject of birds.” Young and old could find pleasure equally from hearing “the early song of the robin on the lawn, or cooling, delicious notes of the canyon wren in a wild ravine of a mountain desert.” Both experiences taught that, “despite human cares,” there could be happiness and “relief in the return to Nature.”

Faced with competing estimations of wildlife values and growing anti-hunting sentiments, organized sportsmen began to craft a defense of hunting in twentieth-century terms. Their reformed image of sport hunting stressed the more esoteric values of recreational wildlife consumerism. Companion-ship, well-being, and increased efficiency were important by-products of hunters’ encounters with wildness. The “healthful recreation of hunting furnishes relief from nervous strain” for adults, asserted Manly Harris, president
of the United Duck Hunters of California in 1927. A bit of waterfowl gunning could also “divert attention of youth away from less desirable pursuits” (including premarital sex)—an outcome that clearly “offset the costs of killed ducks.” Without “open sport” to serve “as an outlet for their young desire for expression,” boys would be lost in a “wave of youthful delinquency.” Indeed, as Harris concluded, if only “Loeb and Leopold had a little duck shooting they would never have conceived ’the perfect crime.’”

Sportsmen’s expansive vision of “constructive conservation,” however, went beyond abstract values to characterize recreational hunting “as a commercial asset as well.” Hunting clubs, sportsmen argued, served an important ecological purpose by maintaining, with private funds, wildfowl habitats threatened by agricultural and industrial development. The sportsman paid for the birds he killed in license fees, club dues, guns, and ammunition. Unlike the market hunter of old, the sport hunting consumer valued wild creatures for the wildness experiences they provided, and the money he spent funded important conservation work. Anti-hunting forces saw such arguments as merely defenses of “killing privileges” for a profit, hardly different from the market hunter’s objective. Moral purists insisted that wildlife conservation would always fail “when one commercialized motive comes into its thought.”

Despite the in-fighting among competing wildlife protectors, federal conservation measures expanded in the 1930s. Chief among the new provisions were those aimed at increasing avian populations through habitat conservation, especially along the major and minor continental flyways that migratory birds traversed. The Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 established refuges for North American birds, and the Migratory Bird Stamp Act of 1934 used sport hunter fees for avian conservation and wetland preservation. The Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 funneled monies raised from excise taxes on arms and ammunition into habitat restoration and scientific wildlife management. Although waterfowl reached historically low population levels in the mid-1930s, these new measures gave conservationists cause for hope. A significant shift in wildlife protection policies was occurring, one that Aldo Leopold described as a turn away from the “negative and prohibitory” enactments that had characterized the movement in its early phases toward a “positive and affirmatory ideology” focused on environmental health. For avian activists, the wildfowl refuge victories of the 1920s and 1930s proved that “at last the God of Nature and the wild places and wild things WON.”
These pockets of avian refuge, however, were only the barest reminders of the natural landscapes that had once nurtured the market hunter and were now a distant memory. The evidence of loss could be found in the original survey plats “of some dried-up township,” Leopold wrote, where surveyors had drawn sloughs and marshes in “quaint water color arabesques of blue and brown.” Vast grasslands once alive with wildfowl now spread “lifeless from horizon to horizon, in final surrender to the legions of corn.”47 Or one could remember New York’s “virgin timber . . . interlaced with wild grape vines” that fed innumerable grouse in days gone by.48 The almost-incomprehensible numbers of birds those environments supported and the immense quantities harvested for the market represented remarkable natural wealth and, at the same time, deplorable national waste.

The market hunter of old occupied a different cultural landscape, as well. To explain the market hunter’s late-nineteenth-century existence, modern writers pointed to wildfowl use for frontier subsistence, the lack of game laws, and the nearly universal belief in wildlife inexhaustibility in arguing that utilitarian values had ruled the day. Market hunting was “the most feasible means of harvesting Nature’s resources” in early America, and even the most visionary could not have foreseen the need for conservation, especially for birds.49 The public’s awakening to the tragedy would come slowly. Flickers of concern at the end of the nineteenth century grew into flames with the passing of Martha, the last surviving passenger pigeon, in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914. “The period of wanton slaughter began to taper off” as a new era of enlightened management imposed strict terms for wildfowl use and, in the process, slated the market hunter for extinction. “The wasteful years had come to an end.”50

That was the story, at least. The twentieth-century triumph of wildlife conservation was an unambiguous epic of market hunting villains, sportsman-conservationist heroes, and wildfowl victims. This narrative forms the historical foundations of what has come to be called the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. A distinctively American construct according to its proponents, the North American Model (NAM) comprises seven core tenets:

1. Wildlife resources are a public trust.
2. Markets for game are eliminated.
3. Allocation of wildlife is effected by law.
4. Wildlife can be killed only for a legitimate purpose.
5. Wildlife is considered an international resource.
6. Science is the proper tool for discharging wildlife policy.
7. Democracy in hunting is standard.

Though not formally articulated until 1995, these principles nevertheless drove modern wildlife conservation policymaking, according to some researchers, ultimately producing “the greatest environmental success story of the twentieth century,” and perhaps even “one of the greatest achievements of North American culture.”51 Wildlife experts employ the model both descriptively and prescriptively, offering it as a schematic for conservation’s historical and political evolution, as well as a road map for future directions in wildlife management. The past successes of sportsmen-led wildlife conservation campaigns that brought populations of migratory birds and other terrestrial creatures back from the brink, NAM advocates suggest, offer lessons in how incentivizing sustainable, nonmarket wildlife consumerism can work.52

Other researchers, however, have in recent years challenged the North American Model’s dominance in wildlife management circles. Some take issue with the prohibitions against privatization and commercialization of wildlife—a position that reflects the widely held notion that “conservation and business are natural enemies.”53 This anti-capitalist ideology, they argue, is a necessarily limiting vision for wildlife policy and does not account for conservation successes in parts of the world where private ownership and wildlife markets are the norm.54 The NAM also fails to fully acknowledge the ways commercialism is implicated in its own paradigm. Sport hunting, especially, is market driven. Gun and ammunition companies, recreational outfitters, and other businesses are economically vested in the maintenance of certain wildlife populations.55 Indeed, a major argument for sport hunting’s legal preservation has been its ability “to pay its own way” not only through license fees devoted to conservation projects but also in increased commercial activity.56

For many critics, the model’s key weakness is its selective privileging of sport hunters in both current wildlife policies and in wildlife conservation history. NAM principles serve the interests of sport hunters, inspiring wildlife management strategies to increase game populations often at the expense of nongame species. Democratic access to hunting opportunities means little to nonhunters—the majority of Americans—whose participation in conservation policy decisions is consequently minimized by this emphasis. The public trust doctrine on which the model rests does little to address the legalities of private landownership and the concerns of landowners whose relationships
with wildlife are different from those of recreational hunters. Limiting financial and ethical investment in wildlife conservation to a dwindling cohort of sport hunters, NAM detractors insist, is hardly a prescription for either environmental justice or sustained wildlife conservation.\textsuperscript{57}

This controversy has split wildlife conservation science into opposing disciplinary factions, spawning the separate field of conservation biology to counter the NAM’s game management emphasis. Ironically, the fundamental sticking point is not in the present but in the past. The model’s current authority relies on a particular progressive historical narrative, one that pits rapacious market hunters against enlightened sportsmen in a transformative battle that ultimately ended an age of free-taking profligacy.\textsuperscript{58} Skeptics dispute this celebratory, sport hunter-centric historical explanation of the conservation movement, contending that it attributes conservation successes almost exclusively to elite, white males; overlooks the contributions of nonhunters to significant environmental advances; ignores preexisting indigenous patterns of wildlife use and management; and underplays conservation failures.\textsuperscript{59} In short, the model hangs on a dangerously oversimplified history.

For a historian, saying the past is complicated is more a dodge than a revelation. But in the case of wildlife conservation, the past may really be more complex than even the critics have allowed. NAM detractors and proponents alike have tended to interpret market hunting one-dimensionally, as simply an early foil for wildlife activists. Consequently, they have yet to fully come to terms with the ways consumer capitalism shaped and continues to shape the culture of conservation. If, as some have provocatively claimed, an “inadequate history” is to blame for the shortcomings of current wildlife conservation policies, then an “adequate history” that addresses those limitations must consider the ways the modern market in birds produced the consumer-capitalist language of wildlife value we use today.\textsuperscript{60}

This book is a crucial chapter in what I hope is a more than adequate wildlife history. That history reveals that the market hunter stood not at the end of an era, but at the beginning of one. He was part of a larger economic, legal, and cultural transformation set in motion by the market in birds, a transformation that redefined the value of North American wildlife for a twentieth-century consumer culture. Sport hunters, the subjects of so much heated scholarly and popular debate, were not the vanguard of a new effort to reconcile nature with modern society. The market was the key mechanism of change. It was here that wildlife’s cultural worth was debated and decided in terms the
market set. The turn-of-the-century market in birds ushered in the transition from wildlife consumption to wildlife consumerism in North America.

The modern wildfowl market was revolutionary because it commodified animal wildness. The game dealer’s stall, the specimen catalog, and the millinery shop sold not just meat, eggs, and feathers but a host of esoteric qualities that distinguished wild creatures from tame. What else could explain consumers’ continued cravings for wildfowl, asked the New York Emergency Conservation Committee in 1929, when it was “not only the most expensive meat to obtain” but also often “the poorest?” The answer could be found in the creatures themselves. Birds remained recognizable as wildlife in the marketplace, and consumers desired them because they were authentically wild. The commercial production of wildness, like wilderness, promised consumers some relief from the innervating effects of industrial capitalism and the curse of modern artificiality. But unlike wilderness, which was ultimately tied to a geographic space separate from consumers’ urbanized environments, the wildness that was built into avian natures could be packaged, transported to cities, and sold. This was the pivotal innovation of the modern market in birds, and it set the direction for what was to follow.

Commodified avian wildness was at once both biological and economic. Diversity and mobility, biological traits of living birds, were crucial to wildfowl marketability. The late-nineteenth-century market exploited these characteristics, using the variety of avian species and their seasonal migrations to shape consumers’ desires. As dead commodities, birds remained surprisingly mobile. Modern technologies and commercial networks designed to move ever-greater numbers of wildfowl from the countryside to the cities broke down biophysical barriers and expanded birds’ ranges into places from which they were normally scarce or absent. The market removed birds from their ecological contexts, transported them across space, and (quite literally) froze them in time. This spatial and temporal separation between production and consumption, between living-bird environments and dead-bird markets, is the quintessence of capitalist commodification.

Yet avian commodities did not entirely conceal their environmental origins or the natural relationships that produced them. They were not subject to the same sort of human forgetting that masked the socio-natural relations contained in other commodities. The wildfowl market sold wild celery-fed Maryland canvasbacks, the plumage of forest-dwelling Carolina parakeets, or the collectible eggs of the Florida red-shouldered hawk. The market in birds
linked consumers to distant environments and gave them a vested interest in avian species both near and far. Through their purchases, buyers could reconnect in some small way to natural patterns and rhythms, assuaging their estrangement from nature in the process.

The conservation movement drew on these market-mediated engagements with wildness to generate public support. The market transformed wildfowl into a national resource—the process that Merritt once described as “the benefit of one State” becoming “the happy heritage of all”—and nationalized conservation as a consequence. Thus, Royal Phelps of the NYPGA could make midwestern prairie chickens an East Coast issue when they were served in a big-city restaurant, and Frank Chapman of the Audubon Society could expose the snowy egret’s plight by counting hats in a New York City streetcar rather than counting birds in a Louisiana swamp. Little wonder that the foundational US Supreme Court decision in the public trust doctrine for wildlife, *Geer v. Connecticut*, and the first federal wildlife conservation laws concerned marketed, migratory birds. In the context of the market, migration was not just a biological fact. It was also a political act.

For Merritt, that “happy heritage of all” was a product of the wildfowl market. Turning creatures into commodities was a democratizing act, giving the public access to American avian wildness in the marketplace. Sport hunting consumers had to counter this capitalist argument head on to craft a democratic definition of recreational hunting for a modern and increasingly urban consumer culture in which hunting was no longer a necessity. Assigning cultural value to the experience of living wildness, sport hunters drew a bright line between their killing and the market’s, elevating their wildlife consumption above other commercialized forms. They asserted that those experiences were available to all even as they advocated for restrictive game laws and privatized their shooting preserves. The sportsman’s insistence on the superiority of democratic hunting over the democracy of the market enshrined in the North American Model of Conservation, was a direct outcome of the turn-of-the-century debate about the market in birds. For a while, sportsmen’s analyses of wildfowl worth dominated the popular discourse about conservation and guided wildlife law making. The anti-commercial conservation vision sportsmen advanced, however, left them in a conflicted position with modern American consumer culture. Decrying wildlife commercialism as morally, culturally, and ecologically bankrupt, sport hunters failed to
recognize the extent to which their experiences with wildness were commodified ones.

Modern wildness was, in many ways, a market invention. The wildlife market fundamentally redefined wildness not as an environmental condition but as an intrinsic attribute of individual animal identities and an object of consumer desire. Birds were particularly compelling exemplars of wildness based on the freedom of the Hunted. Highly mobile, migratory avian species perfectly embodied the free-roaming natures of truly wild creatures. Avian entrepreneurs capitalized on that wild identity, pricing the wild duck differently than the domestic fowl or even the game farm–raised bird. In the modern market, wild birds’ symbolic worth to the consumer surpassed their utilitarian value.

The market’s construction of individuated wildness, and its explicit monetary valuation of it, shaped the contours of the debate over wildfowl commercialization and conservation at the twentieth century’s turn. The key participants in that debate—the Market Hunter, the Game Dealer, the Sportsman, and the Conservationist—came to define their respective identities by their personal ethical relationships to avian wildness. Each claimed special moral authority to speak for birds, and each claimed to know the true value of wildness. Commodification of wildness threatened the social identities and cultural authority of sport hunters and conservationists. Conservation of wildness delegitimized and destroyed the identities of game dealers and market hunters. All prized wildness, but in their own ways, and they sought to convince the public to do the same. In the end, the contest between wildlife commercialization and wildlife conservation turned not on capitalist logic or scientific principles, but on the value of wildness to consumers in a modern world.67

Wildness is a slippery concept. Like its wilderness sibling, wildness is a cultural invention bound up in a material nature.68 We have trouble defining it, but we know it when we see it. “Our ability to perceive quality in nature,” wrote Aldo Leopold in his portrait of a crane marsh, was capable of growth “to values yet uncaptured by language.” The sandhill cranes’ qualities belonged to that higher realm, “beyond the reach of words.” In the crane, Leopold saw “wildness incarnate.”69 But in the act of assigning human value to this nebulous quality of nonhuman wildness, we catch ourselves in a bind. The higher the value we accord it, the greater the bind. The dilemma was most obvious in the wildfowl market, where it was no paradox, only a simple case of supply and demand. As consumers’ desires for avian wildness grew, there was less of it to
be found. In the conservation movement, where preservation of wildness was the goal, the contradiction was far less clear. Leopold saw it, though, in the marsh and in the wildness of the cranes. "All conservation of wildness is self-defeating," he wrote, "for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish." The culture of conservation was itself a culture of consumption.

Herbert Merritt died in 1946 at the age of eighty-eight, the “last of a well-known local family.” With his death passed away Kewanee’s last living connection to the nineteenth-century world of the market hunter. The visible remnants of Henry Clay Merritt’s business in birds had slowly faded. Merritt himself had torn down his icehouse in 1901, using the bricks to build a new block on Chestnut Street. The Merritt home followed in 1937, leveled to make way for an oil station. Merritt’s ice pond was sold, closed, and filled in with rubbish. His hotel and old storehouse with its curious inscription were razed for a parking lot in the 1950s, after decades of litigation posthumously resolved the final dispute between Merritt’s sons and their stepmother, Jennie.

So too had disappeared the environment that, Merritt once claimed, “held more game than any land of its size in the world.” The saturated landscape of Henry County that had drawn countless waterfowl in the nineteenth century was wrung dry in the twentieth with the aid of modern engineering and significant capital investment. The Green River, “a stream formerly sluggish from its tortuous windings,” was straightened and drains were laid. The “rescued soil” from the river now grows corn and hogs instead of cattails and teal. People can still hunt birds along the edge of the old Great Willow Swamp north of Kewanee, “a sportsman’s paradise” that used to contain “one of the most concentrated and varied wildlife populations in the central part of North America,” but now they hunt planted pheasants by permit in a state-managed program.

Some traces of the past remain. A 230-acre patch of the old Annawan wetlands endures as Mineral Marsh Nature Preserve. The Kewanee Historical Society occupies the Butterwick Building, where Merritt used to store game birds in the basement, and a local restaurant serves a custom-brewed “Prairie Chicken Ale” in a nod to the old Kewanee Brewery’s flagship beverage of more than a century ago (advertised as “the beer that makes the smile that won’t come off”). Still, the most detailed record of those bird-filled times rests on a shelf in the Kewanee Public Library. Merritt’s loosely organized recollections paint a picture of an unfamiliar world, one that bears little resemblance to our
Waterfowl viewing area on a dammed lake in Johnson-Sauk Trail State Recreation Area, north of Kewanee, Illinois. The recreation area occupies a fragment of the formerly vast wetlands hunted by Henry Clay Merritt in the nineteenth century. Once drawing incredible numbers and varieties of wildfowl, it now attracts recreational wildlife consumers: hunters and birdwatchers. Author photo

own, either environmentally, economically, legally, or culturally. It seems a forgotten time, this “day of the professional hunter and plentiful game,” and Merritt, a forgotten representative of that time.  

Appearances, however, can be misleading. Though not exactly a household name, Henry Clay Merritt has hardly been consigned to the dustbin of history. Like clockwork, once every decade or so, The Shadow of a Gun is rediscovered by local history buffs, nostalgic sport hunters, and historians. Others of his ilk have found their places in historical memory, too. John Curl, E. M. Brubaker, and Dale Hamm are among those one-time professional wildfowlers whose stories make up what could be called “the last of the market hunters” literature. With his image reshaped in the retrospectives that began to appear from the 1920s onward, the character of the market hunter has been reclaimed by sportsmen as part of their genealogy. Viewed with a mixture of admiration,
fascination, and disgust, both legal and “outlaw” market hunters serve as a reminder of a time when the value of wildlife was measured on a narrow utilitarian scale, before Americans learned to properly value “wildness incarnate.”

Although there is no equivalent body of literature featuring “the last of the game dealers” or the “outlaw cold storage man”—perhaps for obvious reasons—the late-nineteenth-century wildfowl market has had its chroniclers too. But the histories of the market hunter and the market have existed largely in parallel. The former focuses on colorful individuals engaged in an extinct way of life; the latter is an institutional analysis of political economy. To those two narrative threads, some environmental historians have added a strand of cultural analysis tying the market consumer to changing constructions of nature. Each line of inquiry is valuable. A more integrated history of the market in birds, however, unravels the connections between economy, ecology, law, and culture that these separate investigative paths leave ambiguous. It reveals, too, the interplay of avian biology, individual personalities, organized group actions, and broader social forces—subjects more often treated in isolation—that nationalized the public’s interest in birds in the twentieth century.

These are not merely academic considerations. Market hunting’s history is obviously deeply implicated in current conservation paradigms, and it explains why impassioned controversies over different versions of wildlife use continue without clear resolutions. The killings of Zimbabwe’s “Cecil the Lion” in 2015 and of “Pedals,” New Jersey’s upright-walking bear, in 2016 generated heated public outrage but failed to produce serious public attention to the realities of human-wildlife conflicts and conservation funding reliant on sport hunting revenues. Today, a shrinking cohort of hunters struggles to make the economic case for recreational, consumptive wildlife use to a much larger nonhunting population that imagines a more affective connection to wild animals they rarely encounter. Wise-use supporters, who argue that productive relations with nature are superior to those based in consumption, clash with elite environmentalists claiming to represent the public’s interests in wildlife. Current efforts to privatize wildlife by introducing game ranching, commercial harvesting, and the sale of hunting privileges in North America produce swift backlash from conservationists convinced that markets in dead wildlife would destroy the existing system of wildlife conservation. And, on the one hundredth anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Trump administration made good on its effort to “clip the wings” of the groundbreaking federal wildlife legislation by removing penalties for compa-
nies that incidentally kill or injure migratory birds. Opposition forces have called for immediate congressional action in response, insisting that “America is being robbed of its birds and wildlife” to benefit corporations.87

It all seems clear-cut, this struggle between economics and environmental ethics. That is why the market hunter’s story is so compelling. The market in birds neatly illustrates the morality tale that is all too often construed as the history of wildlife preservation. In that narrative, market hunters and game dealers like Merritt were callous exploiters of nature without the higher sensibilities of wildlife protectors who appreciated the ineffable qualities of avian wildness. It was Merritt’s loss. “History could have read: H. Clay Merritt, hunter, naturalist, conservationist,” wrote an Illinois columnist in 1964. “Only a point of view made the difference.”88

Merritt’s story and the history of the market in birds can tell us so much more, though. To imply that the Kewanee market hunter and game dealer had no appreciation for wild birds beyond profits would be a mistake. His depiction of a jacksnipe’s spring migration northward as “in the nature of a romance,” for example, hardly seems a coldhearted financial view:

For many months he has fed at the Gulf, he may have traversed the Isthmus. He hears the beating of the Pacific; he covers the footsteps of Balboa. Behind him the Summer, before him the screech of the wild fowl opening up the frozen fastness of the North. Enwrapped in the clouds of the night he plunges into the airy abyss. Headland and Mainland vanish before him. Turbulent rivers and mountain ranges disappear as if by magic. Rising cities throw out a line of light. To-day he feeds in the cotton fields, to-night he will be beyond the black belt of the bondman. The constellations with their jeweled fingers open up the gateway of the Mississippi, he enters the vortex of commerce, he follows the coastline.89

We want to imagine wildlife like Merritt’s jacksnipe: roaming free in nature, separate from the urban-industrial world below. We believe we can save wildness by holding it apart from the economy with the right ethics, the right science, and the right laws.90 Merritt’s point of view, though, offers a glimpse of the fundamental problem at the heart of human-wildlife coexistence in modern America. The bird in Merritt’s romance escaped “the vortex of commerce.” The birds in Merritt’s freezer did not. Before we can think about how to prevent wildness from disappearing under the weight of the market, we need to escape the vortex of commerce ourselves.
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