

# Old Ways No More

By Matthew Mullenix  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

*Editor's note: This essay is excerpted from an upcoming collection of essays on natural history, hunting, and Matt's Louisiana bayou geography. Western Sporting Publications hopes to have the soft cover edition available by the 2004 NAFA Field Meet around Thanksgiving this year.*

It is hard to imagine now, but once upon a time lived the market hunters. My friend Ida's grandfather was one, alive and working at the turn of the last century out of Amite, Louisiana. His livelihood depended in part on a small strawberry farm and in part on a huge pack of hounds (Ida: "My aunt swears he had forty.") He and the dogs hunted nearby marsh and bayou bottomland for squirrel, rabbit, possum, raccoon, and "anything that somebody would eat, that he could sell."

Ida's grandfather hunted and sold game locally, feeding families whose men built rail lines into virgin Louisiana longleaf pine or cut the timber down. It was a fleeting economy, his and the timber man's alike, based on wholesale exploitation of a landscape.

But the consequence of market hunting on this scale, however common, was probably negligible. Ida's grandfather hunted abundant native species; these were killed and eaten locally, carried to market on foot, and stored without refrigeration. Every facet of this work contained its own limitation – limits of time, space, energy, and appetite that constrain subsistence hunting everywhere.

It was industry and a national economy, not men on foot, that tipped this balance beyond recovery. The rail lines with fossil fuel and refrigerated cars made markets for local meat in distant states. Diners

in New York could buy and eat Louisiana bushmeat long before it spoiled and well in excess of what the marsh could replace. The same was true for dozens of species, in dozens of states and dozens of cities. The end came soon for some, the passenger pigeon and heath hen among the first. Those that evaded extermination dwindled to trace amounts and tiny bands of hangers-on: buffalo, elk, hosts of shore and wading birds, still others.



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Near the end, but too late for many, came legislation to limit commercial exploitation of wildlife. The Lacey Act, the Weeks-McLean Law and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act effectively stopped what remained of large-scale market hunting of birds. Market forces would have done the same, in time, but without a bird left breathing.

The effect of this century-old legislation on modern falconry is huge.

Most of the birds we train and most of the ones we hunt are named in one or another of the above laws. Our falconry permits are granted by special exception to them. Waterfowl and the “webless” migratory birds (doves, rails, etc.) are open to hunting by other special exceptions.

We have put an end to market hunting but at the same time (and with the same tools) curtailed and marginalized recreational hunting. We have established the process by which, one species at a time, recreational hunters will be limited to ever-shorter lists of game species, conceivably to zero. Consider the list of “game birds” within the original MBTA: it included plovers, lapwings, oystercatchers, stilts, avocets, sandpipers, phalaropes, and others once hunted but now forbidden by systematic omission. Every year one state or another proposes additional species to protect (e.g., mourning doves); I fear the near end of

my rail season and wonder sometimes how it hasn't already passed into history.

The wicked witch is dead. Industrial-strength, market-driven devastation of wild birds in North America is no longer. Of course it lives on and well elsewhere; it will bring an end to many species worldwide and has already. Of course native habitat still smothers beneath endless miles of concrete and asphalt. Of course the U.S. Department of Agriculture continues to kill hundreds of thousands of migratory birds at the request of local farmers every year (e.g., 368,528 blackbirds in Louisiana alone in 1996\*). Of course feral cats and cell phone towers and skyscrapers and automobiles and power lines kill tens of millions more each year. And then there's my hawk Charlie.

There are so many witches. Which witch is which?

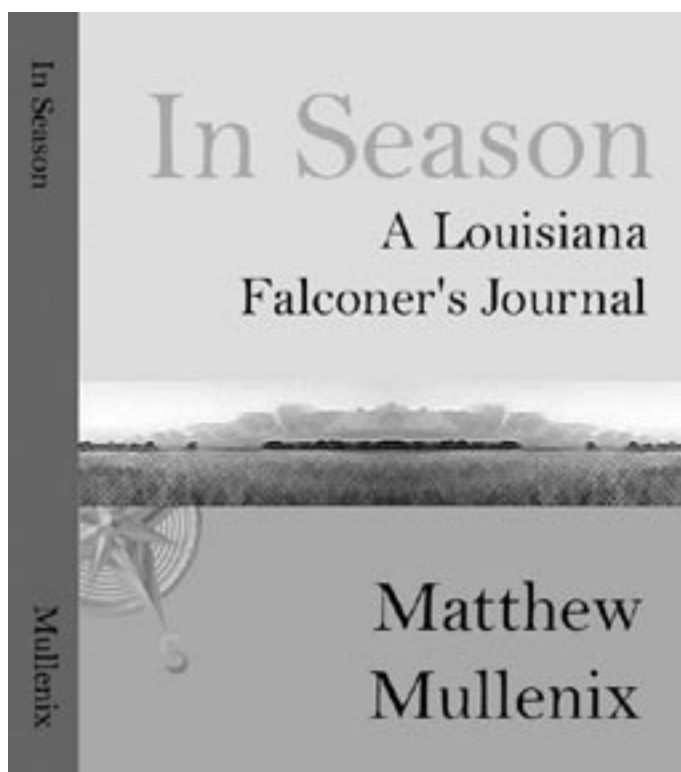
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\* <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ws/tables/96table2t.rtf>

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# THE NATURALIST'S EYE

By A. LEE CHICHESTER



## A Review of Matt Mullenix's soon-to-be-published book, In Season: A Louisiana Falconer's Journal

One of the many things I truly love about the sport of falconry and one's close association with a bird of prey is being able to "see through the bird's eyes." If I had more money and time on my hands, I'd be spending a lot of time just watching the behavior of the two Harris' hawks in my care, seeing what they see, imagining the world through their eyes.

That's also what I truly enjoy about reading essays about their worlds by such notables as Aldo Leopold, Noah Adams, Chris Bolgiano, and Stephen Bodio – seeing through their eyes. This, in my opinion, is what the best writing does for the reader.

In his introduction to Matt's work, Bodio calls him a "falconer's falconer." True enough – although I believe a real case can be made that Matt's approach to his art might raise some eyebrows in the more traditional falconer's world. In fact, Matt says so himself in this passage from August 2003 in the book:

If T.H. White's maddening and enigmatic goshawk was the perfect mirror of his solitary introduction to falconry, so is Charlie emblematic of the sport I practice today: social, methodical, flexible, and reflective. The Harris' Hawk is all these things and my Charlie all of them and more.

Falconers tell each other sometimes in frank terms that birds are not to be made people. I have met a few who managed this, but I never liked them much. My best friends and mentors in the sport are sentimental fools like me.

What I'd call Matt is a "writer's writer." If you also like to read spare words deftly combined to convey a place, a character, a passion, a sadness; this is an excellent book to acquire for your permanent bookshelf.

(10/13/03) This catbird is a study in what can be done with the color gray. Shades of charcoal, darkest in a streak atop his head, turn to lead and nickel then to black again. From below he's a somber blue-gray, the color of Gulf waters under storm. The crimson patch

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beneath his tail stands out like a warning flag at dusk,  
“Detour: Southbound Route Closed.”

The book began life as a web log (blog) of a season in Matt’s hunting life. At the time of this writing, it is in production by Western Sporting Publications, with a hoped-for release date surrounding the fall 2004 NAFA meet. It will be paperback, running some 200 pages, price as yet undetermined. But I assure you, the cost will be worth it. (For news of availability go to: [www.geocities.com/matthewmullenix/InSeason/](http://www.geocities.com/matthewmullenix/InSeason/))

(From the Author’s Preface): After seven months of very close attention to my hunting, how or why I started seems less important than why I keep at it. That’s the bigger puzzle, and every hunter has his own to solve. . . My hope is that wondering why I hunt is important, and not just to me.

Matt contemplates his world – a shrinking space more and more populated; more and more difficult to hunt in – through his own and his primary character’s eyes; Charlie the Harris’ hawk. It is a hunting season’s worth of contemplation about hunting itself and hunting’s place in both Charlie’s and Matt’s world – the Bayou Country of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

(10/5/03) Many people (myself, before moving here) think a bayou is a swamp. This is understandable. The word forms part of a limited lexicon of marketing terms used in any nationwide reference to this region. So “bayou country” is to the automakers a flooded cypress forest where truck tires spin a satisfying spray of black mud into the camera lens. Lively Zydeco music accompanies the scene like a laugh track . . .

A bayou is creek: a shallow, slow-moving tributary tied at one end to a river and at the other to a marsh. Parts of any bayou can be “swampy,” and there are likely cypress trees along the banks. If challenged to come see for themselves, the ad moguls would probably conclude they got it right, then get back on the plane before a mosquito bit them.

Most falconers can relate to the challenges Matt faces. He describes taking a non-falconer hunting; the difficulty of introducing the concept of hunting, eating, and dying to his three-year-old twin

daughters, Briana and Maggie; how his own passion inflicts itself on his spouse and boss; traveling to hunt with falconer friends; the internal debate where passion overshadows reason and you elect to hunt despite the fact your hawk is too fat (something Harris’ hawkers can get away with where others simply can’t); loss of habitat in his environs. But he also contemplates some larger issues our modern society faces, and links them in unexpected ways to the sport of falconry.

(10/10/03) Commercial air travel is inhumane, a crime against humanity. I realized yesterday (while suffering the altogether ordinary airline experience) that travel in this way makes clear the barest essentials of modern life. You are a man inside a machine. The machine is big – worldwide – and it looks the same everywhere, especially from the inside. You are its fuel, funneled in and through the guts, broken down and robbed of useful parts, then exhausted at your destination.

The system is running smoothly. I don’t mean to suggest that it isn’t working as designed. It is fuel-efficient, now more than ever. The hijackings improved the system, not so much for the reasons advertised as by ridding it of the last pretension to human dignity. Machines have never been efficient when forced to bend to the needs of people. We slow them down and foul them up. For a machine to work at maximum efficiency, the human element must be managed, packaged and squared off at the edges. Eliminated where possible.

Falconry fares poorly within the machine. It cannot mechanize. It cannot even modernize much before falling apart. Square off the human element and it crumbles.

Such complex human institutions are irreducible, highly friable but meaningless when broken down. Good fuel by contrast must be simple and willing to split into uniform molecules, each homogenous and predictable.

Uniformity is the greatest threat to falconry. Opponents of hunting and wild animal husbandry are merely as shrill, mobbing birds drawing the robot eye of the colossus upon us. The mob have already adopted a machine-readable view of the world: inside/outside, good/bad, wild/human: ones and zeros. They have nothing to fear.

The challenges Charlie faces, however, are inextricably linked, as with all predatory species, to

his habitat. After reading this passage about swamp rabbits, I will go down to Matt's home country someday and witness the contest he describes.

(10/22/03) The swamp rabbit is built like a bear, round and full of hard, red meat. Catch him anywhere but square in the head and you'll bounce off; snag a hind leg and get kicked off. A hard bind by a hawk will twist a swamp rabbit into a ball, but briefly. The explosion to come can send two birds flying at once and the rabbit on his way. For a sound team of swamp rabbit hawks, fly three.

Charlie catches around thirty each season, many of them with help from above: His sisters, aunts and cousins, proper company for a Harris' Hawk, still hunt in a pack over the marshes and woods of New Orleans East [Coulson territory]. Like many southeast Louisiana families, they get together mainly to feed.

Last night Charlie had no help but mine, and that was nearly inadequate. We turned from the high ground behind the soccer field to a low pan of goldenrod and tough, woody shrubs that spread to the dark woods beyond. Large round pellets of swamp rabbit sign littered the open places in piles.

We walked a wide circle, two-thirds from the center to the edge, and flushed a rabbit halfway around. Charlie startled, climbed from his perch and stooped vertically into chest-high weeds: a thump, a pause, and then a wild, leaping ride on the back of a little mule. I chased and caught glimpses of my hawk hanging on with one foot. I dove almost blindly and grabbed the rabbit, gripping it with both hands. Charlie held it fast with one long leg extended to a point beneath the rabbit's chin. When I killed it, he snatched his left foot away and planted both feet into the brown fur around my glove.

There is a frank sadness permeating the thoughts printed on the page: the sadness all hunters accept as part of the "game" we choose to play in our own habitats – the loss of open space and quarry to *homo sapiens* population growth. Matt doesn't try to solve the problem; he doesn't even rail against the system, exactly. He looks at the fact with a raptor's eye – in crystal clarity – and you suspect, with a tear.

(2/22/04 – [Last hunt weekend of the season]): Other Meraux properties – cow pastures, woodlots and little bits of marsh – lend much of St. Bernard Parish its backwater charm. But Meraux is dead now and his land selling fast in huge apportionments.

We caught three rabbits in the Cypress Field then drove up 510 to a spot across from Jazzland, the theme park built on trembling earth. Red and blue stakes followed us through green mounds of briar; the western border of this corner lot is already cleared. We caught six rabbits there and called it a day.

But all is not doom and gloom. The chronicle's epilogue includes this quote and excerpt, looking, again, with a Naturalist's Eye, to the cycle of life, of seasons, of hunting and not-hunting, of living and dying, of the ways our disparate lives intersect with one another. It combines the hunter writer into an entity sought by the naturalist in all of us – and confirms our suspicion that we've also been a character in the book all along.

*"At the end of a fishing trip you're inclined to summarize things in your mind. A tally is needed for the quick description you will be asked for: so many fish at such-and-such weights and the method employed. Inevitably, what actually happened is indescribable."*

*-Thomas McGuane*

Charlie's weight is up a hundred grams. He started molting on 15 March, dropping three of the four tail feathers held over from the summer of 1992. Maybe he'll drop them all and meet the new season with a full set.

When that season comes I plan to meet it without expectations. The potential for entropy I mentioned in August will still be there, but the pressure to see the point in my hawking, like Tom McGuane's to land and look at his fish, is sated. You helped me with that, so now I'll let you go.