**Hunting Ortolans on the Patuxent River**

Our special feature this issue is by Richard Dolesh, director of Patuxent River Park, Croom, Prince George's County, Maryland. The drawings are by wildlife artist Jan Turner. Both are long time friends and supporters of CMM.

Few people today have ever heard of hunting ortolans on the Patuxent River. Yet for 100 years the wild rice marshes of the upper Patuxent were world famous as the prime hunting ground of the ortolan, or as it was later called, the railbird. This tiny marsh bird became so prized as a delicacy that exclusive gun clubs were formed and large hunting lodges were built. Wealthy sportsmen traveled from Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York for a week's shooting in September.

The railbirds of the Patuxent were called ortolans, but the name is somewhat misleading. The true ortolan is a small bunting (Emberiza hortulana) found in most European countries, north Africa, and western Asia. This bird is more closely allied to the North American bobolink than to the American railbird. But when the European colonists found that the similar sora rail (Porzana carolina) had flesh even more delectable than the esteemed ortolan of the old country, the sora came to be called "ortolan", and the bobolink was called "reed bird" or "rice bird." The name sora rail gradually became interchangeable with ortolan till both were eventually replaced by the simplified name, "railbird".

The name ortolan is not so far from living memory, however. I recently asked two lifelong watermen of the Patuxent if they had ever heard of hunting ortolans. "Nope," they replied, "never heard of it. But we did used to go up the river a long time ago and shoot Artlings."

There are five species of rails that were found on the Patuxent River: the king rail (Rallus elegans), the Virginia rail (Rallus limicola), the sora rail (Porzana carolina), the yellow rail (Coturnicops noveboracensis), and the very rare black rail (Laterallus jamaicensis pygmaeus). The Rallidae family of birds is composed of rails, gallinules, and coots, all of which are plump and chicken-like. The rails are brown, reddish, or gray, and range in size from that of a sparrow to that of a chicken. Their long legs and large three-toed feet are particularly suited to walking on the soft mud of the marsh.

Many people use the phrase "skinny as a rail", but few have any idea from where it comes. It has nothing to do with railroads or rail fences, but was derived from the railbird. John James Audubon wrote in 1840:

"... they have a power of compressing their body to such a degree as frequently to force a passage between two stems so close that one could hardly believe it possible to squeeze themselves through."

They have other remarkable habits also, as C. J. Maynard... (Continued on Page 2)
of the marsh at high tide, a small flat-bottomed skiff was poled through the marsh by a guide called a "pusher". Earnshaw Cook best describes the boat and the method of hunting in his book Hollica Snooze:

"Over the years, a short, narrow, flat-bottomed boat has appeared with chines profiled like a rocking chair. It is perhaps fourteen feet in length, not over eighteen inches wide, light in weight, and more precarious than a canoe. A low seat is placed about one third aft for the hunter. The stern is decked over to provide a second seat for the guide when he is paddling out to the shooting grounds. The boat is used as a platform on which to stand while pushing through the marsh. A stout, twelve foot pole is employed by the pusher, with a carefully fashioned, three-pronged claw fastened to the lower end to give purchase on the soft bottom. After paddling up a tidal gut to a likely spot, the boat is eased out on the marsh, the pusher stands erect upon his platform and the craft rocks easily along over the grass as the helmsman "climbs" his pole. Meanwhile, the gunner stands with left foot forward and right foot aft, bracing himself just below the calves of his legs across the forward seat. As the tide falls, or a slight elevation is reached, it requires a nice bit of coordination and a judicious amount of swearing to maintain a relaxed shooting position. The birds rising before the advancing boat over an arc of one hundred and eighty degrees impose a strenuous, exacting test of peripheral vision and fast, sharp shooting."

The railbirds possess few qualities of a good game bird except for their taste. When flushed in the marsh, they barely rise above the tops of the grasses, flutter with legs dangling for 40 or 50 yards, and then suddenly drop out of sight. They are unlikely to be flushed into flight again, but rather will escape by running. Many hunters have been quite surprised at how difficult it is to hit this seemingly easy target. Earnshaw Cook continues:

"The fast jump, erratic flight and sudden drop of the bird usually allows less than three seconds to mark, shoulder the gun, swing, aim, and fire. As the tide falls, the skiff meets greater resistance from the grass, moves imperceptibly slower, makes more noise, and the birds flush farther and farther away, perhaps at twenty yards instead of ten. Without realizing this, it is not unusual for an ordinarily good field shot to fire several boxes of shells during his first experience with rail birds."

Mr. Edgar Merkle, a life-long hunter and conservationist of the Patuxent River recounted his first railbird hunting trip to me:

"The first time I went railbird hunting, you were allowed to shoot 100 birds. I had an I.C. Smith double-barreled full choke and medium choke shotgun. I only brought 100 shells with me and I shot every one of them. If I would have hit one, I'd have blown it to bits. I had a headache for three solid days and nights after that!"

The guides and pushers were local tobacco farmers and watermen who knew the haunts of the birds and earned a handsome day's wages "pushing a tide." The pushers would call "Hai, rail!" or "Mark, right!" or "Mark, left!" each time a bird was flushed in shooting range. The skill of good pushers finding seemingly lost birds was legendary. The birds which were shot were expertly scooped up into the boat with a short-handled small net or a paddle. Sometimes, when the shooting was good, small blocks of painted wood were thrown out to mark birds which had fallen, and then were picked up along with the birds when the boat was poled back out of the marsh. The earliest skiffs were double-ended, but later changed to have a bow and a square stern.

Pushing a tide usually constituted much more than just the few hours' hunting time. Gary Wiseman, considered one

**RAILBIRD HUNTING ON PATUXENT, drawing by Jan Turner**
of the best pushers along with Capt. Whittington of Lyons Creek, rowed up from Nottingham (about 4 miles), pushed the tide, and then rowed back in the dark. Salaries for pushers ranged from $5 per day in the early 1900's to $15 per day in the 1930's, a not inconsiderable sum for poor tobacco farmers and watermen. The work was not done when the hunt was over, however. The hundreds of small birds had to be picked and cleaned for the table. Generally it was women’s work, and they earned a penny a piece for picking them. To cook them you sauteed them in butter, poured in wine, and served over grits. An 1837 recipe recommended preparing them as you would quail stuffed with oysters, namely breading and baking them till tender. You needed about six birds per serving according to Mrs. Marjorie Rigg.

The fortunes of the gun clubs reached their peak in the early 1900's and then waned near the time of the Second World War. The most accurate records to be found as yet are those of the gun club at Jackson's Landing in Prince George's County. Incorporated in 1897 as the Glebe Rod and Gun Club with Charles West as president, the club was allowed in the original lease the use of the property and buildings; and it was “... agreed between the parties of the contract that the said Mr. West may have the privilege during the existence of the lease to use the grounds hereby rented to entertain his friends for a day at a time, and the further privilege of shipping the produce of himself and signed friends from shore on said property ...”. The club later became the Jackson’s Landing Gunning and Fishing Club in 1900 whose lease was renewed numerous times till it became the McClure Gun Club by vote of the general membership in 1930.

The Italian Fishing Club just up the river was incorporated in 1905 by “Twelve of the Capital’s most outstanding Italian citizens,” and made major improvements to the lodge in the 1930's. Its exclusive membership was limited to 25 throughout its existence.

After World War II railbird shooting declined, club members died and were not replaced, and the gun club lodges were sold to private owners as residences. The McClure Gun Club was sold to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission in 1962 to become part of the Patuxent River Park in Prince George’s County. Partial restoration is underway, and the club is open by advance reservation for meetings and interpretive tours.

The decline of the railbirds on the Patuxent River was caused by a complex series of reasons, most notable of which were habitat destruction, pollution, and sedimentation. At its peak, railbird hunting on the Patuxent was of significant economic and social consequence to the areas of Calvert County, Anne Arundel County, and Prince George’s County which bordered the river around Jug Bay. Although a few railbird skills are still to be found each year on the marshes in early September, the ever diminishing numbers of railbirds marked the passing of an era on the Patuxent River rich in history and folklore.

PRAD 1980 - BEST EVER

This year's Patuxent River Appreciation Days, an annual two-day festival centered on the Museum grounds, was the best ever with attendance estimated at 25 to 35,000. The exhibits were nearly double what they were last year, thanks in large part to a grant from the Maryland Arts Council which covered expenses for ten artisans and craftsmen who demonstrated their skills ranging from seafood cookery, woodcarving, boat building, cabinet making to caulking and seafood-harvesting techniques.

El Paso Marine started a new tradition this year in the form of a raft race. Teams from El Paso, Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, Flotilla 15-07 of Solomons, and the Patuxent River Naval Air Station all competed. El Paso won the contest.

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION
TO SIMBC

The American Model Yachting Association has officially recognized the Solomons Island Model Boat Club and assigned it American Model Yachting Association (AMYA) Sanction Club No. 90.

Sponsored by CMM, the Club was organized in December 1979 with Pepper Langley, commodore, and Barney Wood, secretary-treasurer. The membership totals fifty. A majority of these are inactive members living in scattered parts of the country. Membership in SIMBC carries with it the right of purchasing the Club's boat plans.

The Chesapeake Bay skipjack is the Club's designated model. Because of the widely scattered membership, don't be surprised to see a skipjack sailing San Diego Bay, Lake Michigan, or Florida's Indian River.
CMM BUILDING LOG CANOES

Thanks to a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation Maritime Grants Program, the Museum is presently constructing two single-log canoes. One is an Indian dug-out and the other an early colonial punt. These craft, when completed, will join our synoptic log canoe collection which already boasts a two-log, several three- and five-log canoes, a brogan and the queen of the fleet, the nine-log bug-eye converted oyster buy boat, "Wm. B. Tennison."

George Surgent is the project director and can be seen Saturday morning with his faithful crew of volunteers working on the canoes.

The tree, a tulip poplar with a girth of 36 inches, was donated by Mr. Edwin Ward of Dunkirk. Mr. Eugene Jones of Chesapeake Beach loaded it up on a truck for delivery to CMM. Others actively working on the project include Peter Vogt, Al Lavish, Dennis Kund, Bob Kelsey, and Bob Simmons.

An official celebration and launching is scheduled for this summer, so look for the announcement in the spring issue of the BUGEYE TIMES.

Log canoe undergoing trials on launching day, photo by Tim Mihursky.

George Surgent shows visitors our Log Canoe under construction, photo by Tim Mihursky.

Board of Governors

Appreciates Volunteer Efforts

Open letter to the Museum’s Volunteer Force from the CMM Board of Governors:

The Board of Governors are most appreciative of the dedication with which the volunteers have responded to the needs of the Museum through contributions of time, effort, and support.

We are grateful to all of you — those who are working toward your goal of 1,000 hours and those of you already beginning on your second thousand: Jim Buys, Joe Lore, Clara Dixon, Dorothy Ordwein, George Van Winkle, Sandy Roberts, and Peggy Ziemann.

Our sponsoring of Volunteer Day with its cruise aboard the "Wm. B. Tennison” was a small thank-you made more enjoyable by the large participation and the bountiful lunch arranged by Barbara Wilson and Dorothy Ordwein.

The Museum is indeed fortunate to have such a loyal, dedicated group, and we thank you for your willingness to serve in this capacity.

Dorothy G. Oursler
Secretary to the Board of Governors
Calvert Marine Museum
SPECIAL RECOGNITION

ELLEN ZAHNISER for the beautiful Christmas wreaths on the front entrance doors.

ANNA WEEMS EWALT for decorating the Drum Point Lighthouse in traditional Christmas decorations.

LINDA McGILVERY for decorating the Christmas tree in the Museum lobby.

EDWIN WARD of Dunkirk for donation of a huge tulip poplar tree for the log canoe project.

EUGENE JONES of Chesapeake Beach for hauling and loading the log canoe trees for transport to the Museum.

WINTER CALENDAR

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

All programs begin at the Museum at 7:45 p.m. unless otherwise noted. Programs are free to members; $1.00 to non-members unless otherwise noted. For additional information call Dorothy Ordwein at 326-4162.

John Olsen Chapter American Shipcarvers Guild — first and third Tuesday, monthly at 7:30 p.m.

Solomons Island Model Boat Club — first and third Wednesday, monthly at 7:30 p.m.

January 19 – DOLPHIN SOCIETY. Lecture by Dr. Kenneth Norris, University of California. Dr. Norris will discuss recent discoveries in understanding dolphins, their "language," and group organization. Lecture is at 6:00 p.m. in Baird Auditorium at the Smithsonian Institution. Trip includes time in exhibit area before lecture. Admission $5.50; cost of transportation to be shared by participants. In interested, call 326-4162 IMMEDIATELY for reservations. Deadline January 5.

February 2 – OYSTERING ON THE CHESAPEAKE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. Lecture by Breton Kent, Department of Zoology, University of Maryland. A lecture on the facts archaeologists can glean from a study of oyster shells found in diggings; the existing weather conditions, uses of oysters in Colonial times, and the probable life styles of persons involved.

February 25 – INDEPENDENCE CRUISE REGISTRATION DEADLINE (see June 13 below.)

February 28 – OYSTERING BY SKIPJACK. Speakers, Rob Kasper of the "Feature's Staff," Baltimore Sun and Captain Stanley Larrimore, skipper of the Lady Katie. Share an evening of tales and facts about life onboard the Lady Katie and other skipjacks at work on the Bay.

March 10 – ALL YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT JELLYFISH. A lecture by David Cargo, Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. Lecturer will discuss the natural history of jellyfish and the ways by which summer populations are predicted.

April 29 – OSPREY. Steve Cardano of Charles County Community College will share his interesting research on the life habits of the osprey and its present status.


SELECTED ACQUISITIONS

SMITH BROTHERS, INC. - Yawl boat from three masted schooner "William J. Stanford."

MARJORIE RIGG - Model of Baltimore clipper "Rossie."

CHARLES NICHOLS - Melon seed duck hunting skiff.

BRUCE PHILIPSON - Steam whistle from "S. L. Pocahontas."

LORETTA YEATMAN GOLDSBOROUGH - 1918 photo of Drum Point Lighthouse with keeper William Yeatman and family.

CMM PURCHASES

Oursler oil paintings of steamboats "Calvert Approaching," "Calvert Leaving," and "Tiroli."


Print "Oyster Tossing" from 1872 Harper’s Weekly.

Print "Oyster Canning" Frank Leslie, 1873.

Maryland Map 1795 issued in 1799 by Samuel Lewis.

Maryland May 1822-24 with notation of Patuxent River navigation Chesapeake Bay English Pilot section 1737-1760.

INTRA-MUSEUM LOANS

The CMM oyster life-cycle exhibit was loaned to the TIDAL FISH-LIFES DIVISION of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources for Chesapeake Appreciation Days.

On permanent loan to the BATTLE CREEK CYPRESS SWAMP are five exhibit cases; our snake exhibit, and the full-scale carving of the American Bald Eagle carved by the John Olsen Chapter of the American Shipcarver's Guild.
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

MEMBERSHIP PRIVILEGES INCLUDE:

1. Subscription to the quarterly "Bugeye Times" newsletter.
2. Quarterly calendar of events.
3. Free admission to Museum programs (films, lectures, slide-shows).
4. Invitations to previews and receptions for new exhibits.
5. Discovery & Exploration Labs (D&E Labs) for children.
6. Trips and tours.

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO:
Calvert Marine Museum
P.O. Box 97
Solomons, Maryland 20688

(Your membership expires__________)

PLEASE ENTER MY ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FOR:

( ) $ 2.50 Student (under 25 yrs. old)
( ) $ 5.00 Individual
( ) $ 7.50 Family
( ) $ 50.00 Supporting
( ) $100.00 Sustaining
( ) $500.00 & over - Life Membership

Name

Address

City State Zip

PLEASE RETURN THIS PORTION