

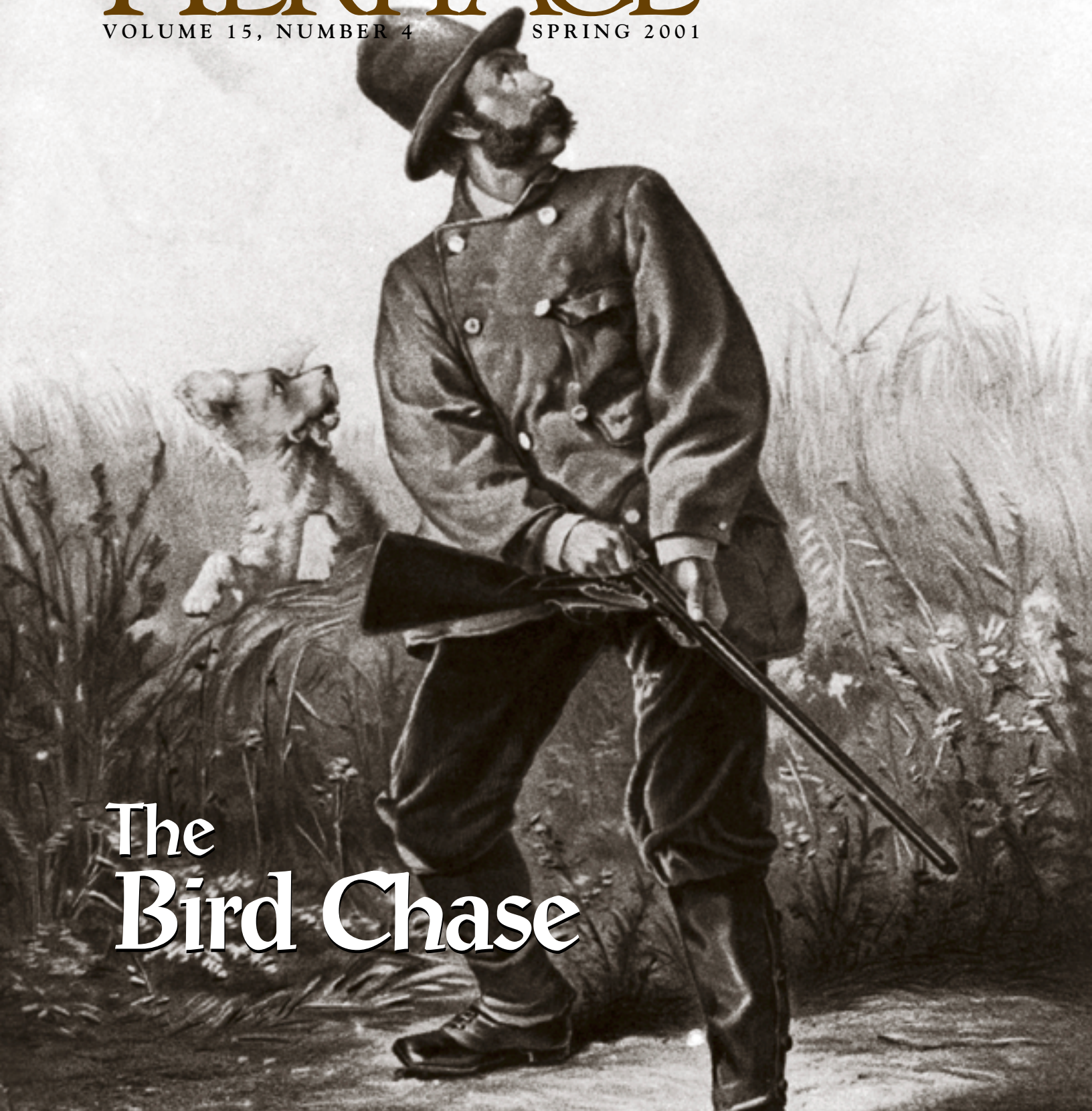
COASTAL HERITAGE

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The Bird Chase



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THE BIRD CHASE

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A drawing of a snipe hunter hangs on a clubhouse wall at the old Santee Gun Club.

PHOTO/WADE SPEEDS



RIDING IN STYLE. A mule-drawn buckboard carried deer hunters at Medway Plantation in this 1937 photograph.



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The Bird Chase

A century ago, wealthy Yankees began flocking to South Carolina, seeking status and sport, spurred by dreams of aristocratic living. Their surprising legacy has been a dazzling experiment in wildlife conservation.

By John H. Tibbetts

BIG GUNS. The southern aristocratic hunting culture, drawn largely from English traditions, prizes elegantly designed shotguns, like this 20-gauge belonging to the Legendre family of Medway Plantation in Berkeley County. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

“Lord, please send us a rich Yankee.”

That’s what one lowcountry plantation owner, Sam Stoney, Jr., said in the 1920s. Rice plantations, once Carolina’s gold mines, had fallen into decline after the Civil War. Freedmen fled coastal plantations and cultivated their own small farms, and a series of hurricanes ruined ricefield dikes, which planters couldn’t afford to repair. While northern cities swelled with prosperity, the South Carolina coast remained mired in poverty. Many plantation owners turned to Yankees for salvation.

From the 1890s into the 1930s, rich northerners poured south to play in a region where a once-sophisticated economy had collapsed. Some of the biggest names in New World commerce bought bankrupt estates along the South Carolina coast, luxuriating in the landscape

that had spawned the most powerful strain of southern aristocracy. The Yankees were industrialists, hugely successful financiers, newspaper titans, political giants, and old money high-hats, with names including Vanderbilt, du Pont, Roosevelt, Baruch, Luce, Guggenheim, and Pulitzer.

Some captains of industry who turned the mansions of the Lost Cause into wintertime retreats and hunting clubs had been rich for several generations. Other magnates were nouveau riche, having become suddenly and dizzyingly wealthy in the Gilded Age or Jazz Age booms. There were no income or estate taxes, and families could pass all their financial assets down generations. Plutocrats and their children, swimming in money, bought up land and houses around the country.

"The industrialists were rich and in search of status," wrote historian George C. Rogers, Jr. "There was money enough to buy anything." One way to conspicuously consume was to purchase a bankrupt plantation in South Carolina and invite friends down to bask in the mild winter weather and shoot waterfowl in the former ricefields and quail in the longleaf forests. Yankee swells bought houses and plantations in Camden and Aiken, S.C., in Pinehurst and Southern Pines, North Carolina, in Thomasville, Georgia, and at a half-dozen other sporting playgrounds in the South.

By the early twentieth century, large stretches of the South Carolina coastal plain had returned to rough country. University of South Carolina historian Walter Edgar pointed out: "Some lowcountry farmers turned to truck crops, but without rice the lowcountry reverted to what it had been two hundred years earlier, a semitropical wilderness."

Although not a true wilderness, lowcountry forests were superb places to hunt. Many northern millionaires of that era bought cheap land in the American backwoods to enjoy a rough-and-ready outdoors life. "They felt it was their responsibility as a class of people to get back to nature and to prove their manly skills," says Lawrence Rowland, historian at the University of South Carolina-Beaufort.

Some Yankees admired the southern elite's faded elegance. By the 1890s, only a few decades after the Civil War, the northern public had changed its attitudes toward the South. The abolitionist movement was dead, Reconstruction had collapsed, and the disenfranchisement of southern blacks was underway. In the North, as cities industrialized and became increasingly dirty, crime-ridden, and swollen with immigrants, white Americans looked

back on the antebellum era through a nostalgic haze. Yearning for simpler bygone times, they embraced a "national myth about the glories of the southern plantation past," Rogers noted. "The rich Yankees began to fall in love with the ready-made plantations, all with historic pasts and with appropriate settings for their gentlemanly sports."

Repairing old plantation houses or building new ones, some millionaires imitated the style of European aristocrats. The W.R. Coe family, for example, bought a plantation in the ACE Basin (Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto river basin) and sent architects overseas to raid entire rooms from European castles; their home was designed around these rooms.

"Indeed," Charleston editor William Watts Ball wrote in a 1929 letter, "the odor of genteel Yankee wealth, while not suffocating, is pervading."

Plantation owners eagerly imitated the English gentry who, with expensive shotguns, stalked Old World game birds such as partridge, grouse, and pheasant through fields and forests. The British had established a complex hunting tradition that included skilled bird dogs and land stewardship. Irrepressible Anglophiles, the American industrialists hungered to be just like dukes and duchesses across the Atlantic. Rich Yankees managed their southern estates to hunt bobwhite quail, a plump, chicken-like bird similar to the Old World partridge, though smaller and quicker. "A lot of the northerners who came south wanted to establish themselves as English-style landed

gentry," says Charles F. Kovacik, University of South Carolina geographer.

Sometimes hunters blended southern and English traditions in unusual ways. The gray fox, native to South Carolina, was lively prey for those who hoped to emulate the red fox hunts of Great Britain. In 1930, Richard S. Emmet, a New York lawyer, described a fox hunt at a lowcountry plantation. "As practiced at Cheeha-Combahee, the field, emitting various versions of the 'rebel yell,' followed the hounds on horseback in the early dawn, through a wide variety of difficult terrain that made up for the lack of stone walls and fences to clear."

Plenty of estates were not gussied up, though. There were austere hunting lodges and camps and meeting places where men escaped city comforts. The southern coast from North Carolina to Mississippi was exotic and rough enough to stimulate the blood. John Updike recently described the long-lost world of "Florida when it was a far place, a rich man's somewhat Spartan paradise, and not yet the great democracy's theme park and retirement home."

Many hunters traveled south for brief wintertime vacations. To reach ACE Basin estates, visitors in the early days rode from New York or Philadelphia by train to Charleston where they caught a passenger line called the "Boll Weevil" that ran once a day and stopped at Wiggins in Colleton County.

Some families visited South Carolina so often that a few of their descendants assimilated into local society. Other landowners eventually sold out and moved away. For a time, though, the arrival of rich northerners was teasingly considered a second invasion of the South. "Indeed," Charleston editor William Watts Ball wrote in a 1929 letter, "the odor of genteel Yankee wealth, while not suffocating, is pervading."



TOOLS OF THE TRADE. A duck boat holds decoys on an impoundment bank at Cheeha-Combahee Plantation in the ACE Basin. Large stretches of the South Carolina coast remain rural primarily because large landowners have preserved hunting plantations from development. Protected by conservation easements, the 13,000-acre plantation is part of an impressive network of private and public lands managed for hunting, forestry, farming, and wildlife between Beaufort and Charleston.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



High-born birds

From the 1890s through the 1950s, quail hunting emerged as the most popular sport among the big-money set along the South Carolina coast. Quail were once plentiful in the sharecropped areas. The birds thrived within the high weeds they found on old-style farms, eating leftover grain in the days before mechanized harvesters.

But after World War II, when farmers began using more chemicals and efficient equipment and field size increased, quail populations dropped.

Hunters now have a difficult time finding wild quail on the South Carolina coastal plain. Plantation managers artificially supplement coveys, releasing thousands of birds early in the fall so that some survive for wintertime hunting.

Duck and quail hunting offer different experiences. Duck hunters rise before dawn and sit in a cold blind in the middle of a pond, waiting for birds, or paddle around in canoes, stalking their prey. By contrast, quail hunters, after a leisurely lunch, traditionally ride on buckboard wagons through the afternoon woods and fields to reach coveys.

Wild ducks were always more plentiful than quail along the South Carolina coast. But “quail were considered the aristocrat of the hunted birds,” says Virginia Christian Beach, author of a book on Medway Plantation. “The gentlemanly thing was quail,” agrees Charles Kovacic, University of South Carolina geographer.

THE OUTDOORS LIFE

On the eve of the American Revolution, South Carolina rice planters were nabobs of the slave states, the richest of the colonial elite. For decades, planters had used slaves to cut down tens of thousands of acres of cypress-tupelo forests to build rice fields with massive dikes and ingenious water-control structures. Here, rice planters grew the famous “Carolina gold” to sell on international markets.

The rice estates were extraordinarily profitable, allowing wealthy planters to ape English aristocrats. In the 1770s, South Carolina sent more young people to England to be educated than any other colony. One visitor to South Carolina in the 1780s, the Italian aristocrat Luigi Castiglioni, was convinced that “most” South Carolina planters “were raised in England.” South Carolina’s elite copied the English gentry’s manners, morals, religion, furniture, architecture, and dress.

For generations, the English gentry held certain notions about hunting—that the sport taught noble values and that shooting wild animals made well-bred boys into gentlemen. In short, how a man hunted defined his character. In the early nineteenth century, English aristocrats became especially keen on “wing-shooting”—the sport of killing birds as they flew. A South Carolina rice planter echoed these tastes in his 1846 book. “Field sports are both innocent and manly,” wrote William Elliott. “[T]he rapid glance, the steady aim, the quick perception, the ready execution; these are among the faculties and qualities continually called into pleasing exercise; and the man who habitually applies himself to this sport will become more *considerate*, as well as more prompt, more full of resource, more resolute, than if he had never engaged in it!”

But Elliott fretted about disappearing game. In most of the eastern United States at that time, sportsmen primarily shot birds because larger mammals had been killed off. Buffalo and elk had long since been hunted out of South Carolina. Big game mammals were scarcer in his own region, Elliott admitted, partly because planters had cleared forests for rice and

cotton fields where these animals once found refuge. Rice planters, the most powerful force in South Carolina politics before the Civil War, caused widespread changes to the region’s wildlife habitats. Although acknowledging that planters had contributed to game declines, Elliott lay most of the blame on “a race of professional hunters” who supplied “hotels and.... the private tables of luxurious citizens with venison.” Elliott sneered at “this class of men” who “devote their days and nights to hunting.” Once a market hunter kills off all game in one area, he “pitches his tent, or builds his cabin in another quarter; and re-commences his career of destruction.”

Even so, Elliott’s plantation was still remote enough that deer, wildcat, and fox thrived on his land. An absentee landlord who spent most of his time in northern cities, Elliott also boasted about the birds he could shoot on his brief trips home: wild turkey, partridge, dove, golden plover, woodcock, snipe, and a wide variety of ducks. And he laughed scornfully at his hunter friends in New York who lacked their own plantations: “Ye city sportsmen! . . . who, with abundant pains and trouble . . . marshal your forces for a week’s campaign among the plains of Long Island, or the barrens of Jersey—and in reward of your toil, grab one brace of grouse . . . ye city sportsmen! who go so far, and so little for your pains.”

Northern sportsmen—wealthy, urban, influential—competed fiercely with lower-class professional hunters for dwindling supplies of game in the nineteenth century. Professional hunters supplied flourishing town markets with almost every kind of wild bird and mammal and their meat, skins, or feathers; it was all legal and legitimate.

After the Civil War, over-hunting by sportsmen and professionals reached a crisis. Two important technological changes spurred wildlife declines. English manufacturers built better shotguns and more efficient cartridges, which American hunters adopted, enabling them to kill larger numbers of game. And the railroad became the economic and social equivalent of today’s Internet, altering how Americans lived and played. In the 1880s, it had

become common for wealthy northern hunters to take vacations in the South, traveling via rail; no more bumping by carriage over bad roads for days or weeks.

It was a time when game regulations were minimal and lightly enforced or nonexistent. Appetites for wild meat and outdoor sports were growing, but animal populations were not.

Passenger pigeons, for example, became the main attraction in a popular sport—trap shooting, in which contestants shoot at birds let loose from traps or at objects launched into the air. This was excellent practice for shooting out in the fields and woods. Trap shooters especially prized passenger pigeons, which flew erratically and were hard to hit.

Commercial hunters netted vast numbers of passenger pigeons and shipped them to cities as fodder for city sportsmen to shoot during trap shooting events. Only very prosperous hunters could afford the cost of shipping live birds, and the ability to kill a wild pigeon “on the wing”—that is, in flight—became a sign of upscale manhood. “Wing shooting was big in England at the time, and people thought that’s what we ought to be doing here,” says Kovacik. By the 1890s, after years of over-hunting, the passenger pigeon was extinct, and trap shooters began aiming at clay pigeons instead.

In the 1880s and 1890s, ladies’ hearts went aflutter over hats decorated with brilliant feathers. To gain gorgeous bird plumes, commercial hunters decimated tern, heron, gull, and egret rookeries along the entire Atlantic coast from the tip of Florida to Maine, noted environmental historian Jennifer Price in a recent book. Massachusetts upper-crust ladies, outraged by the slaughter, gathered for afternoon teas to

organize for reforms in the millinery trade. They called their group the Audubon Society, one of the first important conservation groups in the United States. Soon there were state Audubon Societies across the country.

Although recreational hunters were a major part of the problem, by the 1870s sophisticated sportsmen understood that this frenzy of over-hunting had caused a wildlife

the early conservationist movement, but decades would pass before over-hunting abated.

GOING SOUTH

In 1894, President Grover Cleveland fell out of a boat while visiting a Georgetown-area rice plantation on a wintertime duck hunting trip. At 265 pounds, Cleveland was a hefty man, and it must



EATING OUT. In 1937, Medway Plantation owner Sidney Legendre (right) hosted a picnic in a broom-sage field. By World War II, there were more than 140 hunting estates in coastal South Carolina and many more in other southern states. Socialites made wintertime tours from estate to estate around the Deep South.

catastrophe. Finally, in 1900, Congress passed the Lacey Act—the first federal conservation measure, which prohibits the interstate shipment of wild species killed in violation of state laws. Spurred on by President Theodore Roosevelt at his bully pulpit, Congress established the first national wildlife refuges. These measures were important victories for

have been difficult to haul such vastness out of the drink. Eager for lively stories about the president, newspapers blared this story across the country.

Some Carolina plantations, such as Medway Plantation in Berkeley County, were already known as hunting retreats after the Civil War. But it wasn’t until Cleveland’s rescue

that many northern hunters learned that the Carolina coast was an excellent place to shoot wintering waterfowl.

By that time, professional hunters were killing huge numbers of migrating waterfowl in the mid-Atlantic area for the meat trade, ruining sportsmen's outings there. Well-off duck hunters began traveling to the far reaches of the Deep South by railroad, searching for places where competitors had not yet ruined the outdoors life.

Northern hunters established clubs that leased and later purchased land in South Carolina. The Santee Club, incorporated in 1898, eventually owned about 23,000 acres bordering on the South Santee River and the Atlantic Ocean. Men from Philadelphia and New York dominated the Santee Club, limited to 30 members at a single time. Knowledgeable hunters considered this property one of the best places in the nation to bag ducks and geese that migrated from Canada, resting and feeding for a time in former rice fields. Yet few South Carolinians were active club members in the early years—just one in 1900 and one in 1934. Joining a club was an expensive proposition.

After Carolina hunting trips, millionaires began buying up bankrupt rice plantations. The new owners often combined several smaller estates into one gigantic holding. In 1905, Bernard Baruch, a native South Carolinian who became a rich financier in New York, bought all of the plantations at the foot of Waccamaw Neck, a total of 17,000 acres. He called his new plantation Hobcaw Barony, and later built a white-columned, Southern-style mansion. Baruch never installed a telephone in his grand house, though he did keep a ticker tape.

Captain I.E. Emerson, a North Carolinian who manufactured and sold BromoSeltzer, visited the Santee Club in 1905 and 1906. He liked the area so much that in 1906 he bought a tract of land in Georgetown County, including several former rice estates. Emerson called his new property "Arcadia Plantation." With additional land purchases, Arcadia grew to about 12,000 acres. In 1936, Emerson's grandson, George Vanderbilt, inherited the property.

After the 1929 market crash, land seemed a safer investment than stocks, and Yankee purchases proliferated. By World

War II, there were at least 140 hunting plantations along the South Carolina coastal plain, according to Kovacik. And there were dozens more hunting estates in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Socialites often made wintertime tours around the South from estate to estate.

By managing and selling timber, landowners found that they could pay for their hunting pleasure and keep plantation finances in the black. But timber sales were often not enough. Arcadia Plantation initiated chicken and



SCOUTING PARTY. On a quail hunt, conservationists Hugh Lane (left), Charles Lane (center), and Weldon Schenck ride through Cheeha-Combahee Plantation in Colleton County.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES

International plan helped preserve waterfowl populations

By the 1950s, duck and geese populations throughout North America began to fall steadily due to hunting pressure and agricultural practices, particularly wetland drainage in the Upper Midwest and Canada.

In the 1980s, however, the United States, Canada, and Mexico signed the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, which called for greater cooperation among government agencies and private landowners to save waterfowl habitat. The plan encouraged states to establish “focus areas” in watersheds that are vital habitat for waterfowl and other wetland-dependant species.

In South Carolina, the focus areas are the Savannah River, the ACE Basin, Cooper River, Santee River, and Winyah Bay. The ACE Basin preservation project resulted from this international effort to protect waterfowl habitat.

Largely due to this international plan, duck populations have stabilized throughout North America since the late 1980s, according to Tommy Strange, S.C.

Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) waterfowl project leader.

But while habitat management has improved, duck numbers have apparently continued to fall steadily in South Carolina. Now the state has “more wintering habitat for waterfowl than waterfowl to use it,” says

Bob Joyner, resident biologist at the Yawkey Wildlife Center in Georgetown County.

Some observers, however, argue that the state’s waterfowl survey does not reflect how birds have adapted to changing conditions. The survey routes have traditionally focused on coastal

areas, though in recent decades many ducks have found quieter places farther inland, away from disturbances on the coast, according to Kenny Williams, regional biologist with Ducks

Unlimited. “Many ducks are spreading out to an expanded habitat base in other parts of the state,” he says. “Beaver ponds and privately owned plant and flood impoundments, where disturbance and hunting pressure can be controlled, are providing some excellent hunting opportunities away from the immediate coast.”



turkey operations to provide cash. Other landowners tried row crops, truck farming, and cattle. “They kept these places open any way they could,” says Lew Crouch, manager of Cheeha-Combahee Plantation.

Hunting estates kept many local families alive, too. In rural areas of the South Carolina coastal plain, the economy was scarcely breathing in the 1930s. Local people were glad to get a touch of Yankee money, working as hunting guides, game wardens, household staff, and laborers.

The old order had to face up to new realities. Prestigious South Carolina families, fallen on hard times, became financially dependent upon the new elite. “Some of the old southern aristocracy were hunting guides” on land that their ancestors once owned, says Rowland. “You can imagine how

bitter that could’ve been. Yet friendships evolved—there were hunting and fishing guides who became very close to the northerners.”

New landowners made minimal investments in the rice fields, stabilizing embankments, repairing wooden water-control structures, and planting small rice crops. After harvests, plantation managers left some grain in the rice fields to draw ducks, which arrived by the thousands—a legal practice then and now. The head gardener of Arcadia Plantation described the abundance of the coast: “At times, late in the afternoon, I can recall . . . seeing so many ducks circling these fields that they would literally block out the sun.”

Although ducks and quail were the prime quarries, plantation hunters also sought wild turkey, rabbit, dove, deer, fox, wildcat, feral

cattle, and wild pig. They had a field day with South Carolina’s fabulous natural wealth. Six members of the Santee Club went out at 4:00 in the morning on Nov. 15, 1902, and in seven hours they shot 242 birds, including mallards, widgeons, bluebills, teal, sprig, and one spoonbill. At first, there were no limits on how many ducks a hunter could bag. “Early on, there was a fair amount of over-hunting,” acknowledges John Frampton, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) assistant director of development and public affairs.

“Greed is a relative thing,” says Bob Perry, DNR wildlife biologist. “If you went to Murphy Island (in the Santee Delta) where there were 100,000 ducks and you killed 100 mallards—well, today, that’s sounds horrible and greedy. But it was a time of no limits.”

In 1918, the federal government signed the Migratory Bird Treaty,

which decreed that all migratory birds were protected from exploitation. In 1925, conservationist J.C. Phillips wrote that this law, in tandem with market hunting restrictions, “has produced really astonishing results, more wonderful than the wildest optimist had prophesied.”

The federal government established hunting regulations on waterfowl, limiting the duck season’s length and the number of bagged ducks allowed. First, the limit was 25 waterfowl per day, then 15, then 10. Today, the daily limit is six waterfowl in the migratory flyway that includes coastal South Carolina.

Most of the hunters who came to South Carolina in the first wave were probably not conservationists by today’s standards. These men (and some women) often killed as many animals as they could. Like many people of their era, the new plantation owners regarded various wild creatures as pests and vermin, putting bounties on the heads of eagles, foxes, bobcats, alligators, and hawks.

Even so, the new owners were responsible for protecting vast tracts of wildlife habitat along the South Carolina coast. While improving their lands for hunting, estate owners benefited many nongame species. The former rice fields attracted not only ducks but also colonial waterbirds such as woodstorks. By preventing extensive wetland drainage for large-scale agriculture, plantation owners preserved endangered plants and animals. For many landowners, however, protecting nongame wildlife was probably unintentional in the early days.

Despite a new era of limits, duck numbers did not rebound quickly. The Santee Gun Club

noted “a very great decrease” in the number of ducks that visited its marshes between 1900 and 1933, according to member Henry H. Carter, who wrote a short history of the club. As a result, some clubs and plantations set their own bag limits. The Santee Club established game restrictions that were tougher than state and federal laws, according to Tommy Strange, DNR statewide waterfowl project leader. Other landowners, such as Tom Yawkey in Georgetown County, created refuges on portions of their property where no hunting was allowed.

One conservation effort was particularly important in the first half of the twentieth century. Landowners and hunting clubs kept out poachers and market hunters who drove species to extinction. The National Association of Audubon Societies encouraged landowners to set up guards to protect rare bird colonies sought by plume hunters. One of the oldest recorded heron-egret colonies in the country was located on land owned by the Santee Club, guarded by its game wardens. The colony is still thriving, protected today by the Nature Conservancy.

In 1949, ornithologists Alexander Sprunt, Jr., and E. Burnham Chamberlain noted: “On these great estates, most of them owned by Northerners, wildlife is infinitely better off than in other days when they could not be maintained and patrolled as they deserved. Poaching was common . . . and there was little oversight of woods and rice fields . . . On the vast majority of the plantations the season’s bag of game is only a fraction of the number of birds

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GRAND ENTRANCE. The old Santee Gun Club, limited to 30 members at a time, was one of the great waterfowl hunting sites in North America in the first half of the twentieth century. The clubhouse, built in 1905, and surrounding property north of McClellanville are now managed by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. Many of the South Carolina coast's valuable public lands were once private hunting preserves. PHOTO/WADE SPEES



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which find protection from the poacher and the night hunter.”

Beginning in the 1950s, a few landowners began experimenting with innovative land management techniques. At that time, the great majority of foresters managed timber primarily for fiber, clearcutting large stands of fast-growing trees. By contrast, Gertrude Legendre, owner of Medway Plantation, and manager William Baldwin encouraged slow-growing longleaf woods by annually burning the woods and selectively harvesting, which benefited quail and wild turkey populations. Baldwin’s forestry management also aided rare species such as the redcockaded woodpecker, though few people in those days even realized that the now-famous woodpecker existed. “With our logging and burning practices, we were promoting wildlife habitat and aesthetics, not just producing fiber,” says Robert Hortman, Medway’s current manager.

Baldwin and other plantation managers continued to rebuild earthen dikes that once surrounded the old rice fields. Many of these ponds attracted migrating waterfowl. But resource regulations have since prohibited complete rebuilding of the dikes; only existing dikes can be repaired. Today, about 70,000 acres of former rice fields remain impounded in South Carolina; another 74,000 acres of ponds have

deteriorated. These ponds are returning to their natural state as forested wetlands, but some landowners want to reconstruct the long-broken dikes. Fishermen are opposed to new dikes, because these open-water areas offer easy access to excellent fish habitat. In the upper Cooper River, a team of Sea Grant scientists is studying the ecological succession and functioning of old rice fields to provide scientific guidance to plantation property-owners and natural resource managers.

MODERN CONSERVATION

One windless December morning at Medway Plantation, a flock of wood ducks and ringnecks swam and fed in the blue water of a former rice pond. Startled by visitors, the dark birds flew up, wheeling slowly in loose formation across the gray sky toward another pond beyond the trees. In our era of gobbling development, when historic landscapes disappear every year, it’s remarkable to see a place that has changed little in decades. Medway and numerous other hunting plantations are protected from development because of innovative measures undertaken by dozens of landowners over the past 20 years.

In the 1960s and ‘70s, Hilton Head Island emerged as an internationally known resort, and development spread quickly along the coast. As property values and taxes escalated, landowners sold off tracts to developers. Plantations were divided up for subdivisions, golf courses, and strip malls. But other estate owners, including Tom Yawkey and the Santee Gun Club, gave large tracts to conservation organizations and the state DNR. A few landowners set up foundations to manage properties. Hobcaw Barony is operated by the Belle W. Baruch Foundation, dedicated to marine, coastal, and forestry research under agreements with Clemson University and University of South Carolina.

In 1987, a group of landowners, government officials, hunters, and environmentalists collaborated to conserve the vast landscape of river bottomlands, salt marshes, and upland forests in the ACE Basin. Some landowners gave estates outright to trusts and

PROPOSAL WOULD ESTABLISH CONSERVATION BANK

This year, state Rep. Chip Campsen, R-Charleston, introduced a bill to create a “conservation bank” to raise up to \$32 million annually to buy development rights for sensitive property tracts. The bill would take the state portion of state deed recording fees to establish the annual grant pool. This portion now enters the general fund. “There are 31 states in the country that have land protection in a major way,” says Hugh Lane, a landowner and conservationist. “The state of South Carolina needs to catch up and start preserving ecologically valuable landscapes.”

The money would be given in matching grants to nonprofit organizations, local governments, and state agencies such as the S.C. Dept. of Natural Resources Heritage Trust Program. To help preserve habitat, the bank would concentrate on efforts to buy development rights from willing landowners.



government agencies. But perhaps more important, dozens of landowners donated conservation easements to nonprofit organizations. Over the next decade, more than 125,000 acres were protected from development. Noting the ACE Basin's success, other property owners along the coast have since donated easements to land trusts and conservation organizations.

This was nothing less than a revolution in the history of conservation. For the first time, a family could apparently protect a property's rural land uses forever, while still maintaining title to land.

When a property owner donates a conservation easement, he promises not to subdivide and develop it; he is giving away his "development rights" on that land. But he retains other rights of ownership and can work his land for farming, forestry, hunting, nature-based tourism, or other rural and traditional uses. A landowner thus reduces future speculative profits, but also cuts future inheritance taxes and allows the next generation to hold onto family property. In some cases, landowners have substantial income tax benefits from donating development rights.

"It takes a special type of landowner to do this," says Crouch. "These landowners don't give a damn about the money. They want the property to stay the same."

With this conservation tool, hunters and plantation owners, perhaps more than any other group, have helped to preserve the South Carolina coast's rural landscape, argues Charles Lane, landowner and chairman of the ACE Basin Focus Area Task Force. "There is an enormous reservoir of sportsmen in South Carolina. These people are influential in the



TODAY'S CATCH. These quail were shot at Cheeha-Combahee Plantation. The banded bird was farm-raised and released in autumn to supplement wild birds for winter hunting.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES

community, and that has been a key to the ACE Basin's success."

With sprawl moving so quickly, government can't afford to buy all of the ecologically rich areas. Yet large blocks of private land are increasingly important habitat for endangered species and migrating waterfowl, scientists say. Now conservationists hope that many more plantation owners will donate easements to land trusts. However, a new generation of landowners, squeezed by estate taxes and high maintenance costs, might

have to sell all or part of their properties.

There are still dozens of hunting plantations along the South Carolina coast, with great forests and fields and thousands of former rice fields. These estates, purchased decades ago as exclusive sporting playgrounds, are now something more important—a necklace of irreplaceable habitat strung from the Savannah River to Winyah Bay and up the Black, Pee Dee, and Waccamaw rivers. ♡

EBBS&FLOWS

Coastal Zone 01

Cleveland, Ohio
July 15-19, 2001

This biennial conference will feature lessons learned by coastal managers around the world and models of successful partnerships among nations. Speakers will examine how local and regional issues are connected to worldwide influences of culture and commerce, climate, and biology. For more information, connect to the conference Web site at www.csc.noaa.gov/cz2001

Estuarine Research Federation

St. Pete Beach, Fla.
Nov. 4-8, 2001

Join your colleagues in sunny St. Pete Beach at the Tradewinds Conference Center for the Estuarine Research Federation's 16th Biennial Conference. Themes for the conference include detecting estuarine change, marine restoration/conservation, modeling estuarine processes, and ecological impacts of invasive species and disease. For more information, visit the Web site: www.erf.org

Second International Conference & Trade Show on Marine Ornamentals

Orlando, Fla.
Nov. 27-Dec. 1, 2001

The aquarium hobby is second only to photography in popularity in the United States. The vast majority of ornamental marine specimens are harvested from the wild. The long-term goal is to develop culture protocols that can be used by industry to reduce harvest pressure from worldwide reef ecosystems. This conference will address efforts toward accomplishing that goal. For more information, visit the conference Web site: www.ifas.ufl.edu/~conferweb/MO


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