

Crazy on the Bayou

**Five Seasons of Louisiana
Hunting, Fishing, and Feasting**



Humberto Fontova

Crazy on the Bayou

**Five Seasons of Louisiana
Hunting, Fishing, and Feasting**

Humberto Fontova

Humberto Fontova puts you in the heart of the Louisiana bayous, where if the mosquitos don't leave you itching for more, then the hangover will. The misadventures continue as the cast from his previous two books traverses the overgrown marsh, seeks out wild game, and guzzles beer. After facing off with the beasts of the bayou, the crew retreats home to clean their kills and enjoy a feast. Every chapter contains one of Fontova's own Cuban-Cajun recipes for preparing wild game. From parmesan-dusted duck fingers to duck gumbo and pressure-cooker nutria sauce piquante, the author offers Cajun cooking at its best. Gonzo-style journalism meets the brackish waters of Buras, Belle Chasse, and Bayou Manchac in this part-memoir, part-cookbook, and part-outdoorsman spectacle that every hunter must read.

Crazy
on the Bayou

Crazy on the Bayou

**Five Seasons of Louisiana
Hunting, Fishing, and Feasting**

Humberto Fontova



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRETNA 2017

Copyright © 2017
By Humberto Fontova
All rights reserved

The word “Pelican” and the depiction of a pelican are trademarks of Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., and are registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

ISBN: 9781455623532
Ebook ISBN: 9781455623549

Back-jacket photographs by Pelayo Pelaez except: second from top at right by Buzzy McKee, third from top at right by Simon Townsend, right at top by Rudy Hall, right at bottom by Shirley Fontova

Photographs in book by author except: page 12 by Wendel Gillen; page 13 by Jared Serigne; page 24 by Paul Pelaez; pages 25, 76, 81, 162, 196 by Pelayo Pelaez; page 106 by Shirley Fontova; page 120 by Mikey Fontova; page 128 by Chris Keys; page 147 by Johnny Morise



Printed in the United States of America
Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

In south Louisiana, many nationally popular terms (“tailgate party” comes to mind for one) take on a “special” meaning. In brief, they’re cranked up several notches. This cranking up is itself cranked up when it comes to the term “hunting and fishing widow.”

Shortly after this book’s release, Shirley and I will celebrate our thirty-ninth wedding anniversary. Naturally the rollicking “paaaaw-ty” will feature much of the gang rollicking through the forthcoming pages, whom I refer to as my “running buddies.”

And speaking of “running buddies,” to my left in the wedding picture in the introduction you’ll see seven of them. This book is dedicated to the (gorgeous) one who appears on my right. Now I’ll borrow from a popular Grateful Dead lyric: “what a loooong, strange (but wonderful!) trip it’s been,” honey! In the forthcoming pages, you’ll come to appreciate the “strangeness”—and especially the “wonder!”—of this trip.

Contents

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| | Introduction | 9 |
| Chapter 1 | Fall: Duck-Hunting Season | 17 |
| Chapter 2 | Winter: Nutria, Sheepshead, and “Caaawnival” Season | 61 |
| Chapter 3 | Spring: Freshwater Fishing Season | 103 |
| Chapter 4 | Summer: Saltwater Fishing Season | 131 |
| Chapter 5 | Fall Again: Deer Season | 181 |

Introduction

“Had Dante seen it,” wrote English novelist Frances Trollope of the place, “he might have drawn images of another hell from its horrors!” Mrs. Trollope was horrified while cruising through south Louisiana’s bayous on her way to New Orleans in 1832. “Swamp tours” just didn’t carry much cachet back then. “Wetlands” were regarded as anything but “valuable.”

Now these “horrors” form the setting for some of reality TV’s highest rated shows. Indeed bayou country has become, according to a recent story by the *New York Times*, “the Reality TV capital of the world.”

“To bring these people to reason,” thundered Louisiana’s first American governor, William Claiborne, “we’ll have to train the cannons on them and batter down the walls of the city. They are indolent and utterly corrupt—ill fitted to be useful citizens of a Republic!” Claiborne was writing to his boss, Thomas Jefferson, who’d just bought Louisiana at Bonaparte’s fire sale for a song. The good governor was in a sputtering rage after witnessing his first Mardi Gras. Back then Cajuns and Creoles didn’t carry much cachet either.

“Men of our race cannot thrive in such a climate!” huffed English novelist J. B. Priestly while visiting Louisiana in 1938. “Our characteristic virtues cannot flower in this soil. The puritan tradition never meant anything here. There is a Latin atmosphere of sunshine, saints, and sinners!”

In fact, history shows that those “characteristic virtues” often prove malleable when transported to the south Louisiana milieu. Many of us have seen it time and again. To wit:

Some corporation transfers another employee from the East Coast or Midwest and you meet a new neighbor. He gets here with his fly rods, his goofy fishing hats and vests, his dinky little “creels,” his granola bars and vitamin water in cute little squirt bottles. He arrives with a trim body, clean mind, restrained appetite, dormant libido, and a kayak on neat little racks atop a shiny SUV with a “Love Your Mother” or “Coexist” bumper-sticker. He asks you where he might find a good place to go “kayaking” (whatever that means).

Six months later an outboard flecked with dried shrimp heads and fish scales juts halfway out of his garage. Empty beer cans rattle in the back of his mud-splattered SUV. Empty wine and whisky bottles cram his garbage cans. That Mr. Rogers smile has vanished, replaced by the smart aleck smirks of Groucho Marx, Al Scramuzza or Ronnie Lamarque. High fiber and fitness have given way to hot fudge and fun. No more grim face and drudgery at the health club. Now it’s a radiant face and revelry at the carnival club.

No more phony smiles and forced laughs with the boss and co-workers at company picnics. Now he’s guffawing heartily and back-slapping with genuine friends at a crawfish boil or tailgate “paaaw-ty.”

His Sunday morning jog or bike ride in fashionable fluorescent attire has been replaced by exercise more vigorous but indoors, and requiring no attire. No more sips of mineral water from plastic squirt bottles. Now he’s gulping Mimosas from champagne glasses. No more oat- bran muffin while standing in the kitchen. Now he’s scarfing down a sumptuous breakfast of sausage, eggs, and beignets while lounging in bed.

His conversations, once curt, to the point, and meant to convey actual facts or inspirational and uplifting advice has become a freewheeling and spicy ramble, wonderfully free of sanctimony and utterly devoid of facts. Its purpose is now the proper one: to provide a backbeat and exercise the jaw muscles between gulps of beer, sips of wine, the sucking of heads or the slurping of gumbo.

What local hasn’t seen this fascinating phenomenon in play?

Well, it took a while but nowadays Louisiana's colorful scoundrels are among America's favorite TV characters, and more are sought out (often by boat) and offered more than they've made in two decades of work to clown it up in front of TV cameras for a month.

Actually, Frances Trollope didn't see the half of it. She was on her way to New Orleans with lips curled and snoot raised, observing these fetid expanses of tropical brush, squishy mud-flats, and decaying slop from the comfort of a ship. She couldn't see (or feel, or swat, or inhale) the clouds of stinging insects. She never saw the snakes and alligators crawling through the putrid slime. She never got bogged to her waist in its vicious quagmires while stalking a deer with bow and arrow. She never baked, steamed, or sweltered in its foul miasma. And at the time of her visit, the hideous (but delicious) rodent named nutria was still a hundred years away from arriving in Louisiana from Argentina to overrun and devour our wetlands.

Louisiana owes its license plate motto as "Sportsman's Paradise" to Trollope's "hell," to its "horrors." If nature played favorites Louisiana can't complain that it wasn't one of them. She saw to it that the Mississippi River would end its continental stroll right through what later became our state. Sediments from half a continent were scattered into the Gulf as the river, growing bored with its course every few thousand years or so, whipped back and forth spewing its fertile cargo into the Gulf. Forty percent of this continent's coastal marshes were thus born.

This process means that our coast flirts with the Gulf. Louisiana doesn't go right up to the gulf and say "here I am, Gulf, give me a little strip of white sand then take over." In a few places the Gulf make a few rude advances; the Lake Borgne/Pontchartrain complex and Barataria Bay, but generally it's a courtship, an elaborate ritual of slow seduction. The upland pines and hardwoods give way to cypress-tupelo swamps. These spillover swamps slowly cede to fresh marsh. Then the lush fresh-water marsh reluctantly surrenders to brackish and salt marshes. Finally the salt waters of the open Gulf close in for the conquest.

Those miles and miles of soggy landscape serve as an immense incubator and nursery for a wide array of marine creatures. Biologists tell us it's the most productive estuarine system on the continent—some say in the world.

Thirty percent of the nation's commercial fisheries are caught along the Louisiana coast. Commercial fishing vessels from around the globe ply their nets and long-lines here. And since the first settlements, Louisiana's own residents have dipped greedily into this massive pool of protein for their own sustenance.

From shrimp to oysters from crabs to crawfish from red snapper to trout and redbfish, the Creole/Cajun culinary instinct combined with this abundance of fresh marine fodder gave rise to a cuisine that has become a worldwide taste sensation—and it's about time.

Maps show how Louisiana juts out into the Gulf below the coasts of Texas and Mississippi. A little sliver of a peninsula bordering the river below New Orleans juts out even further. That was the river's



"It is our fellows who make life endurable to us," wrote H. L. Mencken, "and give it a purpose and meaning. If our contacts with them are light and frivolous, there is something lacking." Above we find the fellows at the author's wedding in "Metry" on December 16, 1978.



Above we find the exact same fellows at “Da Camp” in 2016.

doing—at least until the levees shackled it. For ten thousand years this “father of all waters” as the Indians called it, acted like a huge (but somewhat lethargic) water wiggle, depositing its fertile cargo of sediment. The river robs Peter to Paul in a sense. Iowa’s loss is our gain—until the levees went up that is. Most of Louisiana below Interstate 12 thus sprouted. In geological terms something “sprouts” in ten thousand years. These fertile wetlands account for the lifestyle so popular on reality TV nowadays.

“To all men whose desire is to live a short life but a merry one,” wrote a British travel writer named Henry Bradsher Fearon after a visit to New Orleans 1819. “I have no hesitation in recommending New Orleans.” He described the natives as “fiery men who love pleasure, and live for excitement . . . men who enjoy any game that stirs the senses.”

My hunting and fishing chums—all of us “running buddies” since high school, through college, as groomsmen in each other’s weddings, as fathers, and even (gulp!) as grandfathers—like to think we continue this splendid Louisiana tradition.

Crazy
on the Bayou

Chapter 1

Fall: Duck Hunting Season

Duck Dynasty It Ain't! Duck Hunting the Mississippi Delta

Poor Stan looked baffled. Maybe we should have warned him? Here was his first Louisiana duck hunt and he shows up decked out like a male model from the *Duck Dynasty* pages of Cabela's catalog. His camo outfit was spanking new with the creases razor sharp. His hat even had a price tag still dangling from the back, and around his neck dangled a shiny wooden duck call about the size of a small baseball bat.

We should have guessed it. The tip-off: Stan had been raving about those "Cajun boys," the Robertsons's, all morning. In fact, Stan's attire might be appropriate for a duck hunt around Chesapeake Bay, Stuttgart, or California's Central Valley, near Stan's home in Sacramento. But not here in south Louisiana itself.

Stan, a friend of a friend whom we'd met at a tailgate party only a year earlier, fancies himself a worldly fellow. Fifteen years with a major multinational corporation had shown him the world from New York to California, from Bogota to Buenos Aires, and from Paris to Bangkok. Well-traveled, he considered himself versed in exotic cultures, strange dialects, bizarre habits, and grotesque apparel.

But nothing had prepared him for this. We were in a convenience store in Belle Chasse, Louisiana. Stan—who in looks and demeanor could easily pass for Richie Cunningham of *Happy Days*—seemed oblivious to the snickers erupting all around him as he stood in line clutching a bottle of green tea, two granola bars, and a pack

of sunflower seeds. Most of the people around him held Styrofoam cups of coffee and honey buns. One guy held a beer.

The guy in front of Stan suddenly turned around, flipped back his welder's cap, and addressed him:

"Y'all got 'em?" he rasped.

"I beg your pardon?" Stan stuttered, with a smile.

Good grief, I thought while looking over at Pelayo. Stan needs a translator.

"Y'all *got* 'em?" the fellow continued. "Got the *ducks*? Shot some *ducks*?"

"Oh, oh—no!" Stan finally blurted after recovering his composure. "Not yet. We haven't hunted yet. We're just going out."

"Just going out?" the welder snorted while looking at his watch. "It's 9:15, man! Dem ducks done stopped flying by now."

"That's what I thought too," Stan said with a chuckle. "But my hosts," he pointed at Pelayo and me, "insist that there's no point in setting up at dawn where we're going. Something about the tides and the wind coming up later in the day. I guess they know what they're talking about?"

Stan shrugged and smiled as the welder took a drag from his cigarette and stared at him, nodding and frowning.

"They've been hunting this area for years," Stan added with a smile.

"You see, me," the welder said with a grimace, "*I don't fool wit dem ducks no more, you unnerstan?*"

"I beg your pardon?" Stan stuttered.

"I said, '*I don't fool wit dem ducks no more.*' *Ya follow me?*"

"Sure. I'd be happy to help," Stan said with a shrug. "Now, follow you *where*?"

Pelayo looked heavenward and sighed.

"All that woyk for a few birds? Uh uh, not me. You follow me?"

"I said I'd be happy to follow you?" Stan's smile was looking bent. "Now just where . . ."

"It ain't worth it," said the welder-capped gent. True to form, he paid no attention to Stan. His rhetorical repertoire didn't usually

provoke actual answers from locals, much less rebuttals. “Now I got me a deer lease in Mississippi, you follow me?”

Stan was making a valiant attempt, but his Richie Cunningham smile was giving way to a look of pure bewilderment.

“Oh yes, yes. I understand,” he said while finally reaching the cashier, who rescued him with a dialect that seemed semi-comprehensible.

“Well, good luck,” the welder offered as we walked out. “Y’all have a good one.”

An hour and a half later we rolled into the boat launch at Venice, parked, and started walking towards the dock area as several boats returned from the morning’s hunt. One seemed to have taken advantage of the balmy weather for a fishing trip.

But they were approaching the dock at a pretty good clip—*much* too fast. Stan, already alert to the looming mishap, started running to the rescue. “Slow down!” he yelled and waved at the boat’s female driver as he crouched on the dock, prepared to try and deflect the imminent and probably shattering impact.

“Yes, slow down!” a plump fellow squatting in the bass-boat’s bow turned and yelled at the seemingly distracted woman at the wheel. He held the bow-rope and a beer in one hand and flapped frantically behind him with the other. He was a flabby brute and his massive belly bounced with the arm motion. Remember Clemenza in *The Godfather*? He looked like him.

“*Back it up!*” he roared at the poor woman at the wheel, turning to eye her again. She was a looker, in a Farrah Fawcett, Suzanne Sommers, seventies sort of way, with big hoop earrings that matched her tight blue windbreaker.

“*Reverse now!*” he yelled as the distance closed. Clemenza’s eyes looked like fried eggs, and spittle shot from his blubbery lips. “*Come on! Reverse!*”

We see this a lot in south Louisiana. A husband and wife team no doubt. They’d probably been raving at each other all morning. “*A peaceful and delightful day of fishing with the spouse . . . how lovely and touching.*” Yeah, right. Save the sappy script for *Oprah*,

Ellen, or *The Real Housewives of Chalmette*. We know better. These trips usually end up in disaster. Heck, they defeat the very purpose of fishing—for 98 percent of fishermen, that is.

Anyway, by turning to roar at his hapless, apparent, wife, Clemenza flashed the entire parking lot with a hideous vista. His tent-like shorts were riding pretty low in back as he squatted, much like Dan Akroyd's as the famous refrigerator repairman in the *SNL* skit. But his bulk was more like three Belushis than one Akroyd.

Meanwhile the poor woman was frantic while tugging at the throttle. "I'm *trying!*" she sobbed. "But it's *stuck!*" Finally she let go of the wheel, grabbed the throttle with *both* hands, and started jerking crazily, her pony tail bobbing and earrings jangling with the motion.

"You're gonna break the godd--- . . . !" Clemenza was now roaring from the bow, shaking his pudgy fist in the air, spilling half his beer, not caring what Stan or the rest of the crowd that had gathered at the dock was thinking. "Listen to me, Deena!" he yelled. "*Shut up and listen, will ya! Now—just turn!*"

"*I can't!*" The woman was blubbing now, her pretty face, which was strangely familiar, was red and contorted. She pushed and tugged mightily, but the throttle wouldn't budge.

"Ahhhh!" she shrieked. "*Eeeehh! I can't! It won't . . . !*" Her frantic jerking finally sent her sunglasses off her face. She let go of the throttle and grabbed at them awkwardly, flapping her arms around like a confused belly dancer, then *splish*. In they went.

"Hit the gas!" yelled Clemenza. "The hell with the godd-- - *glasses!* Hit the key—the ignition! We're gonna crash! Here!" And he finally turned around and lunged over the windshield like a crazed sumo wrestler, which he resembled body wise, just as the hysterical woman finally jerked the throttle free, but into *forward!*

Vrrroooooom! went the revved-up outboard. "*Ahhhhh!*" went the poor woman.

"Whoa!" went Clemenza as he slammed the windshield. Then—*whack!* They finally hit the dock—slamming it *hard*, mostly with the trolling motor, as Stan barely dodged the blow. He'd wised up as the boat roared into the home stretch.

Pelayo and I hunched up and grimaced at the nasty whack of delicate trolling motor against creosote and concrete. The impact sent Clemenza back over the windshield and rolling onto the bow, where he grabbed the shattered trolling motor just in time to halt the momentum of his bulk as it rolled and rippled over the carpeted bow like those elephant seals you see humping onto the shore on the Discovery Channel.

Clemenza stopped just short of joining the sunglasses and his beer, which was bobbing and foaming in the rippled water.

The poor guy lay there for a second just staring up, nodding, breathing heavily. The poor woman wept hysterically; her head was bent down, her face buried in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs. It had been a long day, no doubt. The charm of this connubial morning had evaporated—but probably sometime around sun-up, three hours earlier.

“You all right?” Pelayo and I had actually started running up a few seconds earlier, thinking to maybe help Stan stop the impact. Good thing we didn’t. We’d have snapped femurs right now. When she jerked the throttle into forward—*snap*, we’d be the ones moaning and wailing right now.

“Yeah fine!” gasped Clemenza. “Just fine. Perfect end to the *perfect* trip!” He rolled over with a mighty grunt and finally managed to stand up, but a little wobbly. He even jerked his pants up in the back. He stood there nodding for a second, then yelled over his shoulder.

“Get me a beer, will ya!” Then he rolled his eyes, nodded disgustedly, and looked over at us. “Helluva day!” he snorted. “Outboard needed a jump this morning, then lost a \$200 pole overboard, then,” he holds up a bandaged hand, “got a treble hook from a crankbait in my hand when she,” he nodded behind him at the snuffling woman with trembling lips who was dutifully digging in the cooler, “tried to lift a bass into the boat after I *told her*, I don’t know *how many* times, *not to*.”

She broke back into sobs now, weeping openly as Pelayo and I shuffled awkwardly on the dock and tried not to notice. “He . . .

here Nicky.” She held out the dripping Bud with one hand and a tissue to her eyes and nose with the other.

When she lowered it Pelayo and I looked at each other wide-eyed, almost on cue. She noticed, seemed shocked, and quickly looked away, pretending to dig back into the cooler.

She recognized us too. Yikes. The memories! Deena had been a little sister for Doc Fontaine’s fraternity at LSU. In fact we’d nicknamed her “Farrah.” We’re going back over thirty years here, but Deena seemed to be holding up quite well. She’d always been on the voluptuous side, even as a nineteen-year-old girlfriend of Mitch (now “Doc”) Fontaine. She was the perfect fraternity “little sister.” She planned all the parties. Got along great with everybody—even Pelayo. It looked as though she and Mitch, before he was an M.D., were hitched for the long haul too.

Then that famous LSU-Ole Miss party—whoooo-boy! Togas, tequila shots, total debauchery . . . So we didn’t press the issue when she very pointedly kept ignoring our looks of recognition. But Stan sure got an earful about our *“thanks for the Tigerland memories, and thanks to Deena!”* during the (few) lulls in the hunt later in the day.

“Not much flying this morning” was a common lament by the hunters after all the excitement from the “Nicky and Farrah” show finally fizzled out and they drove their bruised and dripping boat out of the parking lot. “Ain’t barely had no waw-dah to set out the decoys” was another common complaint.

“Getting a late start, huh?” a mud-splattered and smirking hunter asked from the dock as I cranked the engine to motor over to Doc’s camp, after we *finally* launched the boat.

“Or an early one,” said his chum. “We’ll be going out again for an evening hunt.”

“Well,” Pelayo said, playing dumb. “We’re gonna try some fishing and scout for ducks. Hope we have a better trip than our friends did!” Pelayo laughed while pointing at Farrah and Nicky, who were finally rolling out of the boat-launch parking lot. “Maybe we’ll set up for ducks later, when the tide comes up, if we’re *lucky enough*”

Pelayo said as he winked at Stan, “to find some ducks.”

“See that?” I pointed at a flag atop a big Hatteras. “That wind’s finally picking up.”

“And outta the southeast,” Pelayo said with a wide grin. “Artie and Eddie are gonna kick themselves for missing this one.” Everything was falling into place for a picture-perfect hunt, but we all knew that before the night was out, Artie would be bugging out of the morning’s hunt with some excuse.

When it comes to duck hunting, Artie and Eddie were more “social hunters”—the actual *hunting* being incidental to the socializing, cooking, football-watching, bourré games, etc. that so often characterize Louisiana duck hunts.

Oh sure. These guys sure *talk* a good one. You probably know the type: DU banquets, duck calling contests—they make ’em *all*! They own every trinket from mojo decoys to a fifty dollar duck call. Their closet’s crammed with six different types of marsh and cattail camo. So you see him around Thanksgiving:

“Hey, Artie, you been getting some ducks?”

“Naw, man. Ain’t been cold enough to push ’em down. Waw-dah’s too high at my lease, anyway. The few ducks around is all scattered—all back up in the marsh. Gotta kill yourself getting to ’em. I’m waiting for a few good fronts.”

Then you see him around New Year’s:

“Hey, Artie, must be wearin’ ’em out at your lease *now*, huh? Plenty fronts barreling through!”

“Naw, man. My ponds ain’t got no waw-dah! Damn fronts blew it all out. Gotta kill yourself push-poling to get to the damn blinds. I’m gonna wait ’til da waw-dah comes up a little.”

But he’s got a point. In tidal marshes, ducks *are* notoriously nomadic and fickle. Sure, all ducks, regardless of habitat, respond to hunting pressure. On top of that, in the tidal marshes, we’ve got those fickle water levels that send ducks scooting away from, or swarming into, certain regions from week to week—heck from day to day!

But as mentioned, everything was falling into place for a top-notch hunt.



Duck hunting at the Mississippi Flyway's end—nothing like it in America!



We were poised for a duck hunt at the very tip of the Mississippi Flyway funnel, the continent's main thoroughfare for migrating waterfowl. For millennia the Mississippi and its tributaries have served as the continent's busiest network of highways for migrating ducks. Almost a third of North America's wildfowl winter in Louisiana's marshes every year. A quick glance at a map helps explain the phenomenon.

Maps clearly show how Louisiana juts out into the Gulf of Mexico below the coasts of neighboring Texas and Mississippi. That little sliver of a peninsula bordering the river below New Orleans juts the farthest—and serves as the end of the Mississippi Flyway funnel. It took some travel and would take more work, but for diehard waterfowlers there's no place to match it.



These fertile mudflats sprout in thick orchards of prime waterfowl fodder every spring, and stay thick and green well into winter.

These fertile mudflats sprout into thick orchards of prime waterfowl fodder every spring, and stay thick and green practically year-round (barring hurricanes). Consequently, according to figures from *Ducks Unlimited*, Louisiana hunters kill more ducks than those of the next three states in the rankings combined.

The “Birdfoot Delta” is what they call this area, where the levees that straightjacket the Mississippi finally stop and the main river splits into channels like the toes of a chicken. That fertile cargo of sediment spreads out here to build marsh—or “wetlands” in fashionable lingo.

Year in and year out, aerial surveys find that in southeast Louisiana, the biggest pockets of ducks sit in the Mississippi River Delta. Add the roughly 160,000 acres of public land between the Delta NWR and the Pass-A-Loutre WMA, and, naturally, many of

America's hunters pant and salivate at the prospect of hunting the Delta.

So primed by years of hunting permanent blinds in rice-fields, or flooded timber, they head down—panting!—to sample what many lunatics hail as a “duck hunter's paradise.”

By midmorning of their first hunt, their panting often cranks up tenfold. But not from excitement. No, it's the panting of a half-dead marathon runner being carried to the oxygen tent. Now, with their spanking-new *Duck Dynasty* emblems totally hidden by the mud that covers their bodies, and with their fancy DU caps soaked with sweat and mud—between gasps—they're hoarsely cursing the lunatics who convinced them this place was a “duck hunter's paradise!”

The two scrawny and mud-covered teals (only things that decoyed) in the bottom of their mud-splattered pirogue doesn't alleviate much of the hunting debacle they barely imagined the night before as the brewskie cans popped and the BS flowed loudly and gloriously.

In brief: don't confuse duck hunting the Mississippi Delta with any other type of duck hunting in Louisiana, or in the U.S., actually. It's a world apart, primarily due to terrain, and especially, tides. They'll drop, and leave you high and dry.

We always check the tide tables for Head of Passes carefully. Then try to time our hunt for a couple hours around the high tide and especially with a southeast wind, the blustier the better.

We'd barely bumped the dock at Doc Fontaine's houseboat when Stan eagerly jumped out to tie us up. The boy was pumped! And as earlier mentioned, he was certainly decked out for the occasion. He was a walking *Duck Dynasty* banner, from the hat to the jacket to the fanny pack to the calls around his neck. The introductions to Doc and his crew were barely over when Stan felt obliged to demonstrate his duck-calling virtuosity, and with extreme enthusiasm, detonating a lengthy and ear-splitting hail call as we sat on the porch of Doc's houseboat.

“Very nice, Stan,” Pelayo told him with a nod as the notes

echoed back from downtown New Orleans' One Shell Square. "But we're hunting ducks, not auditioning for mariachi trumpeters or announcing the start of a bullfight.

"Shorten it up a bit. We're not calling many mallards down here, mostly gadwall, pintail, and teal. Three to five quick, short quacks in descending order usually does the trick. This sounds like a hen gadwall, and mix it up with some whistling from your blind mates. Widgeon and pintail whistle, but so does the male gadwall.

"Mixing the short quacks with the mixed whistles makes a racket like what the ducks in this area usually hear, instead of what you hear at the opening of a bullfight."

Stan tried to smile, but it didn't come out right. The poor boy was reeling from shock after shock. An urban West Coaster (he grew up in hipster Seattle, actually) who had duck hunted mostly in California's Central Valley, Stan admitted he was looking forward to some serious culture shock upon visiting Louisiana.

But he was not expecting anything like this. The duck-hunting heresies involved in hunting the Mississippi Delta start with the very hunting schedule. Evening hunts are fairly routine for many Delta hunters, because the high tide always seems to come in later during the duck season.

Many local duck hunters have adapted to these conditions and forsaken that dawn hunt (fighting the mudflats for a few shots at teal) for more sleep, maybe some leisurely fishing, and then some furious shooting as the tides rise and flood the duck-potato, three-square grass-studded sand-flats—and the greys (gadwall), pintail, and swarms of teal flock to feast with the sun setting in the west.

But the prospect of a midday hunt still provokes mainly frowns, even down here. Alas, many Delta-area ducks have wised up to our hunting patterns by midseason, which include frequent evening hunts.

During midday, however, the ducks rarely encounter hunters. So—especially during windy conditions—we often have our best Delta hunts during the period from 10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. or so. Strange, but true.

This timetable also saves us a harrowing trip in the dark if the infamous Delta fog closes in—as it usually does in December under the conditions that make for high tides in the Delta (warm southeast winds.)

When we finally headed out, our ideal ambush site appeared when we hung a right about midway down South Pass in the Pass-A-Loutre WMA. These natural spillways let the river water rush through every spring and build sandbars. By duck season, they're sprouting in prime duck fodder, such as duck potato and three-square grass.

The leaves and seeds are gone by December, but those luscious, and nutritious, tubers remain just underground. Best of all, that new sediment every year means sandy, semi-firm, walkable marsh.

"Tides already coming up," I said pointing at the little foam edge to the water half-covering the mud bank. "We're in good shape."

We'd just beached the boat when a jet-like roar passed over, and we jerked our heads up in time to see a band of blue-winged teal almost decapitate us before circling and plopping into a cove about two hundred yards ahead.

"You saw how fast they went down?" Pelayo gasped. "I bet that place is full of ducks. Look at all that duck potato."

Almost on cue, mixed flocks of pintail and gadwall started peeling off from directly in front of us. Then a loose group of mallards (relatively rare in this area) and mottled ducks flapped off quacking from behind some bulrushes to our left.

We were panting, but from the right impetus: excitement!

"Wow!" was all Stan could manage as we started setting out the decoys, but while walking, not typical for south Louisiana duck hunting. We'd just put out the twentieth decoy when Stan yelped, "Look—in the decoys!"

Teal were landing in them even as we manufactured our "blind" for the day—by jamming stalks of ornamental bamboo into the mud around the pirogue.



“Ornamental bamboo?” some readers gasp. “No Roseau cane? None of the traditional blind-building material for south Louisiana duck hunters?”

Yes, you read right. Please allow me to explain, amigos: first off, bamboo is a heck of a lot lighter than Roseau cane, and offers much more cover per stalk. Speaking of stalks, collecting this prized blind-making material often provides thrills of its own:

“*Who goes there?*” It was an ear-piercing female shriek that jolted me while stalking into my neighbor’s yard with my machete a few days earlier. “Hey! Who’s there?! I’ve got a gun! I’m warning you!”

So I turned off the flashlight and hit the ground. “Geezus,” I thought. A *gun!* Then her flashlight beam passed over and under me, and then landed next to me. She was walking closer, and I was hugging the ground, trying to hide my face.

Finally I felt the flashlight beam right on my ear, and when I turned slightly her Birkenstocked feet were a foot away, her chunky legs right above, “Is that . . . ? *Humberto!*” Another ear-piercing shriek. “I shoulda known it was *you!* Criminal trespassing! Vandalism! Destruction of property! Theft! I should call the police right now! Instead I’ll call Shirley.”

“*No! Please!*” Now I was screeching. “*Liz! Please!* Call the police instead! *Please!* What’s a little pistol-whipping? Come on now, Liz! You told me I could trim this bamboo for you. Remember? You said it was getting kinda thick. It was covering part of the driveway, remember? Could you please point that cannon away from me?”

“Yeah,” she said with a snort. “I remember. That was a month ago. You’ve trimmed it pretty darn good by *now*. I want *something* left standing. You trim anymore and I’ll be able to see your backyard, with deceased animals hanging from the trees and the swing set all winter. Makes me, *all* your neighbors, and your wife and daughter sick. Besides, Shirley told me why you suddenly got so neighborly.

“The other day over coffee, I told her you’d come over and offered

to trim my bamboo. She went ballistic. She says she can't get you to mow the lawn or trim the hedges for *years* at a time! Then you come over to *my place* and turn into Joe-landscape-architect!"

"Look, Liz, I just need about five more stalks . . . that all right? A little of this stuff goes a long way for duck-blind building. I'll bring you some redfish Saturday—filleted, as usual, and—maybe some of those ducks you've been begging for, too. And we'll expect you over for the game Sunday. I'm cooking Bambi sausage, Donald gumbo, and barbecued Thumper."

"OK, it's a deal. I'll bring the Mateus and fixin's for the Pete's Special Chardonnay." And she waddled off.

The bromide that "the best duck blind is *no* blind" surely holds in most cases. But for many of us, duck hunting's a gregarious sport. We like to share it with four, five, even six partners in a "blind." This doesn't mean everyone shoots at every duck. But it means that everyone experiences the sensations of watching a five or six man limit decoying and getting blasted from the skies.

What a treat this type of hunting provides. We started hunting in a big family/friend group during the three-duck limits back in the early nineties to lengthen the glorious hunting experience. We still do it, but hiding that many people takes a blind, any way you cut it. And for this you simply can't beat that ornamental bamboo that grows (mostly) in people's yards and even semi-wild in choice locations. Now back to the hunt.



The bamboo was up and concealing us when Stan pointed. "Are those teal, or shorebirds?"

"They're teal, man, *teal!*" I hissed. "And they're coming!"

About forty teal in one wheeling, buzzing mass had seen our decoys and were boring straight in. Shooting—fast, frantic shooting—was seconds away.

Then why did Pelayo suddenly look off to the left, away from the teal? I felt an elbow in my ribs. "On the left . . . pintail."

Ah yes, six drakes had locked up and were gliding in. Here was

a study in contrasts, and a most delicious dilemma. On the right, a mass of nervous little buzz bombs that could mean a duck limit with two shots.

On the left, the aristocrats of the duck clan, sleek and elegant. Next to these guys mallards are chubby, clumsy oafs; teal, a bunch of overgrown snipe; canvasbacks, chubbier and clumsier than even the mallards.

There's nothing gaudy on a pintail, nothing tacky. Let the wood-ducks flap around like some garish neon sign. Let the mallards cruise the potholes in their green and white polyester disco suits. The pintail outclasses them all with his tailored mahogany and white tux.

"Let's pass on the teal," Pelayo whispered right before they swept over at almost hat level. "I'm guessing there's gonna be plenty more."

The pintail looked ready to consummate the process: actually going to land, but not quite. Instead, they suddenly raised their wings against the wind. "They'll be out of range in seconds," I thought to myself—as did my partners.

Blam! We rose, started shooting, and a big drake crumpled. *Blam!* The second pintail shuddered as if the shot merely tickled him. *Blam!* Finally, he sagged and folded.

Amazingly, another small flock of ducks was approaching from the left—apparently unfazed by the shooting! These must be young ones, I surmised. Then I quickly noticed the lead pintail drake eyeing the dekes cautiously from about eighty yards out. He flapped his wings and craned his neck cautiously. It was in the middle of his second circle around the decoys when I grabbed my whistle and gave a shrill blast just as Stan opened up with a feeding chuckle on his trombone. It was magic.

The pintail cupped its wings, curved that long neck, and started gliding in. No other duck can touch this guy. It was a spectacle of sheer elegance on the wing.

But he wasn't coming in to land. At about thirty yards, the bird started gaining a little altitude and veering right.

Too late, buddy.

Pelayo and Stan rose, their guns boomed as one, and the pintail crumpled, splashing down in a puff of feathers just outside the dekes.

Stan's high-five was cut short when he suddenly pointed left and ducked.

A flock of six gadwall were winging in from about two hundred yards out—again apparently oblivious to all the shooting! We looked at each other, smiling and gaping for a second, then hunkered down in the “rogg” (Yat-speak for pirogue). We watched them close the distance through the cracks in the bamboo shroud that surrounded the rogg, while frantically reloading from our shell buckets.

Their wings beat steadily. Their path was unwavering. With these birds there was none of that usual craning of the neck and looking around for company or a place to land. These ducks knew where they were going. They'd made up their minds. Young—and dumb—greys are always that way.

At my first hail, they slowed and banked. Stan and Pelayo chimed in with more quacks and whistles, and the birds cupped. We plastered our faces against the bamboo and fingered the safeties.

Uh-oh!—at about one hundred yards, the lead duck started veering. The others followed. On this trajectory, they'd soon be out of range. So we mouthed the calls in desperation just as they swerved.

Pelayo let fly with a short, sharp hail (the way ducks, not mariachi trumpeters, do it). That did the trick. The greys quickly swerved back towards us.

Pelayo un-mouthed his call so he could look at his blind mates with a triumphant smile.

I chimed in with my own call, and the ducks cupped again, “locking up” for the final landing, or so it seemed.

By the second circle, it looked like they'd consummate. What a sight. These had their wings spread wide, exposing their white bellies as they hovered over the farthest decoys. Their yellow legs started to dangle.

My heart was in my throat as we rose to greet them at point-blank range.

Blam! Stan beat me to the draw, and I saw one fold on the left.

Blam! Blam! Pelayo and I shot almost as one, and two more cartwheeled into the dekes. I was drawing a bead on the last one, but held off.

But all three of the ones we downed, were down for good. The six shots had riddled them with fatal head and neck hits. We stood there admiring the carnage.

Another flock of four quickly appeared from behind, heading straight for us. Again, we hunkered, turning our faces slightly to watch their approach. These also looked like pintail—big-bodied but with sleek profiles, like French models.

They passed about eighty yards to the left, and I gave a short, three-note hail as Pelayo tooted on his whistle.

One cupped immediately and started banking. The others flew on. So I called again and again. After another hundred yards, the remaining trio decided to join the first.

What a picture. We had one circling directly behind—he'd probably appear in range over the dekes in seconds—and we had three others gliding in from the front, still 150 yards out.

Hunkering down, we traded looks. We couldn't even risk a whisper; our eyes and excited grimaces said it all.

"Do we blast this one that's almost on top of us?" we must have all been silently asking ourselves. "Or wait for the trio?"

Then the first one actually landed near the farthest deke, while the trio glided in on cupped wings. It didn't seem possible. Mature pintail aren't usually this dumb.

But these weren't landing, just looking. Too late—they were well in range as we rose.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

A big drake and a hen to his left folded. Another one faltered but regained his altitude.

Blam! Blam! Now he crumpled, and we had forgotten about the one that landed.

I was parting the bamboo, preparing to retrieve, when Pelayo jerked my shoulder and let fly with a loud hail call followed by some chuckles. "They're greys!" Pelayo gasped while dropping his

saliva-filled duck call, jamming down his cap, and shoving both me and Stan down by the shoulder. “And they’re *coming*. Get *low* and hide your face!”

What a sight. They were winging right in, cupping their wings, swerving slightly while slowing down. Those fat white bellies reflect the morning sun and their legs started to dangle.

My jaw quivered. My trigger finger tapped the safety button excitedly. Stan had the look of a leopard about to pounce. Pelayo’s eyes bulged. It’s amazing that we’ve been at this crazy game for almost forty years, but the sight of decoying ducks still makes the adrenaline *gush* through our nervous systems.

“*Now!*” Pelayo yelled. My heart was in my throat as we rose to greet them at point-blank range. The flock scattered and rocketed skyward. A wild flurry of furiously flapping wings and startled quacks filled the air, and I swung left. *Blam!* One folded and hit the water. I swung higher.

Blam! Stan nailed him before I had time to slap the trigger. A puff of feathers and he staggered in flight. *Sha-wuck* went Stan’s pump and—*blam!* The duck’s neck sagged like a noodle, his wings folded with a *splash*, and he fell into the decoys.

Blam! I was startled by a final shot. It was Stan. He nailed one with a gorgeous going-away shot. The duck twirled down like that kamikaze with one wing blasted off you always see on the History Channel. We sat there trembling with idiot grins, looking around. Finally we erupted in wild whoops, rebel yells, and high-fives.

Again, I started parting the bamboo and stepping out of the pirogue to retrieve them—when Stan jerked my sleeve.

Blam! Pelayo’s shot startled me. He had beaten Stan to the draw and I saw another grey fold on the left.

Blam! Blam! But Stan was quick to recover and two more ducks cartwheeled into the decoys. I was drawing a bead on the last one but held off. He looked out of range. These had been circling in from behind—amazingly while we were shooting at the first flock!

More high-fives followed. “Must be more young birds,” Stan said with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Pelayo agreed with a grin. “Young and stupid.” More whoops followed. “Whatcha think, Stan?” Pelayo poked him.

“You guys weren’t kidding!” He beamed as we whooped and high-fived from end to end of the pirogue.

Alligators, water moccasins, and quicksand had vanished from Stan’s mind. “Pintail Alley” was coming through again—but mostly with gadwall this morning. Then Pelayo turned, pointed left, and started slowly hunching down, motioning for us to follow. Another flock was winging in.

By 2:30 p.m., we were one short of a limit, but we decided to head in. With this warm weather, the fog—no doubt—was on its way.

Besides, we’d already had a spectacular hunt. Stan had never experienced a duck hunt to compare, “nothing even *close!*” he kept reminding us all evening long.



The following day called for a low tide in the morning, so we opted to hunt Doc’s lease in the deteriorating, brackish marsh just west of the levee in Buras. Given the tidal conditions, we predicted that a few of the deeper ponds in this private area would probably concentrate the ducks—while in the downriver Delta region, the ducks would concentrate in the deeper open water. This downriver condition would make setting up an ambush site, like we’d done the previous day, nearly impossible, or a quicksand ordeal to rival anything in the old Tarzan movies. Delta mud can be that way.

Pelayo knelt near the bow sweeping the Q-beam along the squiggly trenasse (marsh ditch) that held just enough water to get us to the deepest pond in the area. I steered Doc’s little nine-and-a-half-horse outboard we use for these close-in hunts while trying to heed Pelayo’s frantic arm motions to turn this way, then suddenly *that* way, and back again!

Suddenly, Pelayo’s arm motions got even more frantic. I couldn’t make out the direction, and poor Stan wasn’t much help as he crouched next to me.

"What?" I yelled. "Where? Turn *which* way?"

"Don't turn!" he yelled while turning around to face me, his hand still flapping downward and the other swinging around the Q-beam, which nearly fried my and Stan's retinas.

"Just slow down. Kill the motor, in fact—*look!*"

He flashed the Q-beam back around along the water ahead of him. I didn't see anything alarming. In fact, at the moment, I couldn't see anything *at all!* Imagine 100 flashbulbs going off an inch from your face.

"What? I can't see," I blurted. "You blinded me with the Q-beam!"

"Somebody's been through here!" he growled. "Must be up ahead somewhere. Look!"

He kept flashing the beam in the water. I still had no idea what he was talking about.

"I don't see anybody?"

"The bubbles, man, the *bubbles*—look!"

Pelayo's eye for detail had always impressed me, as befits an accomplished deer and duck scouter. Finally, my retinas started semi-adjusting to normal, and I saw what alarmed him. A thin line of foam and bubbles indeed stretched ahead of us. Beneath it, the normally root-beer colored water was grey, cloudy and churned with detritus, the spoor of a boat somewhere ahead of us.

"Doc and Artie went to Doc's old blind way over there." I pointed east toward the pink horizon. "So ain't no way this is *their* boat trail." Stan shrugged and nodded, attempting a feeble smile.

No way around it, the spoor belonged to trespassers.

Saltwater surge in this area had been hammering Doc's lease horribly. The little millfoil and widgeon grass that struggled to sprout in the ponds of this rapidly eroding marsh had vanished. The scant clumps of wild millet, peavine, and smartweed were mostly exterminated.

Not that these developments mattered much to Doc, Artie, and most of their guests. A couple teal and dosgris per blind, mostly shot at dawn, sufficed for their brand of casual "social" hunting. On blustery days a couple of suicidal greys, widgeon or mottled ducks

would usually show up in their bag, provoking much boasting and jubilation back at the camp.

After these hunts, it was quickly back to the camp to cook, BS, whoop it up, and watch the football game, followed by some fishing and more whooping it up at night. And there sure as heck ain't nothing wrong with *that!*

Pelayo and I, and Stan too, we were happy to discover, have this odd penchant for actually *hunting* ducks, which doesn't generally mesh well with the rigid schedules and permanent blinds at most traditional duck camps.

Locating duck fodder (hence ducks) consists of much of our duck hunting. Planting and hunting food-plots has made this endeavor irrelevant for many deer hunters, but the same principle of locating food sources used to apply to most deer hunting. Early bow season, you sought out persimmon trees, when those ran dry, you might move to white oaks, and when that choice mast expired, it was over to the red and water oaks or the honeysuckle.

Point is, deer food preferences changed as the season progressed.

Ditto for ducks. Take teal, for instance. They love shallow marsh, and like most puddle ducks, prefer feeding on seeds rather than underwater vegetation—not that they don't gobble up widgeon grass. Just that they prefer seeds when available.

In September, in the fresher coastal marshes (and especially in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Deltas), teal, pintail, and mottled ducks find a culinary paradise: vast orchards of duck potato and three-square grass along with thick stands of wild millet. The standing duck potato provides little bouquets of seeds along with those little white flowers.

By November, however, the duck potato plants have mostly wilted, and the pintail and greys flock to the same sites to root for the tubers in the mud.

In more brackish marshes, dabbling ducks (pintail, greys, widgeon, teal, and mallards) also like it shallow, usually a foot or less, in order to reach the seeds, grasses and assorted plants from the bottom. Greys and widgeon, in particular, swarm into

deeper ponds in the brackish marshes for the Eurasian millfoil and widgeon grass. Some of these ponds are resting sites. The birds drop in late in the morning, sometimes near noon.

On Doc's lease, however, Pelayo and I determined that such places were early morning feeding sites. No delta-type seed-bearing areas sprouted anywhere nearby, so the ducks had no choice but to feed on the underwater grasses—"secondary browse" you might call it in deer-hunting parlance.

This "secondary browse," however, would be most accessible (within tip-up beak range, on the low tide). This also influenced our decision for this particular hunt locale, this particular low-tide morning.

Doc Fontaine's family had added these new one hundred acres to their ancestral Buras-Boothville-area duck-lease only two years earlier, and had never bothered to hunt them. Access was a problem. No major bayous, canals or even ditches entered this expanse of shallow, weed-choked fresh to (increasingly) salty marsh.

Hence our attraction to it. Pelayo and I had pored over the aerial photos where the different colors gave away the different forms of vegetation. We finally neared the pond we'd marked on the maps. So we killed and raised the little outboard, and started push-poling. The sun was halfway over the horizon now. A sudden roar turned our heads, and the sight quickly shifted us from the trespasser hunt back to the duck hunt. The panorama—for any waterfowler—was exhilarating.

A flurry of flapping wings and startled quacks surrounded us. Words were unnecessary. Stan was gaping and whooping under his breath.

Long wings propelled the gadwall frantically upward. Some more exploded into flight behind them, and even more behind them. Then some mottled ducks started leaping and flapping from the potholes. Then a flock of teal roared overhead. We stopped push-poling to take in the stupendous panorama. Our hunch about the ducks concentrating in this deep water area on the low tide had paid off. For *genuine* hunters such a pay-off always ignites a serious ego-buzz.

"No way that boat passed through here," Pelayo said bringing us back to earth, while remembering the earlier trail of bubbles.

He was right. They'd have certainly spooked these ducks. "The trespassers musta turned on that little slough behind us," Pelayo said with a frown.

"Yep" I answered with a nod while a mottled duck erupted from thirty yards away, quacking his raspy alarm.

We chunked out our twenty-three dekes, hid the skiff and were soon huddled in the bamboo-shrouded 'rogg. As usual, teal appeared first. There must have been thirty of them, twisting around like overgrown pigeons. Down they went, behind some marsh alders. Did they land? I stood to look.

"Oops, here they come again!"

"Down!" Pelayo tugged my elbow, and we hunkered down as the massive flock closed on the dekes—only to turn at one hundred yards.

"Damn!" Pelayo hissed through his teeth. Then they turned back, almost like they heard him. At eighty yards, they veered again. We quacked, hailed and whistled frantically, all three of us tooting on calls and whistles, pleading and beckoning. Ah!—here they come! I was already tapping the safety when—*Blam Blam Blam!*

But the shots came from up ahead, and the teal skyrocketed above barely seventy yards ahead of us.

"The trespassers!" Pelayo growled. I turned and Stan looked worried. I was shaking and stuttering from a combination of excitement from the teal's approach and burning rage from their quick departure. But I could see many other ducks on the horizon. Pelayo looked over grimacing. I knew what he was thinking: let's go find, scare and boot the trespassers.

"Forget it!" I told him. "Look around. We'll get more. Let's wait. No point in spoiling the hunt. They're flying well in this wind. We'll nab the trespassers later."

"Yeah!" Stan seconded. "Let's hunt! That's what I came for! Not to be a security guard!"

"Down!" Pelayo suddenly hissed.

These came from behind, right over some stunted Roseaus, and banked one hundred yards out. I gave a toot on the widgeon whistle as Pelayo chuckled on his hail call. They turned sharply toward us.

It was heavenly. They turned to face the sun, every feather glistening, the wings slowing down, then picking up again as we tooted and quacked some more. Seventy yards and closing, about a dozen of them—gadwall, mostly drakes. I dropped the call and fingered the safety. They were huge, gorgeous. Their legs started dangling—*now!*

Blam! Our opening three shots went off almost as one and two big greys crumpled. Another was flapping crazily to the left, and I put the bead under his beak . . . *Blam! Blam!*

Stan had done the same, and both our shots smacked the duck and sent him cartwheeling into the dekes to join the two others. Not a bad start.

The thrill had barely worn off when I caught movement on the left, and rasped out a four-note hail, the way ducks do it.

The pair turned on a dime and started gliding in. Boy, they were pretty. They cupped and swung in, widgeon in their gorgeous winter plumage. It was almost *too* easy. I love the way they rock back and forth as they glide down.

Blam! Again, we shot almost in unison, and again both ducks crumpled, splashing into the edge of the dekes.

Limits came startlingly quickly (for Doc's lease). Our scouting (mostly on Google maps) and careful analysis (between brewskies) paid off handsomely. Our bag consisted of teal, greys, those two widgeon and one distracted mottled duck, even with the trespassers' shooting flaring off every second flock that approached us.

Now it was time to settle scores with the trespassers. We backtracked down the trenasse, and turned into their slough. Stan dutifully helping with the push-pole. Up ahead, a clump of brush looked suspiciously like a makeshift blind. We motored toward it, and sure enough, some dried rosseau and wax myrtles contrasted against the greener maidencane and three-square grass around it.

We bumped the bank and Pelayo leaped from the bow, stumbled

in the muck and started plodding toward the enemy “blind.”

“You boys are in a world of trouble *now*!” he thundered. “*Private* property here! Criminal trespassing! Better believe the sheriff’s gonna hear about this!”

I pulled the skiff onto the marsh and stumbled along behind Pelayo while a bemused Stan stayed in the boat. But it was hard working up dander while laughing. The scene conflicted me almost as much as it did Stan. I’ve never quite gotten used to being on *this* side of these confrontations — not after the duck hunts of our misspent high-school and college years. True, things were different then, posting not as widespread or as rigidly enforced. But now the prospect of a role as the *chaser* rather than *chasee* had me cackling. Now we swaggered like lifetime landmen, with deputy badges and taser guns to boot.

“The sheriff’s gonna be out here!” Pelayo yelled. “You can bet on *that*! You boys had *better* . . . !”

Pelayo was yelling when three figures suddenly popped from behind the bent rosseau canes and faced us, choking off Pelayo’s blood-curdling threats in midsentence and halting us.

It looked like a classic standoff. Think the famous scenes from the *O.K. Corral*, *Kelly’s Heroes*, or maybe *Dirty Harry*.

Adding to the classic-movie stand-off scenario, I could not detect a hint of guilt, remorse or nervousness in the faces or demeanor of the gentlemen who stared resolutely at us from no more than thirty feet away.

What I could detect were arms, chests and shoulders that—even through the layer of army surplus camo—displayed the fruits of a probable lifetime roustabouting, lugging oilfield casing and swinging oyster sacks. The one on the left sporting the welders cap and black stubble finally smiled. But this was not the smile you see on *Andy Griffith* taking little Opie fishing, or on Mr. Rogers at the opening of his show.

For added effect, the burly trespasser squinted, nodded and snickered. His taller companion took a long drag from his cig and snickered himself, slowly nodding while blowing out a cloud of smoke. Through it all, they never took their eyes off us.

The brute with the bush-hat on the far left had his duck-call lanyard wrapped awkwardly around the brim, and he suddenly yanked it off. He untangled it, and started snapping the lanyard tight between his two burly fists.

Poor Luca Brasi came quickly to mind, on his way to “sleep with the fishes,” that is. I could already see Pelayo’s eyeballs and tongue popping from his face as the bush-hatted brute tightened the lanyard around his neck.

“Look, ummm, guys . . . you know,” Pelayo finally cleared his throat and started explaining legal maxims as they applied to private property — but in a markedly different tone of voice now. He no longer sounded like Sergeant Carter addressing Gomer Pyle, Archie Bunker addressing Meathead or Morgus summoning Chopsley. The suddenly smiling and sweet-voiced Pelayo, now sounded like a head waiter amiably discoursing on the day’s specials.

Me, I could only think of Cher’s song: “If I Could Turn Back Time.” If only we could, we’d have forsaken this little errand and been back in Doc’s camp, slurping gumbo, sipping a cold one and with scant prospects of several weeks’ food being delivered intravenously with our jaws wired shut while encased in body casts from neck to toes at Plaquemines General Hospital.

“In the future, let Doc worry about any trespassers on *his* lease,” I turned to Pelayo and *almost* blurted.

But the brute in the welder’s cap beat me to the draw. “Dey’s some trespassers here alright,” he yelled. Then he bulled through the brush and approached us. He wore overalls with suspenders, and with that face stubble another movie scene flashed to mind—one featuring banjo music: “Aintree? This here river don’t go nowhere near Aintree. You boys done took the wrong turn. You boys is lost, ain’t ya?”

How Ned Beatty missed a Best Actor plus a Lifetime Achievement Oscar for that performance qualifies as the biggest injustice in the annals of moviemaking. Burt Reynolds and John Voight deserved special Oscars also — for avoiding hernias from laughing during the shooting.

The accent here was wrong, but everything else in the tense scene fit perfectly.

"Did Doc Fontaine say you could hunt here?" the brute rasped.

"What?" a confused Pelayo asked. "You're *damned right!*" he quickly added. "In fact, he . . . !"

"Artie too?" his bushhatted friend asked.

"Well sure!" a still confused Pelayo shot back. "I mean . . . ?"

"Artie's my cousin," the "trespasser" snickered. "We know Doc, too. You guys are all coming over to our place for dinner tonight. I suggest you guys go back and check with your friends. How's that? We'll probably see you tonight."

We were dumfounded—but pleasantly so. Pelayo finally recovered his composure and smiled, as did I. Oddly, the "trespasser" seemed perfectly sincere. Stan started laughing openly.

Artie and Doc could hardly *stop* laughing when we got back to the camp and unloaded the story. "You guys met Buzzy!" Doc roared. "He's Artie's cousin. But he's a third cousins we think. We ran into those guys out here last year right after we leased the new property. They were picking up their boat. They explained they'd been hunting that section for twenty to thirty years, and didn't know it had been leased up.

"Well, they shared some oysters with us, and we got to talking, and found out one was related to Artie's uncle. Well, we kinda made a deal not to bother each other, and when we planned on hunting out there to inform them. I think the oysters and shrimp and homemade boudin they've brought over since then has paid for the lease twice over. No harm done."

"No harm done?" Pelayo huffed. "Hell, we almost got our heads ripped off! Wish you woulda told us!"

And sure enough, we went to their "place" (two elevated doublewides) that evening (whether camp or a home, we never determined). Between the fresh, cold, salty oysters, the equally cold beer, the fried shrimp — well, to say we "passed a good time" is masterful understatement.

While walking across the soggy yard in front of Buzzy's home-camp we had jumped three small birds which blazed off in a crazy swerving flight while screeching.

"Saw *that*?" Stan pointed. "Were those snipe?"

“Sure were,” Pelayo laughed. “And I know what you’re thinking. But don’t worry. Before you head back home we’ll put you on a few. And don’t think ’cause you get a double on decoying teal you’re some kind of hot-shot wingshooter. Down a limit of snipe—*then* you can call yourself a wingshooter!

“Can’t wait!” Stan yelled. “Let’s do it! I did pretty well with quail at the hunting lodge last week. So I’m ready!”

“*Hah!*” Artie looked around and laughed. “Fish-in-a-barrel, quail-at-a-hunting-lodge” to us they mean about the same thing. Next week you’ll see what we mean about snipe.”

Sniping

You’d think that with today’s fitness and exercise craze, snipe hunting would be more popular. A day, or even half a day, tramping over good snipe habitat shames the feeble routines found in any health club. You’d also think that a doctor of medicine, of all people, would best appreciate the cardiovascular benefits of a midmorning stroll through the Manchac shoreline.

But no. Dr. Fontaine prefers his fancy smanzy health & racket club for exercise. “You’re nuts.” he snorted into the phone as we informed him of our forthcoming snipe hunt. “I fell for it last year. Never again. I’m lucky to be alive. I thought I’d never get out of that quagmire. I think I’ll stick to shooting ’em if they fly over my duck blind. No thanks. Call me when you want to play racquetball or run the track.”

For many of us exercise for the sheer sake of it gets old quick. Why suffer for the sheer sake of suffering? Why not “feel the burn” in your leg muscles in the process of downing a limit of these longbilled packets of concentrated propulsion called snipe? Why not plop into the barcalounger with a post exercise libation with the aroma of eight snipe breasts gurgling in sherry, onions and thyme rather than your sweat socks on the coffee table?

But no, Fontaine will pay a bundle for the health club, then

another bundle for the sporting clays. The sporting clay hasn't been invented to match a snipe's flight. Maybe that's good. Point is, why not exercise while doing something actually fun like snipe hunting?

No Nordietrack has been invented to match the muscletoning qualities of a tromp through the scenic Manchac swamp, where we were bringing an excited Stan before he flew back west. On a Nordic track or a jogging track you need a distraction, something to take your mind off the agony. Many trendy health Nazis use a Bluetooth or meditation for this.

You won't need either while snipe hunting at Manchac. The panorama does it all by itself. The glorious gabble from the rafts of ducks. The reedy rasp of Greenheads overhead. The sudden "*Screanch! Screanch! Screanch!*" of a snipe erupting into his frantic flight. You forget you're exercising.

And that gentle sucking of the famous Manchac muck on hipboots tones the calves like no ankle weights on the market. None of those little barbells that fitness freaks like to hold as they jog down the busiest thoroughfare they can find, the better to show off their eighty dollar jogging shorts, two hundred dollar jogging shoes, twenty dollar sweatbands and that earnest grimace they sport while pretending not to notice all the motorists gawking at them—none of this tops a day of snipe hunting for exertion.

And there's no better time to appreciate the Manchac WMA than during snipe season. The place is then gorgeous—at least to us. The bugs are dead or comatose. The vegetation sparse. The air cool and invigorating. This place is accessible; near three major metropolitan areas. An easy interstate drive, and a good public ramp at North Pass.

According to the experts when snipe take off, they zig one way, zag the other, and then level out. The experts advise that we wait until that time to shoot. I've studied snipe flight patterns, closely, for about thirty years and I've yet to detect any pattern.

But I've only hunted them in south Louisiana. As mentioned, something seems to happen to any organism when it reaches the atmosphere of south Louisiana. They go crazy.

A few examples to illustrate my point: let the Saint's pluck an All-Star from any corner of the country, a man with a glowing record of consistent achievement and success. The minute he sets foot in the Superdome, he becomes a hopeless bumbler.

Conversely, trade away the most incompetent Saint to any team in the League. Next year look for this man in the Pro-Bowl.

Bill Kilmer, seduced by Bourbon Street and Brennan's, passed a football that traveled like a snipe flies. Removed from these seductions he took Washington to the championship in one year. I could go on with examples.

Let any corporation transfer down to Louisiana it's most virtuous and efficient employees from the Midwest; upright Rotarians, stalwart Kiwanians, Dale Carnegie graduates, meat and potatoes eaters. In a month these people become shiftless rogues, cynical rascals, shirkers, malcontents and suckers of the heads of insect-like crustaceans. They become not mere samplers, but actual connoisseurs of every vice under the stars.

Think I exaggerate? Doubt that south Louisiana's very atmosphere induces wanton behavior? Let's take an actual case that deals with our subject, snipe.

No less a shining citizen than John James Audubon himself succumbed while visiting New Orleans in 1821. Here's a man revered by environmentalists. In 1821, while visiting New Orleans, Mr. Audubon, this same man whose name is enshrined by birdwatchers and conservationists, took part in a snipe hunt along the shores of Bayou St. John. Here where over two hundred hunters downed one hundred fifty thousand plover and snipe in one morning.

Here's the famous Mr. Audubon himself from his famous book: "Several times I saw flocks of one hundred or more destroyed to the exception of five or six birds. Supposing each man to have killed thirty dozen that day, one hundred fifty thousand must have been destroyed."

I know. That's nothing compared to what some of you rack up on those dove hunts to Argentina, which are so popular nowadays.

But it's still a fair bag. And notice how Audubon used the word "destroy." This icon of modern day environmentalists obviously relished the avian holocaust!

Our plan was to get the gung-ho Stan into some serious snipe action, by walking the wilted marsh bordering Pass Manchac. This open, mushy area always seems to hold the most snipe.

We come in from the Lake itself. But this is only possible with a north or west wind, pretty likely in February. The next best area is the more open marsh along Pass Manchac itself, a little off the Pass where the bachiris and wax myrtles thin out into an open marsh.

We trudged to an area where we'd seen a big flock (about a dozen) while we were motoring down the pass, and got ready. The little suckers were sitting tight in the winterburnt grass a few steps ahead. They *had* to be. I watched for them, flushing the whole time we parked the boat, disembarked and walked over—and none had. We walked upwind so they wouldn't hear us. I guess it worked. That, or no one had hunted these yet, and they were dumb and holding tight. I fingered the safety knowing their fuses were lit and the countdown was at three or four. One of nature's most frenetic events was seconds away.

Pelayo, Artie and I took deep breaths, nodded gravely to each other and marched forward, *Shootout At The O.K. Corral* style. We were taking no chances. Maybe by raking the air in front of us with nine patterns of highpower number nine shot, each three feet across, we'd connect with a few of the dozen snipe as they zigzagged away.

Ordinarily, we're as sporting as the next guy. But with snipe, our consciences didn't trouble us in the least. It's not that we planned to shoot blindly at the group, mind you. It's just that with snipe the chances of hitting the one you're aiming for are no better than hitting any of the ones around him. The time it takes to pull the trigger, release the firing pin, hit the primer, explode the powder, send the shot down the barrel, and over to the snipe is more than enough time for him to change position three or four times.

The first one flushed to my left *schreanch, schreanch, blam,*

and he flipped onto the marsh. Then another flushed directly in front of me, then another to my left. My second shot kicked up a spray of water three feet behind, one rocketing over a pond and the third shot was five yards off target even as I squeezed it off. Three salvos from Pelayo, Artie, and Stan put one snipe on the marsh, barely wingtipped.

You know almost exactly where they are. You know almost exactly when they're going to take off. Your finger is on the trigger and all your senses are on full alert. But when the ground around you starts erupting with these little packets of concentrated propulsion, it's always the same—pandemonium!

He's known as the only bird that can take off in all directions at once. And if you've ever hunted snipe, or just flushed a few during a duck or rabbit hunt, you've seen the *Top Gun* of the avian clan in action. Next to this aeronautical wizard, greenwinged teal with a twenty miles per hour tail wind seem plodding, doves riding a gale seem lumbering, and quail and woodcock . . . well . . . they're practically stationary targets.

On my way over to retrieve my first bird of the day, two shots startle me and I look up to see a trio of snipe winging directly overhead. Now these are the kind of shots I like. Swinging ahead of the lead bird I touched the trigger and watched the number nines fold him and send the one right behind him spinning to the ground.

"You see *that*? *That*, my friends, is *shooting*!" I'm taunting my buddies but I've taken my eyes off the spot where the snipe fell and so spend the next ten minutes combing the dead, brown and yellow marsh grass for the dead, brown and yellow snipe. In the meantime the rest of the snipe have started filtering back, gliding overhead and offering easy overhead pass shots. Pelayo and Stan fold two apiece while I fume and fret, rummaging over the winter burnt marsh until I finally find both snipe, not six feet apart, and not twenty feet from where I'd shot.

Each fall and winter one quarter of this continent's waterfowl cram into Louisiana's wetlands. The same attributes that make Louisiana the favored resort of ducks and geese make it a haven for a disproportionate share of the continent's wintering snipe.

Actually, nobody knows how many that is. But some estimates put the number at a couple million.

Snipe winter along the south Atlantic and Gulf coasts in the U.S. as well as Mexico, northern South America, and the Caribbean. What makes Louisiana especially attractive is obvious—Louisiana has forty percent of the continent's coastal wetlands. Not that snipe favor the marshes exclusively; soggy pastures, soybean and rice fields often concentrate them more than the coastal marshes. This is the type of terrain that holds the earthworms, insect larvae, and other small invertebrates that snipe feed on by probing with that absurd bill.

And for hunters, if you can get access, tromping over a soggy pasture or bean field beats the h--- out of wallowing through a coastal marsh flushing snipe. But if pastures and fields are off limits, its best to focus on certain types of marshes and certain areas of marshes.

The best are the fresh marshes where the duck potato, bull tongue, deer pea and other sedges and grasses wilt with the first freezes. This gives the snipe better access to the ground and the hunter easier walking. Generally speaking, brackish marshes where the cordgrass remains standing throughout the winter hold fewer snipe. But in these the hunting can sometimes be easier since the snipe tend to concentrate in certain areas.

Foremost among these areas are patches of marsh mowed over by nutrias or burnt off by trappers or rabbit hunters. In marshes made up mostly of cordgrass or spartina look for those patches which are made up of other vegetation like bull tongue, three-square or deerpea. These stand out in late winter as this type of vegetation dies and creates an open area.

Old spoil banks are another good area to try, by old I mean ones which have sunk down to just a foot or so above the level of the surrounding marsh. The transition zone right between the typical spoil bank vegetation (bachiris, marsh alder) and the cordgrass is where the snipe tend to congregate, especially when it's dotted with puddles or flooded.

In some areas it's best to use two groups of hunters. One sets

up in an area that you know snipe to frequent; like a place you consistently flush birds or one where you consistently watch them land after being flushed. The other party sets off to walk them up. Snipe (like ducks) have certain areas of a marsh they prefer. These are usually the more open areas (as mentioned above). Once flushed from such an area snipe may return later in the day. With this two party setup you speed up the process.

In southeast Louisiana the entire Manchac WMA and the lower portion of the Pearl River WMA (the portion from Highway 90 to Little Lake and the Rigolets) probably offer the best public sniping in this area. Salvador WMA in St. Charles Parish is also good if you're adept at walking over "floating marsh" (we're not). Lacassine NWR in southwest Louisiana is another section of prime snipe marsh, especially in late winter.

These fresh marshes give snipe good access to the soft ground, and are generally walkable for humans in late winter.

And be sure you're shooting snipe. Several species of shorebirds are quite similar to snipe, and quite illegal to shoot as a result of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. This banned market hunting and closed the season on all shorebirds save snipe.

The easiest way to identify snipe is by their flight. Snipe fly in singles, pairs or small, loose groups. Dodging and darting the whole time. Large flocks are rare. The ones that sweep over the mudflats in huge compact flocks are probably dowitchers, the smaller ones sanderlings. Larger ones with a slower wingbeat are probably plover or yellowlegs.

You'd think the snipe's invertebrate diet would make him taste like a little dos-Gris. He actually tastes more like a miniature green-winged teal.

The Art and Science of Wild Duck Cookery

Of all culinary atrocities common to wild-game cookery few match roast wild duck. At dinner parties I've seen normally polite

people theatrically gag at the first bite of wild duck. I've seen many others grimace or "fish-face" at its mention. I've seen homes vacated and fumigated when whole, fat, (un-skinned) wild ducks were roasted.

A neighbor swears it took months to deodorize her kitchen. Another claims it's never been the same. Another publicly berated me, claiming the ducks I gave her (which she begged for) befouled her kitchen beyond redemption. Her dog wouldn't touch them, much less her family.

As I handed them over I tried to explain. "Look Liz, wild duck *isn't* like . . ."

"Oh don't worry Hom-Boy-Da, honey!" she waved me off. I should have known better than to argue with, or attempt to impart new information to, a native New Orleanian. "I've got a recipe from my sistah-in-law! I'll do just fine," she smirked and waddled off.

Two days later Shirley's iPhone buzzed. She answered and listened for a few seconds. "Humberto, it's Liz," she said with an eye roll while pointing her iPhone at me. "She claims the ducks you gave her were rotten, or polluted, or seagulls, or something. Here."

"Tell Miss *N.O.-It- All* (boy, did Brandon Tartikoff hit it on the head when he named that now-defunct show!) I'll call her back when I'm finished cleaning these ducks—the *right* way." (I was *skinning* some ducks.)

Point is, you simply cannot make wild duck taste like the *Duck A L' Orange* at your favorite uptown bistro or like the *Peking Duck* at your favorite Chinese restaurant. Think of wild duck meat as something closer to lean, tender (but somewhat livery-flavored) beef. Wild duck is a dark meat, the breasts are actually darker than the legs, because they fly more than they walk. The opposite holds for domestic ducks and chickens.

Skinned, defatted, marinated, and cooked properly wild duck can be made to closely resemble lean, tender beef. The goal in this proper preparation and cooking is to render them more beef-like than liver-like. Think beef when you think wild duck. Your family and "dinner paw-ty" guests will love you for it.

First off all, skin them. Always skin wild ducks. The benefits are manifold. To wit:

A.) It's much easier than plucking them.

B.) That ghastly smell so many complain about when roasting them comes from the fat. Remove the skin and you remove most of the fat.

C.) Blood clots, feathers and those steel pellets (that *don't* give way to your molars like the old lead ones sometimes did) can mostly be removed in the skinning process. Sometimes you skin a duck and find a huge blood clot covering almost the entire breast under the skin, with feathers imbedded in the flesh around a couple of steel pellets for good measure. Leave the skin on and you actually bite into this horrid (and often painful) mess! No wonder so many people gag!

Anyway, not only were the ducks I gave Nicole not rotten or seagulls. They weren't dos-Gris, or goldeneyes. They were two pintails grown obese from gorging on the Mississippi delta's duck potato. The woman stuffed and roasted them. Just like her "sistah-in-law's traditional recipe" called for. Then her *dog* wouldn't eat them. And I wasted two beautiful sprig!

Amigos: wild duck *is not* poultry. *Wild Duck* is not *poultry*. Please remember this. The sooner we get this through our heads the better our kitchens will smell and the fewer ducks we'll waste. You'll see, the duck platter will be the first empty one at your next dinner "paw-ty."

Humberto's Duck Gumbo

Duck Gumbo and Chicken Gumbo recipes are much too abundant to need detailed reiteration here. In brief: prepare the roux, and add the 'holy trinity' (onions, bell pepper, celery) in the normal manner. Spice-up with your favorite creole or Cajun seasoning in the traditional manner. Add the *file'* in the traditional manner. I'm guessing most folks reading a book such as this are pretty familiar with the process. But for this version of Duck Gumbo add less stock or water than you would normally—by about two cups. (You'll see why in a second.)

Here I'll restrict myself to the "proper" *preparation and introduction of the actual duck meat to the gumbo*, as the crowning touch.

Again, please skin the ducks, for all the reasons mentioned above whose benefits apply double when it comes to gumbo. Place the four or five medium sized ducks (gadwall, pintail, widgeon) or six to eight small ducks (blue or green-winged teal) in a pressure cooker and half cover with water and a half cup of dry sherry . . . Whoops! Sorry.

Have I mentioned a pressure-cooker? Have I forgotten to introduce (or re-familiarize) readers with this veritable miracle tool for game cooking?

"*You mean that thing Aunt Clotilde gave us for a wedding present?*" comes an answer. "*That thing that's still in the box somewhere in the attic? Heck, I don't know. Weren't those things once used for sterilizing baby bottles or something?*"

Forgive me, amigos. Here goes, in the form of a quiz:

What are the most notorious attributes of wild-game meat?

Incorrect answer: "Heck if I know. I give all my ducks away. I'm always goin' to the LSU game that night and I ain't got time to clean 'em. And I send the deer to the butcher. He sends it back in little white packages. I give most of these away and throw the rest in the backa da freezer. Nine months later I dig 'em out and throw 'em away to make room for the new ones. Sometimes we bring a bunch of these white packages to a tailgate paw-ty and throw the contents on the grill. . . . Well, we get to shootin' de breeze. Then to shootin' the Cuervo. Then to shootin' the Jägermeister . . . then the jello-shots . . .

"The women start whining: 'When's the food gonna be ready? We're hungry. The kids haven't had anything to eat, blah, blah, blah.'" Meanwhile we get to arguing about Orgeron, Brees and Payton . . .

"Next thing ya know flames are shooting from the doggone barbecue pit, everything's charred black and the women—none too happy—run off and come back with a buncha pizza and Popeye's chicken . . . so I don't know."

Correct answer: Wild game is often considered tough and dry.

But meat items that are normally considered tough and/or dry come out extremely tender and juicy when properly cooked in a pressure cooker. And this process takes about one-fifth as long as with a classic Dutch-oven or similar type pot.

Question 3. What's the thing modern-day couples constantly complain they have so little of in this hectic age—what with both of them working and all that? (Hint: this requires them to order take-out food four nights a week, buy prepared food that cooks quickly but tastes like sawdust or caulking paste, and limits their amorous interaction to playing footsie on the sofa once a week while watching *Grease* on Demand TV.)

Correct answer: Modern couples always complain about not having enough: *time*.

Point is, a pressure cooker is a godsend for wild-game cookery. You'd almost think it was designed specifically for that purpose. All of my game stews, (duck, squirrel, rabbit, and nutria) are cooked in one. And it's invaluable for tenderizing duck legs for use in any stews and gumbos—unless you've got four hours to spare tending a Dutch oven or pot.

Don't get me wrong: such pot-vigilance is possible—even fun—at “Da Camp” on weekends. But at home during the week? Who has the time or inclination? The movie *Grease*, after all, lasts almost two hours, and Demand TV has no commercials.



Like I was saying, place the skinned ducks in a pressure cooker and half cover with water, half a cup of dry sherry, along with a few stalks of celery, an onion, and some crushed garlic cloves. (Think of boiling crawfish but without the crawfish boil, corn, and potatoes.)

Crank up the pressure cooker and cook the ducks for twenty minutes. Remove the ducks and, with clean hands, simply pull the now flaky meat off the duck carcass—including from the legs and the shoulders. While pulling it off with your hands in small

pieces you'll be able to detect any bone splinters and steel pellets embedded in the meat. Obviously, discard these.

Throw these chunks, slivers, and flakes of duck meat (minus the skinny rib bones) into the already (mostly) cooked gumbo. Pour the liquid left in the pressure cooker (now a sumptuous wild duck stock) through a fine-meshed strainer and into the gumbo. This will keep out any pellets and bone fragments which might have accumulated in the bottom of the pressure cooker while cooking.

Some folks frown on adding seafood to meat gumbo—and vice versa. But we find that adding a pound or two of peeled shrimp for the last half hour of cooking greatly enhances duck gumbo. For enhanced shrimp flavor, we also like to slightly season the shrimp and sear them before adding them to the gumbo. Then we deglaze the shrimp-searing pan with a little of the duck stock and sherry and pour into the gumbo for the final touch.



Grilled Duck Breasts—medium rare and juicy!

Humberto's Grilled Duck Breasts

Naturally, first skin the duck. Then cut off the breast (but keep it attached to the breastbone) by cutting along the ribs from the cavity to the shoulder on each side of the duck. (Heavy garden-type clippers work better for cutting through the shoulder/wing bones than do actual “poultry shears.”)

Score each side of the breast with three cuts perpendicular to the middle breast bone. Make these cuts penetrate about halfway through the breast meat to ensure good penetration of the marinade for quicker and more even cooking.

Marinate the breasts for a minimum of two hours (the length of the movie *Grease*) in a mixture of teriyaki sauce, balsamic vinaigrette salad dressing and fresh (not bottled) lime juice.

(Amigos, when it comes to cutting that “gaminess” so many non-hunters grimace about in so many game dishes—when it comes to replacing that grimace with a smile, nothing beats fresh lime juice as a “magic gaminess-cutting” marinade ingredient.)

For a meal of four medium sized ducks or six teal, I'll squeeze out the juice from two fresh limes into a glass bowl then add equal parts teriyaki sauce and Balsamic vinaigrette dressing till the mixture covers the skinned and scored (but bone-in) duck breasts.

Remove breasts from marinade and sprinkle with your favorite Cajun or creole seasoning (we also use the Cuban seasoning “Adobo,” for variety.) Place duck breasts on grill (or under broiler) and let cook for a couple of minutes, before applying the basting sauce.

Basting sauce: equal parts butter, teriyaki sauce and (your favorite) barbecue sauce. Simply put these items together in a bowl and in microwave, or in a small saucepan, and heat till the butter melts. Then stir and mix together, perhaps with a dash of your favorite Cajun or creole seasoning. (This latter step mostly depends on how salty you like your food.)

The key to this surprisingly delectable (especially to non-hunters) dish is to leave the duck *rare* in the middle. This means

pink, not bright red. So the length of the grilling or broiling time depends on the hotness of your grill fire and the distance between the duck and the fire, which varies greatly from grill to grill.

Given these variables and the variety of places where I'm called upon to cook this surprisingly delicious (especially to non-hunters) dish I find no alternative but to simply cut into a representative duck breast to check for proper pinkness. Please remember, amigos, this isn't the "well-done" you want for your pork chops or ribs. This is the pinkness of the medium to medium-rare many of us want for our steaks and burgers.

Apply the basting sauce liberally with a brush after the duck has first cooked for a couple of minutes, then apply heavily at the very end right before serving.

Amazingly, medium rare wild duck (especially after marinating) is almost bereft of "gaminess."



Grilled Duck Kabobs—perfect for tailgate “paaww-ties!”

Humberto's Wild Duck Kabobs

This dish is very similar to the Grilled Duck Breast described above except that the breast meat is filleted off the duck breast bone (just like so many folks fillet it nowadays to make those popular “duck poppers.”)

Slice each section of duck breast across the grain into three or four chunks—depending on the size of the duck. (This dicing provides yet another venue to check for those notorious meal-killing pellets and feathers.) Marinate these duck chunks in the same marinade described above.

Cut sweet onions, green, and red bell peppers into chunks roughly the same size as the duck chunks.

Simply skewer the duck chunks—making sure to include a pepper and onion chunk on each side for flavor enhancement—on metal skewers and throw on the grill. Then, simply apply the same basting and grilling instructions provided for “Grilled Duck Breasts” above.

Again, the key here is to leave the duck chunks *medium to medium rare* on the inside.

Humberto's Parmesan-Dusted Duck Fingers

Fillet the duck breast as described above—then slice lengthwise into strips (i.e. “fingers”) 1/4 to 1/2 inch thick. Marinate them in the same marinade mentioned above—but cutting down somewhat on the balsamic vinaigrette quotient. Make it about *a quarter* balsamic and crank up the teriyaki sauce portion to replace it.

Shake the duck strips in a bag with half Italian breadcrumbs, one-fourth flour and one-fourth cornstarch. (That cornstarch greatly aids in the crispiness factor. That's how oriental cooks get their fried stuff so crispy.)

Fill a medium-sized frying pan about half an inch deep with a combination of olive oil and butter (about half of each). Bring to medium hot and drop in the “fingers.”

Again, you want to leave them pink on the inside, which means you fry the fingers for no more than a minute, while turning to get even brownness on all sides.

Scoop out onto a glass serving dish and squeeze fresh lime juice over them, drizzling well. Sprinkle with grated parmesan or Romano cheese. Your dinner guests will *not* believe its wild duck! This works even with dos-Gris!

Humberto's Quickie Duck-Leg Stew

Do yourself a big favor, if you're just slicing open the duck's breast and filleting out the meat to make "poppers," keep skinning down each side of the duck to the legs, then twist them and cut them off. The legs are actually juicier and less "gamey" than the breast meat.

With garden clippers cut off the feet about half way down the leg and make sure to remove any resulting bone splinters.

Coat the legs in kitchen bouquet or other browning sauce and season the legs with your favorite Cajun or creole season (again, I like the Cuban seasoning Adobo along with Greek seasoning for some variety.)

Brown the legs on both sides in butter and olive oil in bottom of pressure cooker. Remove the legs and add chopped onions, celery, carrots, and potatoes (think beef stew here). Cook these vegetables down until the onions just start to brown around the sides and caramelize. The liquid released by these chopped vegetables also serves to partly deglaze the bottom of the pressure cooker after the leg browning process.

Add the browned duck legs back into the pressure cooker with three or four ounces of tomato or spaghetti sauce (not *too* much!) and stir.

Now cover the duck legs and vegetables with liquid consisting of one-third dry sherry and two-thirds water or beef or venison stock—with a "dash" of Worcestershire sauce and/or teriyaki sauce.

Crank up the pressure and cook for twenty minutes.

Open and make a gravy out of the remaining liquid in the pressure cooker by adding about half a cup of milk into which a dash of browning liquid, a dash of Au Jus sauce and a heaping teaspoon of flour or cornstarch has been vigorously and completely mixed (no lumps).

Turn up the heat under the pressure cooker again (but with cover off) until the gravy bubbles, browns and thickens.

Serve over rice or mashed potatoes. It beats regular beef stew by a country mile!

All the recipes above are devoured with gusto by normal non-hunting dinner guests. And all of these recipes are absent from most “authoritative” wild-game cookbooks.