

Market Hunting in the Yolo Basin, 1850-1950

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Every winter we cherish the sight of thousands of ducks, geese, and other waterbirds swirling overhead in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. Photographers spend hours seeking the ultimate waterbird picture. But not long ago, even into the 1950's, those sights were seen by many as principally an opportunity for profit. From the Gold Rush through the Great Depression, market hunters shot upwards of a quarter-million ducks, geese and shorebirds each year in order to meet the demand of restaurants and saloons from San Francisco to Lake Tahoe.

This summary of market hunting use of the Yolo Basin area is derived from the following sources: Cumming (1911), Grinnell et al. (1918), Sawyer (2005), Herring (2006), Grosz (2009), and Garone (2011).

Early settlers in the Yolo Basin saw ducks, geese, shorebirds, and even songbirds as resources to be harvested for sale to miners and city dwellers, or for export to China and elsewhere. "Rimlanders" as landowners adjacent to wetlands were called, used the money earned from winter hunting to help establish their farms, and they treated waterfowl as just another crop to add to their seasonal mix.

The most common method for gathering waterfowl was "bull-hunting" in which a live bull or steer was employed as a moving blind (Garrone 2011, Sawyer 2005). After the Gold Rush, cattle became so numerous in the Yolo Basin that ducks and geese grew accustomed to them. Steers, specifically trained for hunting, pulled wagons to within sight of the flocks of waterfowl. After unhitching the wagon, the hunter hid behind the steer and carefully maneuvered the animal close to the flocks, circling to force the birds into tight concentrations. When satisfied with his positioning, the hunter tapped the steer away and opened fire, shooting once at the birds in the pond and again as they took flight. With skill and luck, the hunter might bag nearly a hundred birds in a single shooting.

By 1880, market hunting was a big business. "Duck draggers," as market hunters were called, often worked in teams of three at night with leases from farmers intent on reducing crop depredation by waterfowl. Hundreds of thousands of ducks and geese every year began to flow into San Francisco and

Sacramento. On peak days, more than 10,000 birds arrived in the City by Wells Fargo freight, from railroads, or by steamer down the Sacramento River (Sawyer 2005).

Particularly prized for their taste were the Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*), White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*), Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*) (Cumming 1911). Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) were used early as a replacement for the Christmas goose, and were prized for their medicinal qualities in Chinese communities. Often cranes and other large birds were captured and fattened in captivity. A great variety of birds in the Valley, including American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*), Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), California Quail (*Callipepla californica*), and even House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) were shot and sold for dishes. "Bird on toast" was a common menu item in San Francisco restaurants.

One of the best known commercial shooters was Peter St. Clair, renowned for his prowess at harvesting in the Yolo and Natomas Basins. With boat mounted shotguns, some reportedly as large as 2 gauge, he supplied many hundreds of birds daily ("Pete St. Clair's Cannon," *Sacramento Daily Union*, 20 and 28 Dec. 1890, 1 Jan 1891). He was respected as both a businessman and an amateur naturalist, being knowledgeable enough to chronicle and mount unusual species. In fact, after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the California Academy of Science employed hunters like St. Clair to restore their wildlife collections as the hunters had an unrivaled expertise with the state's diverse animal life and habitats.



Early hunters shooting over decoys. Oliver Family Collection, Bancroft Library.

In the early 20th century, several factors pushed California away from market hunting and towards increased conservation. First, dwindling waterfowl flocks became increasingly apparent to residents, and that sense was bolstered by research by Joseph Grinnell at UC Berkley, Tracey Storer at UC Davis, and others (Grinnell et al. 1918). In addition, as elsewhere in the U.S., sport hunting was a growing pastime of urban professionals. Sport hunters in Sacramento brought increasing pressure to bear on Yolo County, and influenced state game policy to regulate market hunting. The Sacramento Record-Union began editorializing as early as the 1890s about excesses of market hunters like Peter St. Clair and calling for stricter hunting regulations. Sacramento County soon enacted a relatively strict season and bag limits and hired a game marshal to enforce the laws. Hunting licenses, first sold in 1907, provided income to support California Department of Fish and Game personnel and strengthened their role.

Despite the progress, California voters, as in other western states and particularly in rural areas, proved resistant to wildlife conservation measures. For instance, when the legislature passed a law prohibiting market hunting of game in 1914, the state's voters overturned the measure in the first ever use of the referendum process. Nonetheless, after the federal government approved the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act with Canada and later Mexico, market hunting became illegal. Over the next decades increasingly strict seasonal closures and limits were established by California state law.



Early hunting in a "tule splitter" boat. Oliver family Collection, Bancroft Library.

Despite the tightening grip of the law, market hunting remained common in California through the Great Depression, driven by chronically high unemployment, cooperative farmers, and the difficulty of obtaining convictions in local courts. Networks of “duckleggers” continued to operate outside the law, supplying saloons and fine restaurants alike with illicitly acquired game (Herring 2006). However, as the drought of the 1930s drove waterfowl populations to their lowest levels ever recorded, even diehard market hunters could see the end approaching. Finally, in the early 1950s, through the combination of changing popular attitudes and the vigorous undercover efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game, market hunting in the Central Valley effectively came to its end (Grosz 2009).

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