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Hunting and Fishing in the New South

Black Labor and White Leisure after the Civil War

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exploitation of the Southern natural environment with a general lack of control over people of color. Over time, the cacophony of angry white voices raised against blacks' customary rights would lead to the adoption of widespread and comprehensive legislative measures that left African Americans increasingly restricted in their use of such cultural traditions as a way of subsisting, or even prospering, apart from agricultural labor in the service of whites.

“The Pot-Hunting Son of Ham”
White Sportsmen's Objections to African Americans'
Hunting and Fishing

The fact is the *esprit* has been destroyed since these hordes of negroes have taken to the pursuit of game as their principal occupation.

—*Doctor Macklin*, *Richmond Whig*, 1872

Agricultural employers and landowners had allies in their campaign to represent black independence as the biggest problem facing the post-Emancipation South. These other groups, although not tied as directly by economics to the need to circumscribe blacks' subsistence activities as a way of cultivating labor tractability, nonetheless detested former slaves' ability to freely exploit the natural environment. Led by the growing ranks of Southern and visiting sportsmen, these groups identified former slaves' hunting and fishing excesses as leading contributors to their own postwar difficulties. While seeking solace in the South's seemingly endless supply of fish and game—which made Dixie, particularly its black belt, a leading sporting destination for visitors from the North and around the world—white sportsmen were increasingly alarmed by the depletion of wildlife since the late nineteenth century.

The sportsmen and the landowners and employers had different objections to African Americans' hunting and fishing. Landowners and employers decried these activities because of the supposed dangers posed by subsistence or semi-subsistence garnered independent of whites' control. Sportsmen mostly took issue with the basic acts of hunting and fishing by former slaves. White agricultural

interests feared unrestricted black customary rights as threats to the South's labor system and future economic prosperity; sportsmen feared them because they believed that, if left unchecked, African Americans would deplete Southern wildlife and ruin elite whites' cherished sporting privileges.

In March 1888, an unidentified Louisiana sportsman wrote an editorial for *Outing* magazine, angrily outlining the most serious barriers to wildlife preservation in Louisiana. "Even as late as twenty years ago, there was no lack of game . . . the emancipation of the negro changed all this," he began, echoing a common sentiment among the many Southern sportsmen who equated black liberation with a precipitous decline in the quality of field sports in Dixie. "The first idea of the free negro was to become possessed of an old shot gun of some kind, a rejected army musket or rifle," the writer continued. "This was proof positive of freedom since no slave was allowed to keep a weapon of any kind." This development brought great misfortune to Louisiana. "The effect of arming some hundred thousand negro men and boys with shot guns can be imagined. When it is further stated that each negro possessed at least a half dozen worthless curs of the breed known in the South as 'yaller, nigger dogs' . . . it can be readily understood that it did not take them long to exterminate the deer and rabbits." To make matters worse, the editorial concluded, African Americans, unlike white sportsmen, "killed anything they encountered, whatever its age or species." The writer's solution to this problem was to strengthen fish and game laws "in order to prevent the complete annihilation, by the negroes and their dogs, of everything that can be styled game."¹

Complaints such as these illustrate several key components of whites' attitudes toward hunting and fishing by freed persons. First, elite Southerners, looking to the antebellum South as their model of social and sporting relationships, constantly harked back to the Old South as the halcyon age of Southern sport. Blaming Emancipation for both labor problems and wildlife shortages, they longed to return to that bygone era of racial control. Second, white sportsmen, believing that African Americans challenged their sporting mastery, worked to create a public perception of former slaves as immoderate, unsportsmanlike, and dangerous. Ultimately, these ideas—that freedom transformed the Southern sporting field, that unrestrained former slaves depleted wildlife, and that African Americans made poor sportsmen who did not live up to the standards of their white betters—culminated in attacks on African Americans' right to hunt and fish. The attacks intensified in the late nineteenth century and peaked in the early twentieth century, when sportsmen, landowners, labor lords, and lawmakers exploited perceived con-

nections between hunting and fishing and the race problem to establish effective state-level fish and game regulation.

White sportsmen offered loud and frequent objections to African Americans' sporting behavior in the South between Emancipation and the 1920s, a period that began with former slaves enjoying more ready access to the South's natural environment and ended with a coalition of white interests employing fears about lost racial control and negative characterizations of blacks' sporting behavior to impose greater regulation of hunting and fishing. Southern sportsmen held up African Americans as archetypes of poor sporting behavior and blamed them for both destroying Southern natural environments and besmirching the good name of "legitimate" (meaning elite and white) sporting enthusiasts. Their complaints, dependent on the creation of disapproving representations of blacks' sporting behavior, skill, and intelligence, reflected elite whites' frustrations and served as another, and for historians largely overlooked, cultural space in which white supremacy could be cultivated. In their sporting narratives and in the pages of sporting periodicals, whites sought to embed in the Southern (indeed, American) mind that African Americans were bad, even dangerous, sportsmen and that the South's biggest problem—its lack of control over the black population—could be seen in miniature in the struggle over hunting and fishing. "The negro is deteriorating from the civilization he possessed as a slave, and relapsing into his natural barbarism," an editor of the *Southern Review* declared in 1869. "Will this process of deterioration tend to break down the characteristics of the white men?"² In voicing such fears, the editor also spoke for white sportsmen who experienced and exploited the same sentiments.

Between the 1870s and the 1920s, sportsmen and conservationists made some gains in the South. After decades of resisting restrictions on hunting and fishing, due to a general public distrust of such actions, lawmakers finally took lasting steps to regulate Southerners' pursuit of wildlife.³ As observers of this legislation noted, fish and game protection had long been inadequate to address the concerns of sportsmen and nature enthusiasts.⁴ The noted conservationist William Temple Hornaday, for example, acknowledged the gains made in Southern fish and game protection by the 1920s but remained critical of Southern lawmakers, noting sarcastically that "the Southern States have done less actual [game] extermination than our heroes of the North; but they are getting into shape to show more results."⁵ Clearly, even in an age when fish and game law was becoming more comprehensive nationally, more work had to be done.

For long-suffering proponents of such legislation, this problem stretched back

more than half a century. Both the push for legal restrictions and the perceived shortages that brought them about had been debated in the South before the Civil War. Sportsmen's concerns about the proper use of wildlife originated in early colonial history, as agricultural elites worked to make field sports a strictly aristocratic affair, and its most vocal expression developed in the 1830s when changes in firearms and transportation technology greatly increased the amount of fish and game consumed.⁶ By the 1850s, the smoothbore musket had become all but obsolete, replaced by the rifled musket and, later, the breech-loading rifle, both of which allowed for greater accuracy, longer range of fire, and shorter loading intervals.⁷ This development, coupled with the spread of steamboats and railroads that much reduced the distance between urban populations and the fish and game they craved, greatly increased the amount of wildlife killed for food and sport. Through the balance of the antebellum period, as firearms and fishing technology evolved and as transportation advances made Southern wildlife more easily accessible, the slaughter of fish and game continued apace.

Thus, between the Civil War and the turn of the century,⁸ Southern sporting enthusiasts (including many in the former plantation elite) who had long sought exclusive hunting and fishing rights, and sporting tourists from around the United States, grew increasingly alarmed about the unrestrained slaughter of wildlife that seemed to characterize the region.⁹ "Game is disappearing from our home country," Robert Barnwell Roosevelt wrote in 1884, "and if we are to obtain satisfactory shooting, we must go some distance for it."¹⁰ Likewise, Henry B. Ansell, in his history of Knotts Island and Currituck County, North Carolina, lamented the decline of that once celebrated fowling region, noting "seventy years ago our country was thinly-populated; our gunners used the old flint and steel muskets to kill ducks . . . The ducks in those days had only to watch the margins of coves, creeks, ponds, bays and other shore lines for the shooters." But between the Civil War and the early twentieth century, "the millions of wild fowl that once swarmed our waters have wonderfully decreased—all but disappeared."¹¹

Sportsmen offered many explanations for this decline. Some pointed to the advances in transportation that brought more sportsmen to the South. "There are fast lines of steamers and rail-roads that care little for distance," Ansell wrote. "These and most all commercial houses have refrigerators to keep ducks from taint; with the product of the ice plant ducks can now, if needed, be kept for months."¹² Others blamed the scores of Northerners who came South after the war. Virginian James Booth Walters noted that it was "not an uncommon thing for hunting parties from a distance to visit here at any time during the shooting season." Such visitors "sojourn [*sic*] for a season of one or two weeks and wage

dreadful warfare upon the wild tribes of the surrounding county."¹³ An anonymous sportsman, writing to *Forest and Stream* in 1885, described the multitude of visitors from the North who "are spending the entire winter in the South, and are making quail shooting a duty rather than a pastime. Many of these gentlemen can boast of records of from none to twenty birds daily for the season, and will proudly produce their diaries showing their score."¹⁴

Still others blamed increasing firearms availability for the South's wildlife woes.¹⁵ The Civil War had made guns more attainable than ever before. In the years after the war, hundreds of thousands of surplus military weapons, taken home by returning soldiers or sold cheaply by the federal government, made their way into the hands of people who previously could not afford them. Echoing a common sentiment among wealthier Southerners angry at the wider availability of firearms, one Louisiana sportsman noted that "in the ancient antebellum era the hunting grounds of this State were famous throughout the South. All over the State they were preserved and worked in the shooting season, principally, by gentlemen sportsmen." But with saturation of the region with surplus weapons, as Virginian Alexander Hunter lamented, "every kind of gun, from the old Springfield musket to the modern-loader, is used relentlessly, and in the settled neighborhood, the deer are simply gunned to death."¹⁶

Inadequate fish and game legislation was another culprit. North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture L. L. Polk opined in 1879 that restrictions, though unpopular, had become necessary. "While I am aware that no general game law can be enforced effectually unless supported by an intelligent public opinion," Polk wrote, somewhat optimistically, "yet I feel warranted in saying that . . . a law to prevent the indiscriminate slaughter which so seriously threatens extermination to many of our most valuable species of game, would be warmly received and endorsed."¹⁷ Yet as late as 1894, according to North Carolina's Shocco Game Association, "owing to the want of better game laws and lack of enforcement of existing laws for the protection of game, the quantity of game is rapidly diminishing in all parts of the country." Many came to believe that only extreme measures could repair such a dire situation. "In order to remedy this evil, men of wealth who hunt for sport have in different places combined for the purpose of establishing game preserves similar to those of England and other parts of Europe."¹⁸ Land and lumber speculator Robert Pinckney Tucker of South Carolina, who grew wealthy by purchasing abandoned lands and reselling lumber and sporting rights, agreed: "any sportsman not making provision for the future will find it increasingly difficult in a few years to obtain a days sport. The country everywhere is being shot out, taken up by the clubs, or posted by individual owners."¹⁹ Put succinctly,

Southern sportsmen, increasingly alarmed about dwindling fish and game, moved to make it more difficult to duplicate the wildlife slaughter that characterized the period from the end of the Civil War to the early twentieth century.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE SPORTING IDEAL

Despite the frequency with which sportsmen commented on advances in transportation, increasing numbers of sporting tourists, surplus firearms, and a lack of fish and game law as causes of wildlife depletion, many others argued that freed African Americans provided a better explanation. Almost from the moment of Emancipation, many Northern and Southern sportsmen identified former slaves as one of the deadliest causes of fish and game slaughter. One cannot read a late-nineteenth-century sporting periodical without being struck by the frequency with which contributors pointed to black sportsmen as one of the forces most destructive to Southern field sports and characterized them as the epitome of the poor sporting behavior that would destroy the region's wildlife. Frequent *Forest and Stream* contributor "Chasseur" blamed freed slaves for the Old Dominion's lack of deer. "Where there were a dozen [deer shot each week] just after the war there is one now, and the ubiquitous darkey is the cause . . . Each African is the possessor of an old army musket and two or three mongrels, who will chase anything from a squirrel to an antlered buck."²⁰ "G.T.N.," a Clarksville, Tennessee, contributor to the *Rod and Gun and American Sportsman* in 1875, describing the condition of his favorite South Carolina hunting grounds, wrote of "the terrible incubus of blackness which hangs over that commonwealth" due to "the constant stream of loafing Africans, each one with a musket on his shoulder." He noted that although "ten or fifteen years ago, I was accustomed to flush from twenty to thirty coveys [of quail] in a day, not more than six or eight can be found now. Duck shooting has been spoiled in the same way."²¹ English sportsman J. Turner-Turner, in an 1888 memoir of his North American hunts, recalled the scant game in Liberty, Virginia, noting that partridge and rabbits were by no means plentiful, nor "was this to be wondered at in a place where every nigger carried a gun."²²

According to alarmed white observers, then, African Americans' hunting and fishing, unrestrained since the end of slavery, was the principal cause for the decline of good sport. James Henry Rice Jr., describing hunting on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, recalled that "several years ago, during the reign of crime around here, the negro played havoc with the fox squirrels, killing over two hundred in all. They have never recovered their numbers."²³ South Carolina planter and sportsman J. Motte Alston wrote that "the game, once so bountiful, is fast dis-

appearing for various causes. The negroes previous to the war were not permitted to kill the same for market, and so there was no visible decrease. But even the sea birds . . . that used to be so abundant have dwindled away in Carolina."²⁴ Referring to the African-American sportsman as "The Pot-Hunting Son of Ham," a writer from Hearn, Texas, calling himself B.C.H. asserted that "he is very numerous in Texas, and especially so in the vicinity of the Brazos river."²⁵ Linking game slaughter to blacks' immoderate sporting habits, B.C.H. insisted that the black hunter "carries his old relic of war times wherever he goes, and no matter in season or out of it, he bangs away at some nice pond or some place on the river where you have been preparing to go for a week." In the end, the angry Texan concluded, African Americans had taken over much of the region's prime sporting ground. "You go there at first peep of day—and there you find one of those animated black walnut statues, who has been there for two hours."²⁶ Such complaints sounded across the South in the late nineteenth century as sportsmen and landowners worked to persuade the public of the link between black liberation and the depletion of wildlife.

Southern sportsmen were disgusted at the destruction of the old order, a time when most wildlife had been reserved for men of means: "The old time gentlemen hunter of Virginia is becoming a thing of the past," Doctor Macklin declared in 1872. "The fact is the *esprit* has been destroyed since these hordes of negroes have taken to the pursuit of game as their principal occupation."²⁷ Free of the slave-era restrictions on their long-cherished hunting and fishing, liberated African Americans took to the Southern sporting field with vigor. For white observers, this signaled numerous dangers. African-American huntsmen carried weapons. They did not respect fish and game laws. And they did not follow whites' sporting codes. At the heart of these complaints lay a trope of lost control and a sense that a glorious epoch in Southern history had passed. This confluence between anger over perceived hunting and fishing abuses by African Americans and lamentations about lost racial subordination stands as one of the most striking features of late-nineteenth-century Southern sporting literature. Romantic longings for the slave South permeate this literature. According to Harrisonburg, Virginia, attorney John Edwin Roller, "to those who lived any part of their lives amid the surroundings of Southern slavery, in its better aspects, there comeback [*sic*] from those days the sweetest memory possible." For Roller, hunting stood at the center of that memory. "Who can forget the glorious hunts at night . . . the shouts of merriment and triumph at the success when the toothsome game was secured; and then the long and wearied tramp back home to be followed by the sweetest slumbers that mortal man ever knew?"²⁸

Sportsmen often coupled the heyday of the Southern racial hierarchy with the glory days of Southern field sports. Describing his former plantation, Tower Hill, in Sussex County, Virginia, Chasseur recalled an age when "a rich Virginian counted his broad acres by the thousands, his sable servitors by the hundreds, his horses by the score, and he lived his life like a baron of the good old age of the squire."²⁹ In that golden age, whites stood as the unquestioned masters of the black population and thoroughly controlled Southern hunting and fishing. "The typical Virginian of those days was a thorough sportsman," but "the slaves, of course, were forbidden to carry or possess any firearm, and confined their hunting operations to the legitimate darkey game—the 'coon, the rabbit, and the 'possum."³⁰

Anger over African Americans abandoning stereotypically "black" sporting patterns was another point of contention that pervaded Southern sporting narratives. *Forest and Stream* contributor "N.A.T." argued that with Emancipation, "the ancestral instinct to go a-hunting broke out within [former slaves] in an ungovernable manner and hurried them forth into the road and briar patches." The writer pined for the days "before the unpleasantness," when "the only hunting enjoyed by the negroes was rabbit hunting on Sundays and 'possum and 'coon hunting o' nights. They had no firearms in those days, and had to depend exclusively on the dog for their rabbits, and on the dog and ax for their 'coons and 'possums." N.A.T. lamented the loss of an age when African Americans confined themselves to certain kinds of game. "The negroes pursued these sports . . . with a wonderful enthusiasm and enjoyment . . . And yet since they have become free they have totally abandoned the 'possum and the 'coon as far as I can learn . . . He seems to consider that he has entirely outgrown the 'possum, got far above him in the social scale, and to look upon any reference to that animal in his presence as an intentional and heartless reminder of his previous condition of servitude."³¹

Increased gun ownership by blacks created another concern embedded in such complaints. Free from antebellum restrictions on firearms, at least after most states repealed their "black codes," freed slaves made firearms both a powerful symbol and an immediate priority of liberation, a fact not lost on white observers. "The negroes certainly rejoice in the possession of weapons to a large extent," Edward King noted in 1875. "Since the war every black man has felt himself called upon to own a shot-gun."³² Likewise, writer "M" of Northside, Virginia, noted that "having been previously prevented by law from carrying fire arms, [former slaves] naturally exhibited a childish delight in exercising their constitutional privilege."³³ N.A.T. asserted that when African Americans were "'turned loose,' as they generally express it . . . every man and boy was eager to be the owner of a gun, and as old muskets and Enfield rifles were very cheap in those days, they had not much

difficulty in supplying their wants."³⁴ This increased gun ownership provided a way for African Americans to resist whites' domination and became both a powerful emblem of liberation and, as some Southerners feared, a possible source of open violence against whites.

Blacks' ownership of guns, whites believed, also endangered Southern wildlife. After Emancipation, the ease of obtaining a gun made hunting more efficient for the average African-American sportsman. Alexander Hunter, musing that it was not just firearms but the users of firearms that led to the destruction of game, argued that "even worse than the breech-loader [a relatively new innovation in the 1880s], was the old army musket, loaded with a handful of shot, with a lately enfranchised freedman behind the big end of it." For Hunter, when freed persons took to the field with firearms, they became a threat to all Southern game. "It is then that the old army musket is converted into a terror, . . . and [if] its contents are turned loose, every bird will be either killed or crippled."³⁵

Others tied such slaughter not only to guns but to the ability of freed people to hunt at will. "I have often meditated over the sudden conversion of the colored race into sportsmen, which we witnessed at the close of the civil war," N.A.T. wrote. "What was it due to? Perhaps to their wild ancestral instinct, which, suppressed so long in slavery, broke out beyond all reason when their freedom came . . . It may also be so, that they looked upon possession of firearms and gunning as the highest privilege of freedom and manhood." Gunning without restraint became the best way African Americans could testify to their freedom. "How often I have met these ebony sportsmen in their rounds, and how keen was their enjoyment of the fun!" N.A.T. recalled. "Sometimes I have met paterfamilias in the woods, musket on shoulder, attended by his wife and all his young. Oh, it was enjoyment keen, intense! Those were the halcyon days of the negro race in America."³⁶

When sportsmen complained about blacks' gun ownership, they were expressing fear and frustration about several separate yet, within the context of the sporting field, interrelated developments. Newly freed and newly armed, African Americans exploited freedom to the utmost, traversing the Southern landscape and competing with white sportsmen for the region's best fish and game. When blacks took to the field they did so out of necessity, with little regard for the practices espoused by their white "betters." Sportsmen cried foul when African Americans engaged in activities considered either beyond the pale of acceptable black behavior or as best reserved exclusively for whites. Guided by nostalgic longings for antebellum aristocracy and deep uncertainties over fish and game scarcity, white sportsmen purposefully tied African Americans' sporting behavior to larger

anxieties about Southern race relations. Sportsmen once celebrated a hard-working and mostly unarmed black population, but with Emancipation, "nearly every negro owns a pot-metal shotgun or old musket, and he spends much of his time wandering about . . . in search of 'Br'er Rabbit' or 'Br'er Squirrel.'" Unfortunately, this *Forest and Stream* contributor continued, the former slave "eschews possum hunting at night, of which we, who were the sons of slave owners in the old times, cherish fond recollections, as the youthful romances of old plantation life."³⁷

Aside from abandoning "black game," arming themselves, and simply taking to the field, African-American hunters and fishermen angered whites by ignoring the code of fair sporting behavior that supposedly guided middle- and upper-class sportsmen's actions in the field. For late-nineteenth-century Southern sportsmen, particularly those who aspired to a fictionalized aristocratic antebellum plantocracy, pursuing fish and game carried certain obligations. Elites used this code of sportsmanship, always more idealized than actual, to separate true gentlemen from men who hunted and fished for need or financial reward, drawing clear lines of demarcation between aristocrats and the masses.

The amorphous codes binding the nineteenth-century American sporting fraternity contained certain key and constant components. Whether a huntsman or fisherman could be counted a "true sportsman," as sporting publications used the term, depended on a variety of factors, including his reasons for hunting and fishing, his methods of capturing prey, and his behavior in the field. A Delaware, Ohio, sportsman, "H.P.U.," succinctly summarized these key components in an 1881 *Forest and Stream* editorial. First, a true sportsman should be "a thorough-going business man . . . and not a loafer, dead-beat, nor bummer." Second, he should be a "votary of art and science" and have "a love for the true and beautiful, wherever found." Third, and perhaps most important, he must follow a code of restraint in the field and pursue sport purely for its own sake. "He is a gentleman, not a butcher, and makes of hunting and fishing a noble pastime, and not a money-getting trade. He takes to the field not because he loves the kill, but because of the healthful influences with which a hunter's life surrounds him."³⁸ As fish and game seemed to disappear at an increasing rate, sportsmen became more eager to separate themselves from those who did not conform to such codes.³⁹

Although rarely stated so bluntly in contemporary periodical literature, it is clear that only men of means could be ideal sportsmen. A true sportsman had to be many things, including, in the words of H.P.U., "a thorough-going business man," "a votary of art and science," possessed of "a love for the true and beautiful," a "lover of fair play," and a "gentleman." Sporting literature constantly referenced such qualities, making plain that worthy devotees of fur, fin, and feather

possessed manhood, refinement, education, and wealth. In other words, true sportsmen came only from the middle and upper classes. As many scholars have demonstrated, the sporting codes transmitted in print in the late nineteenth century—created by and for and upheld by those who could afford to uphold them—became inherently and intentionally exclusionary.⁴⁰ Elite sportsmen thus worked to completely exclude lesser persons such as immigrants, poor whites, Native Americans, and African Americans.

In short, true lovers of the chase hunted purely for sport, not for food or profit. According to Eugene P. Odom, in the biography of his mentor, North Carolina naturalist Herbert Hutchinson Brimley, real sportsmen cared neither for killing nor for material or financial reward. In fact, "when the methods are fair and 'sporting,' comparatively few animals or fish are actually bagged, the ones that get away being both numerous and large! This is as it should be." For Odom and Brimley, the goal of hunting or fishing was something higher: "the long hikes through country unspoiled by man, the chance to get away from petty troubles of complex modern civilization, the matching of wits with cunning wild kindred, the hearty meal cooked in the open, and the companionship around the campfire." In fact, "even the unsuccessful trip is a success to the true sportsman if he is also a nature lover."⁴¹ For these individuals, the hunting and fishing ideal was sport for sport's sake; such activities should remain ever unencumbered by less pure motives.

Standing in marked contrast to this ideal were the true sportsman's nemeses, the "game hog" and the "pot hunter," who angered sporting gentlemen primarily because they rejected such elite ideals. The proper sportsman hunted or fished for the love of pure sport or for the love of nature. Those who hunted or fished for money, dubbed "game hogs," and those who did so for survival, dubbed "pot hunters," did not deserve the appellation "sportsman." "This is to say that the game must be saved for the enjoyment and benefit of those who pursue it for the sake of pursuit," a *Forest and Stream* contributor argued in 1894. "A grouse which gives a man a holiday afield is worth more to the community than a grouse snared or shot for the market stalls."⁴² Lovers of nature and sport valued hunting and fishing for the pursuit, not merely the kill. The sportsman who, according to A. M. Scudder, was "heavily loaded with the 'instinct' to kill for the price, with an elastic conscience regarding the manner of capture, to say nothing of his faculty for not discerning between open and closed seasons," threatened supplies of fish and game better reserved for those who showed the proper deference.⁴³ "I do not believe any man has the right to kill more game than he can conveniently consume," wrote "J.D.H." of Savannah, Georgia, in 1899, laying bare the requirement that hunting and fishing be neither immoderate nor commercialized.⁴⁴ Unrestrained

slaughter was the purview of the game hog, the man who both loved the kill and depended on its profits. "F.P.W." left little doubt of his estimation of game hogs in his poem "The Hog behind the Gun":

He kills whatever comes to hand,
Quails, grouse or rabbits, while they stand,
Death to the game till the game is done,
Death to the hog behind the gun⁴⁵

Well-to-do sportsmen throughout the country shared this opinion and despised those who depleted fish and game without restraint or respect.

The "pot hunter" became the other great violator of sporting codes and the other great enemy of sporting gentlemen. Pot hunters were those poor and lower-class folk who depended on hunting and fishing for part or all of their living. Unlike game hogs, who flouted sportsmanship for commercial reasons, the pot hunter did so simply because he could not afford to do otherwise. According to the *Rod and Gun and American Sportsman*, pot hunters tended to be men "who break the laws, slaughter the game, and reckon up their trophies by the count of the bag and not by the skill shown in their day's work." Skill, moderation, and love of nature meant little to this hunter, because he "notoriously labors under the imputation of being obliged to bring home a bag which must be made, honestly if possible, but if not it must still be made." Most granted that pot hunters performed their evil acts out of the necessity to make their catch by any means, and that some may even have preferred a restrained and respectful sport. "There are doubtless some pot-hunters of a good sort," the editorial concluded, "but we are afraid there are more of the other stripe."⁴⁶

Most Southern sportsmen shared this hatred of those who hunted and fished for pot or market. According to A. S. Salley Jr. of Orangeburg County, South Carolina, "a pot hunter . . . always tries to kill as much as he can and as many at a shot as he can. He has no appreciation of sportsmanship; no respect for the ethics of the field and forest and only regards the game laws when there is grave danger of his getting entangled therewith."⁴⁷ Sportsmen agreed that such destructive agents had to be eliminated one way or another. The hunter and fisherman "who kills brooding birds and their half-grown young for market or the tickling of his wolfish palate; and catches fish any way he can, the fish that are spawning or guarding their fry" was described by one angry sportsman as "a nuisance, that should be abated by any means within the law, or even by straining the law a little."⁴⁸ For the South, such complaints take on added significance: when sportsmen voiced

anger over such abuses, they often simultaneously complained about a loss of control over the black population.

Because of Southern sportsmen's direct links to long-standing traditions of European aristocracy,⁴⁹ because elite sport became intertwined with the genteel life of leisure of the Southern plantocracy, and, not least important, because the hierarchical sporting structure of the South mirrored the region's racial and class structure, elite Southern sportsmen became perhaps the most zealous defenders of the sportsman's ethos. "Taken as a class, no finer sportsmen or better game shots ever lived in America than the landowners of the South Carolina Lowcountry during the latter two-thirds of the nineteenth century," Henry Edwards Davis wrote. "I grew to manhood under the tutelage of men of this class, and know from experience what they could do with either a shotgun or a rifle; and I had from them accounts of their predecessors with weapons of the same type."⁵⁰ Many Northern sportsmen agreed. "Therefore I say that the South is the seat of the truest sportsmanship of America to-day," Chicagoan Emerson Hough declared in 1895, "because there neither game nor sport is held generally as matter for barter or sale. Both are held as the privileges of gentlemen, and this is the right way to look at it, too." Openly hostile to hunting or fishing for any reason other than sport, Hough noted that "the wild animal should belong of right to the man who is enough master of the chase to reduce it to possession, and it should belong to no one else." He concluded that "I would not change the old conservative ways of the South if I could and hope they never will change."⁵¹

Like much of postwar Southern culture, the drive for exclusivity in hunting and fishing came in part from a longing for the mythologized antebellum plantation South. An unnamed 1880 *Forest and Stream* contributor argued that the best sportsmen in the United States—usually lawmakers—came from Dixie. "Before the war the sporting gentlemen in Congress almost invariably came from the South. Such men preserved the ancient sporting traditions. His kennels were filled with fox and deer hounds, and his stables contained hunters which would do credit to the fields of England and Scotland."⁵² Alexander Hunter also lamented the passing of such sport, noting that the fine Southern deer hound, once something of an art form as a hunting dog, had disappeared for good. "Now all this is changed," he concluded. "The two or three hounds that are found on the farm—plantation no longer—are all 'round dogs, and will follow anything which leaves a scent . . . The sleek, well-kept dog of the Southern plantation is a thing of the past."⁵³

An almost palpable sense that the best days of Southern hunting and fishing

had slipped away gave postwar sporting literature a decidedly nostalgic tenor, thoroughly romanticized and inherently linking antebellum field sports and race relations. Indeed, recollections of antebellum Southern sport invariably included slave subordinates. "Many a dark, drizzling night . . . when I was a small boy," a sportsman writing as Coahoma recalled in 1891, "have I gone forth with my favorite negro 'possum hunter' Ellis, one of the plantation hands, and his two faithful 'possum dogs' in the old antebellum times; and with great exultation [*sic*] have I gone back to the house at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and waked up my parents to show the fine live possum I had in a bag."⁵⁴ *Forest and Stream* contributor "P" made the connection between the hunting and fishing and race relations of the Old South even clearer, noting that an opossum hunt "seems to get into the very air and become infectious, and by some sort of freemasonry is at once known to all male kind on the plantation, from the austere master and the young gentlemen of the 'great house' to the white-wooled old 'uncle' and monkey-like pickaninnies of the 'quarters.'" At such times, "I have often snatched one of those whimpering and dusky nimrods from the grasp and wrath of his irate 'mammy' and borne him in triumph to the woods, he feeling that the luxury was cheaply purchased even at the expense of the severe paddling he was sure to get on the morrow."⁵⁵

An idealized version of antebellum social relationships and, later, the drive to reproduce them became important components of the Southern sporting code. John Fox Jr., in his *Blue-Grass and Rhododendron: Out-Doors in Old Kentucky*, made this point clear. Describing a hunting excursion he once witnessed that involved the former slave Old Ash, a poor white man named Tray, and a well-to-do white man known simply as "young Captain," Fox noted how the scene resurrected the Old South. "And there the three stood, the pillars of the old social structure that the war brought down—the slave, the poor white, the master of one and the lord of both. Between one and the other the chasm was still deep, but they would stand shoulder to shoulder to shoulder in the hunt that night."⁵⁶

That so many sportsmen made slaves a centerpiece of a romanticized Southern sporting field presents an apparent contradiction, when examined in conjunction with the venomous attacks on African Americans' hunting and fishing after Emancipation. Yet this makes sense. Both the fond memories about slave companions found in antebellum narratives and the harsh postwar criticisms of the "Pot-Hunting Son of Ham" spring from a common belief in blacks' subordination. For Southern sportsmen, this subordination was best exemplified by the antebellum sportsman-servant relationship, the loss of which explained blacks' destructive sporting practices after Emancipation. Ultimately, criticism of African-

American huntsmen and fishermen did not just reflect contemporary concern over wildlife. It simultaneously expressed fear for the future of both Southern wildlife and white supremacy and lamented the loss of the racial subordination and labor control that anchored elite whites' vision of the Old South.

CRITICISM OF AFRICAN AMERICANS' SPORTING HABITS

Several key components comprised whites' characterizations of blacks' sporting behavior, each revolving around the core idea that class position and racial makeup made African Americans poor sportsmen who would not adhere to proper sporting codes. Like all who depended on hunting and fishing for subsistence, African Americans privileged the quantity of their catch over the quality of their sportsmanship. In the opinion of well-to-do white sportsmen, blacks killed fish and game at an alarming rate,⁵⁷ and because of character traits peculiar to their race, black sportsmen lacked the basic competency, technological prowess, and concern for rules possessed by their white counterparts. African Americans who hunted and fished independent of whites' oversight inevitably made poor, even dangerous, hunters and fishermen. Whites relied on these assumptions to convince the sporting public that former slaves threatened Southern wildlife and to exalt their own status as restrained, refined, and intelligent sportsmen.

Upper-class sportsmen typically asserted that African Americans did not care for sport and merely used hunting and fishing as sources of food and income.⁵⁸ This characterization associated African Americans with inferior sporting practices and furthered the notion that black sportsmen concerned themselves only with animals deemed "black game" or "negro game." Indeed, an enduring stereotype of rural African-American life, frequently and energetically reinforced in nineteenth-century sporting magazines and narratives, portrayed blacks as driven (apparently by more than mere habit) to seek out the opossum and raccoon as their favorite quarry. The association between African Americans and small game, taking root under slavery as masters sought to separate aristocratic sport from the subsistence-oriented hunting of their slave property, became a standard trope of Southern sporting narratives. On one level, such an association reflects the reality of slaves' hunting habits. Small game was widely available and the easiest to trap or catch at night, and this activity was the least likely to draw the ire of white observers. Yet constantly linking African Americans with small game also reflected the wishful thinking of elites eager to believe that large game and fowl were safe from their sporting inferiors. This assumed division between "black game" and "white game" was so well recognized, as Archibald Hamilton Rutledge



A group of African-American men and children eagerly await the capture of a treed raccoon. Like many other images of black Southerners made for a national audience, this 1902 stereograph was probably posed, driving home the widely broadcast link between former slaves and such small game. Stereotypical though it may have been, the image also reflects a material reality for many African Americans across the South. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

joked, that even animals were aware of it. Writing about blacks' sporting habits, Rutledge asserted that "I have frequently been persuaded that deer pay less attention to Negro rovers of the woods than they do to white men. Nor would this be unnatural; for it is a law of the caste system of the South that Negroes shall not kill deer."⁵⁹

Assertions linking African Americans with the hunting of stereotypical "black game" abound. H.P.U. claimed to have consulted an African-American acquaintance on the topic. "Thinking I might possibly be able to throw some light on the

vexed question of 'How to cook dat 'possum,' I interviewed my ancient colored friend, Uncle Dan'l, with the following result":

Uncle Dan'l speaks:

Iz I ebber cooked a possum?

Yah! Yah! Yah! You'z shoutin' now!

Wan 'ter know the way to boss 'im?

Sho! Any fool nigga tell yo' how.⁶⁰

White sportsmen, desperate to believe that African Americans confined themselves to certain game and eager to saddle people of color with badges of inferiority, advanced such stereotypical ideas throughout the nineteenth century.⁶¹

A Denver, South Carolina, sportsman writing under the name Blue Ridge helped keep such associations alive. Commenting on South Carolina's small game, he noted that "a few opossums are still left to entice the night hunter to forego the pleasures of sleep for a time and ramble around in search of them." Moreover, marveling at "how so sluggish an animal as a possum survives the nightly attacks made on them by the proverbial darkey and his dogs," he assured readers that the animals had reasonable prospects for survival.⁶² Sportsman F. A. Olds, describing the popularity of the opossum in North Carolina, similarly noted that "there is no sport which possesses a tenth of the fascination for the negro, certainly for the North Carolina negro, that 'possum huntin' does." Moreover, Olds claimed, "the 'possum is something which brings to the surface all the unctuousness of the darkey, and the darkey does not live who can stop a smile at the sight of one of these queer animals."⁶³

Such assumptions penetrated into late-nineteenth-century sporting poetry, a common staple of sporting periodicals. The anonymous poem "Coon," for example, makes the point with a rhetorical question:

Dar's a coon on de groun'

An' a coon in de tree;

Now what do you think

De end will be?

Endorsing the stereotype that former slaves would do virtually anything to catch a raccoon, the poem leaves little doubt as to the confrontation's resolution. The African-American subject of the poem is driven, almost pathologically, to retrieve the raccoon from the tree:

An' soon he will land

On dat coon in de tree,

With a club dat will end
 Mr. Coon; you see.
 For with a coon on de groun'
 An' a coon in de tree,
 It is easy to guess
 What de end will be.⁶⁴

So strongly did white sportsmen connect African Americans with small game, unfit for proper sportsmen, that the discussion found its way into the debate over fish and game law. Noted conservationist T. S. Palmer, long-time secretary of the American Ornithological Union, speculated in a 1904 address before the North Carolina Audubon Society in Greensboro—probably for humorous effect—about the legal status of the raccoon. “An Iowa court decides that a coon is not the subject of larceny, but an Arkansas case criticizes this decision and takes issue with it, on the grounds that in some localities these animals are regarded as proper food and under such circumstances would be the subject of larceny . . . The Arkansas decision was doubtless deference to the tastes of our colored friends for that animal.”⁶⁵

As eagerly as white commentators linked black sportsmen with certain game, they just as quickly pointed out times when, regrettably, African Americans strayed from such associations. Their reactions demonstrate both how jealously white sportsmen guarded their assumed dominion over larger and more valuable game and how commonplace the notion of “black game” had become. White sportsmen preferred to believe that former slaves rarely moved beyond their love for small game, but not all remained so unrealistic. “Rallywood,” for example, in response to assertions that African-American sportsmen did not stray from traditional “black game,” asked simply, “Is there a white man in the world so green as to believe that they [former slaves] refrain from shooting partridges whenever they come upon them, the game law to the contrary notwithstanding?”⁶⁶ N.A.T. perceived former slaves’ stepping out of place as both threatening Texas’s fish and game supplies and reflecting whites’ loss of control. “The negro now seems to regard it as almost an insult to talk to him about a ‘possum. I have noticed this so frequently among our colored people that I am now very careful to abstain from all allusion to the ‘possum when in their hearing.” He concluded by wondering if this problem had become widespread. “Have the negroes in the other Southern states grown so proud as this? I hear that they have, but could not personally say so.”⁶⁷ For former slaves, rejecting “black game” continued the age-old struggle to maximize their customary activities. For former masters, it represented a sea change in Southern field sports that held dire implications.

The manner in which African Americans caught their quarry may have irritated white sportsmen more than their tendency to progress beyond stereotypically “black game.” According to the sporting press, former slaves slaughtered fish and game and lacked the decent restraint that supposedly characterized the refined white sportsman. Free from both the Old South’s racial hierarchy and a code of proper sportsmanship, African Americans took as much fish and game as they could. Farmers in the South Carolina Lowcountry, for example, complained bitterly about such nuisances. Summerville resident F. C. Ford expressed his outrage in a letter to James Henry Rice Jr. in November 1909. He recounted a morning run-in with a black huntsman on a train. Ford noticed the man carried an unusually large quantity of wild fowl. “On the rear of the street car I questioned him, but did not learn his name. However he advised me that he had killed some sixty odd coots, ducks, etc., last evening in Goose Creek.” The huntsman informed Ford that another African American, a Frank Sharper, kept boats in the nearby marshes to rent to black hunters and fishermen. “This negro said that he had sold most of his game before reaching the City, and I judge his purpose in going to market was to sell the balance,” Ford continued. “It seems that he and others are making a practice of this thing.”⁶⁸ For Ford, concerned about area wildlife and the violation of sporting rights purchased by fish and game clubs, such behavior was unacceptable. He hoped that Rice, as secretary of the Audubon Society, which at the time was charged with limited power to enforce state fish and game laws, could instruct one of his agents to detain such offenders as Sharper.⁶⁹ “It is certainly distressing,” Ford concluded, “to feel that these negroes should be destroying the birds and other game which the Otranto Club, the Goose-Creek Club, the Liberty Hall Club and others in that section are trying hard to preserve by protection—in fact are spending money to feed them, etc., to encourage their increase. We hope that you will take quick action in this matter.”⁷⁰

While most hunting for market by African Americans did not assume so large a scale, it nonetheless distressed white observers. “If our lands were not posted we would not have anything to hunt,” H. P. Wilder of South Boston, Virginia, declared in 1898, “nor would we be able to get any work done here in the open season, for the negro is a very persistent market hunter, and will kill more birds in one day than will one of our Northern friends in three.” The reason, according to Wilder, was the different intent of black huntsmen. “I do not mean to reflect on the ability of our visitors, but as they are out for sport and not for slaughter they do not exterminate the game like our own pot-hunters.”⁷¹ Portraying black hunters along Texas’s Brazos River as unskilled and immoderate, B.C.H. noted that “when he [the black hunter] finds where a covey of quail ‘use,’ he takes his gun . . . and

watches for them. As soon as he gets them nearly in a bunch as possible, he 'turns loose' his old cannon. When he 'come too' and finds his gun hasn't 'busted,' he takes what he has killed, never getting what have only been crippled and hobbled off to die, and goes to town to sell his booty.⁷² According to N.A.T., that slaughter began as soon as freed persons obtained weapons: "they made a rush for the fields and woods, and for a long time, summer and winter there was a perpetual fusillade. They slaughtered indiscriminately, shooting everything above the blue-bird in size. Even the mocking bird, for all his songs, was not safe."⁷³

An excellent illustration of the perceived and actual differences between elite white and African-American conceptions of proper hunting and fishing comes from Fred Mather's account of a journey down the Red River from Shreveport to Alexandria, Louisiana, while collecting specimens for the United States Fish Commission in the mid-1870s.⁷⁴ To help him on the expedition, Mather employed Sam, an aging black laborer who supplemented his income by working as a guide. The two did not see eye to eye on matters of sport, and their many disagreements provide valuable insight into the differences between blacks' and whites' sporting habits. Their relationship became strained before the trip began, as Sam landed a large catfish that dwarfed Mather's personal best. "It was 3 ft. 4 in. long, and weighed 63½ lbs. It was a record catfish for me, for a 10-pounder . . . was my largest," Mather noted. Obviously irked by Sam's haul, and then by Sam's decision to sell the fish, Mather assumed he would use the money foolishly. "Uncle Sam, as [locals] called my lone fisherman, sold the fish for \$2.50, about 4 cents per pound, and with so much wealth in his possession I expected he would blow it all on booze." Once the two got underway, Sam impressed Mather with his steering prowess. "I thought I knew a trick or two in running streams with a boat, but now I had learned from another poor ducky, and might truthfully say that I knew a trick or three." Grateful for what he had learned, Mather began to regret his previous hard feelings. "I wanted to apologize," he noted, "but that would never do." Note that although it was not acceptable for Sam to upstage Mather in sporting prowess, in the subordinate role of paddler and guide, Sam could teach his employer new steering methods.

Needing samples for his study, Mather promised Sam new fishing hooks if the guide landed an alligator snapping turtle larger than 60 pounds, and the two began fishing in earnest. A running philosophical discussion of proper fishing began when they caught a number of turtles that, according to Mather, were too big to taste good. He wanted to throw them back, while Sam wanted to keep them. Mather eventually compromised, letting Sam keep one, but not before a dialogue on sportsmanship. "Sam and I discussed the snapper question for a while with no

prospect of agreement, and then he said: 'Yo ain' gwine let all dese snappahs go 'case dey ain' de kin' yo' want an' I want de big one to cook fo yo', an' yo'll say he's de bes'es tittle yo' eveh stuck a toof in.'" Mather gave in, but imparted a lecture on proper sport, warning his guide that "what we catch is for our own use, if we want it, but I don't want to kill any animal, fish, bird or turtle unless it is needed for food or it is my enemy, as a rattlesnake is." Mather was uncertain of the extent to which "this new religion penetrated Sam's brain," but he was gratified several days later when Sam "carefully unhooked a big sunfish and let it go, when on previous trips he might have dropped it in the boat to die, and then have thrown it away."⁷⁵

For Mather, releasing extra animals showed proper sportsmanship; for Sam it was wasteful. "Sam did not accord with my views of killing only for our needs," Mather explained; "there was a market for food of all kinds in Alexandria, and now that we were capturing fish and turtles in greater number than we could use, he naturally desired to utilize them for that market." Here lay the essential difference between elite whites' and poor blacks' sporting habits: "From [Sam's] point of view it was the height of idiocy to turn loose catfish and turtles which had a considerable market value; he could not understand it. As for me, I had not journeyed to the lake on a commercial venture." Noting that Sam "interpreted the law of 'dominion' of man over 'the beasts of the field' in a different manner from my interpretation," Mather described the biggest divide between black and white sportsmen. "They think that a day which sends them an extra lot of birds or fish is to be credited to them as a great sportsman, and don't know that they are men of that abominable class called hogs; I have a vocabulary of words to describe them, but the editor would blue-pencil them all."⁷⁶

Embedded in Mather's account are essential features of white sportsmen's attitudes toward blacks' hunting and fishing. African Americans had long relied on the Southern environment to guarantee subsistence and provide a degree of material comfort and independence otherwise denied them. Slaves and freed persons could not adhere to sporting codes proffered by white sportsmen who, as an emblem of personal and class status, eschewed the drive for food or profit. White sportsmen, eager to improve their sport and their standing in the sporting fraternity, cultivated images of racial subordination and blacks' sporting inferiority both to portray African Americans as archetypes of poor sportsmanship and to stamp them as inherently inferior.

Mather and other white sportsmen believed African Americans were incurable fish and game slaughterers, but they moved beyond this to also condemn African Americans' supposed lack of concern for fair sporting methods. For whites, such

behavior was more than a marker of bad sport; it was a vibrant symbol of both racial identity and racial inferiority.⁷⁷ Well aware that African Americans hunted and fished out of necessity, white sportsmen nevertheless decried the methods used to maximize the catch. N.A.T. wrote in 1883: "We have many negroes who follow gunning as a means of livelihood in ducking season." Noting that the black hunter "returns with just as many ducks as the white man, and even more if the latter not be a very good hunter," he explained this success by pointing out the frequent violation of codes of moderation. "The way he does it is this: he finds a good place for ducks; to that place he repairs early in the morning, and on that spot he stays all day long." Once there, the African-American gunner worked to maximize not his enjoyment, but his kills, for even though "his weapon may be an old musket, or an old rickety double-barreled muzzle-loader, he often kills as many birds at a fire, and indeed generally does . . . In this way they often make large bags in a day."⁷⁸ The method described here, it should be noted, is nearly identical to that employed by poor white hunters across the South, particularly in such rich ducking areas as the Chesapeake Bay, the North Carolina sounds, the South Carolina Lowcountry, the Louisiana lowlands, and the Mississippi flyway. Yet whites reserved special anger for African-American gunners who killed as many ducks as possible with each shot.

Disgruntled observers also complained that African Americans killed any animal that crossed their path, whatever the species or the time of year.⁷⁹ One writer described such unlimited hunting in Louisiana, noting that it took a heavy toll. "It is no unusual thing to see a negro tramping over some back plantation road with a bag of that exquisite singer, the Southern nightingale or mocking bird, at his side . . . and were he to encounter the European nightingale itself, carrier pigeons, or any other fancy bird, it would make no difference to him, he would bang away at anything that looked as if it might be edible." The frustrated sportsman also noted that Louisiana fowling enthusiasts had "to adopt some sort of system in hunting to protect themselves from the thousands of amateurs, boys and negroes, who go duck hunting during the season."⁸⁰ Another perturbed sportsman, writing as E. Wanders On, expressed his outrage over freed persons' tendency to shamelessly slaughter Southern wildfowl: "the field is open to, and occupied by *heartless Senegambians*, who ruthlessly hunt and destroy our birds. All true sportsmen deprecate such conduct, and would be a unit in the effort to prevent it, if the law provided any remedy."⁸¹

Some writers simultaneously criticized blacks' hunting methods while lauding those of white sportsmen, accusing blacks of both unfairness and cowardice. Contributor M, stating that his preferred sport of turkey hunting "requires skill, pa-

tience and knowledge of the habits of the bird that few sportsmen indulge in it," complained that poor sportsmen resorted to unfair methods such as trapping to overcome skill deficiencies. "It is considered as decidedly unsportsmanlike to 'belt' or trap turkeys, and no one but 'cuffee' or a white pot-hunter ever does anything of the kind."⁸² David Brainard Whiting recalled from his North Carolina youth what he saw as an example of African Americans' cowardice. He described a winter when a wild cat was in the area: "the few colored people there were too afraid to go out after sun set and the white people kept close at home too. Some of us took out guns and went where we heard him [the wild cat] the night before but we only found his tracks." Whiting concluded that they could have taken the wild cat with enough stout sportsmen to brave the danger.⁸³ Both contributor M and Whiting relay the same basic idea that African Americans, lacking fairness and courage, did not have the stuff to be proper sportsmen.

FROM SPORTING INFERIORITY TO RACIAL INFERIORITY

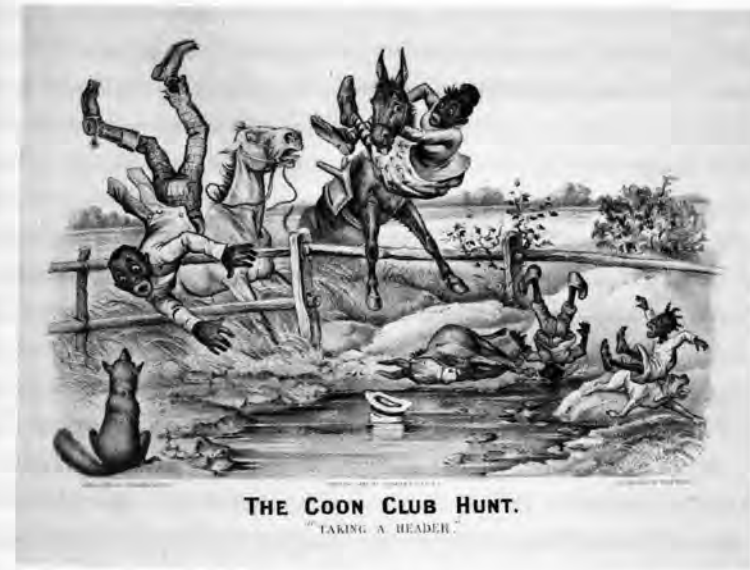
For some observers, African Americans' lack of skill and technical adeptness, rather than lack of courage or fairness, made them bad sportsmen. White sportsmen set themselves apart from their African-American counterparts by criticizing or poking fun at their seeming lack of skill, use of outdated technology, or unfamiliarity with modern sporting methods. White sportsmen's recollections routinely compared blacks' sporting methods unfavorably with their own. While on one of his Southern excursions, English sportsman J. Turner-Turner found great amusement in "an old nigger fishing with an enormous hook on the end of a piece of cord, and a stone for a sinker, the bait being a scarcely perceptible bit of worm somewhere on the hook; he told me he had never caught a fish there; and I was not much surprised."⁸⁴ A sportsman writing as J.E.W., who took to the field with an African-American laborer named Sparks, described the laborer's astonishment at his employer's breech-loading shotgun.⁸⁵ Noting that the "breech loading gun was a little too much for Sparks," he let the farmhand examine it. Unfamiliar with a breech-loader, Sparks was stunned when the weapon seemed to break in half in his hands. "Astonishment was depleted upon every feature of his face," J.E.W. recalled, "while his language deserves a place in 'the archives of gravity,' as one of our colored members of the Legislature said in 1868."⁸⁶

Whites also interpreted African Americans' customary reliance on small game—a stereotypical association whites worked hard to propagate—as emblematic of backwardness. In his collection of dialect stories, William H. Frazer, president of Queens College, Charlotte, North Carolina, drew on the assumed con-

nection between people of color and small game.⁸⁷ "The Possumist," for example, presents rural African Americans as unintelligent and concerned only with their obligatory quest for the opossum. In this story, set at the end of Reconstruction, a meeting of black leaders convenes to discuss the ramifications of a recently enacted grandfather clause. The first speaker, "a pompous brother . . . arrayed in broadcloth and patent leathers," rises and declares that, given the forces arrayed against them, the situation is hopeless. "Yas sah, I'se er pessimist," he concedes. A second speaker stands up, "another very pompous brother," who asserts that given the relative equality in Northern states, there is reason to hope. "Brudder Cheer-man," he declares, "I'se er optimist." Finally a third chimes in, "an old negro from the country" who "gives a loving description of catching a possum and his wife cooking it. 'I ain't none ob yo' optimist, en I ain't ob yo' pessimist, but I'se er possumist, I is, yas sah, I'se er possumist.'"⁸⁸ This story of how African Americans remained unprepared for the franchise hinges on the image of the "old negro from the country," reared under the racial and sporting relations of slavery. He cares not for politics, only for the comfort of "black game." The story confirms whites' basic assumptions and hopes about African Americans' sporting behavior.

Forest and Stream contributor "L.J.M." portrayed African-American sportsmen as both backward and in awe of whites' mastery over new weaponry. Recounting his first use of a new type of shell in his shotgun, L.J.M. recalled that "the darkies were amazed at the slight report and at the distance as well, and, as it is not etiquette in the South to enter, unbidden, into a conversation with a white 'gentleman,' they followed . . . their usual custom of talking at him among themselves." Quoted in the barely decipherable, broken English with which African Americans were typically credited, "the darkies" discussed the strange new weapon. One man in particular, 'Ras, was most impressed by the lack of a loud report. "Wot gits me's dat lill snappy noise like w'en she shoots," he declared. "Now ef I'd cut loose heah wif my ole smokestack [his older, louder weapon] 'twud shake dis yer whawf off'n its laigs."⁸⁹ For L.J.M., black sportsmen such as 'Ras, while perhaps perfectly adept at performing the brute labor required of sporting excursions, lacked the intelligence and culture to understand the weaponry and equipment of modern field sports.

Except in the context of the relationship between white sportsman and black laborer, whites rarely credited African Americans with true skill or knowledge. In fact, some narratives seemed designed to dispel the notion that African Americans could possess such attributes at all. A. J. Lipton of Hobucken, North Carolina, in describing a hunting trip with "a colored man named Jim," illustrates this point well. Bears had been seen in that part of Pamlico County, "and Jim, who claimed



An 1885 Currier & Ives lithograph depicts the likely consequences of pairing African Americans with fox hunting, the long-time bastion and symbol of aristocratic sport. This pairing, to white audiences both incongruous and humorous, reinforced the notion that former slaves, by their basic makeup, were not advanced enough to become competent sportsmen. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

to be a great bear hunter, proposed we should go after them." The two set out one night for the tall corn and a chance to kill a bear, but Jim soon lost his nerve. "Hadn't we better be gwine home?" he asked. "I'se shibberin wid de cole." Lipton agreed, but as the two departed they ran into the bear. Despite his claim of being a skilled bear hunter, Jim ran for cover, leaving Lipton to shoot the bear. "I called Jim, and presently heard him coming through the canes," Lipton recalled. Jim stopped at a prudent distance and inquired, "Has you shuah killed de bar? I told him to come and see it."⁹⁰ In this narrative, Lipton brags about his own skill and bravery and attacks the notion that African-American sportsmen could equal their white counterparts. Jim made bold claims about hunting skill, even proposing that he and Lipton should set out in search of the bear. But his claims ultimately proved false; he proved to be both a poor sportsman and a coward, who relied on his more competent white companion to save the day. Lipton's message is clear. Any pretense at true skill that African Americans might make was invalidated by the inescapable vagaries of black character.

Accounts of such episodes stamped African Americans as bad sportsmen un-

deserving of praise. Henry Edwards Davis, whose descriptions of his experiences with Old John, noted above, included the assertion that "I never knew him to do any work, as that was reserved for his wife and large family of children," adds a new component to agricultural employers' typical complaints about blacks' working habits. Apparently Old John used not hunting itself but the illusion of hunting to avoid work. According to Davis, Old John could be found every Saturday "in the local village leaning on his musket and telling the assembled audience of negroes about the many rattlesnakes he had recently killed after finding them by scent." Ultimately, Old John's claims, like those of A. J. Lipton's Jim, proved false. "Despite all his boasting, however, about his prowess, Old John never produced any tangible evidence of it in the form of a dead rattlesnake or a dead wild turkey."⁹¹ His claims invalidated, Old John remained just a poor sportsman who used hunting to avoid work. Whites eagerly consumed such stereotypes of African-American behavior and used the pages of sporting periodicals to strengthen them in the minds of readers. Moreover, like Davis and Lipton, they connected blacks' sporting practices and black character, using sporting narratives to further these stereotypes of African Americans as shiftless, unskilled, and unintelligent.

Whites' frustration over blacks' sporting behavior also grew from the concern that hunting and fishing might embolden African Americans to break down traditional patterns of deference. Touring a plantation near Natchez, Louisiana, in 1873, Edward King had an encounter that confirmed those fears of blacks' assertiveness. Traveling with the landowner, a planter identified only as "the Colonel," King encountered "a brown man mounted on a stout horse" and armed with guns, a long knife, and a hatchet, evidently prepared for a deer hunt. On seeing the would-be poacher, the Colonel tried to warn him off, saying "there will soon be no deer left." Undeterred, the hunter announced his intentions. "'Yas, Cunnel,' said the fellow, imprudently shifting his long rifle from his right to his left shoulder. 'I reckon ef I see any deer I's gwine to go fer 'em, sho; then, putting spurs to his steed, he galloped off.'⁹² Thus white sportsmen, disturbed by the breakdown of the Old South's social structure and afraid of the effects of unrestricted hunting and fishing on African Americans' behavior, framed "black sport" to fit their insecurities about the emancipated freedman.

Yet, despite the regularity of assertions linking African Americans' hunting and fishing with their basic character traits, and despite the frequency with which white writers described black sportsmen as unskilled and ineffective, the image of the poor, untalented black sportsman was not the only portrait of blacks' hunting and fishing presented to the public. White contributors to the sporting literature sometimes lauded African Americans' behavior afield, often presenting them as

quite skilled. Indeed, some of the same sportsmen who created images of blacks' inferiority could quickly change positions and compliment blacks' sporting prowess a few sentences later. The same African-American huntsman or fisherman initially depicted as lazy, improvident, and untalented one moment might be portrayed as shrewd and skilled the next. Here is another apparent contradiction of late-nineteenth-century Southern hunting and fishing narratives. In opining about black sportsmen, white contributors often took two seemingly incongruous positions, simultaneously presenting people of color as slow-witted yet astute, inexperienced yet well-worn, unfamiliar with firearms yet crack shots, ineffective yet flush with fish and game. This seeming contradiction can be explained if we decode the narrators' basic messages.

In the winter of 1882 and spring of 1883, a debate about black sportsmen raged in the pages of *Forest and Stream*. Motivated by the claim that freedmen bore the blame for the decline in numbers of Southern quail, the Virginia sportsman writing as M sparked a volley of responses by asserting that freedmen should not be so accused. M declared that "I dwell in one of the largest old slaveholding counties of Virginia, where the freedmen are in a large majority; that I am a 'bourbon democrat' . . . and that I have been all my life an ardent and active sportsman," but "it is a slander upon the freedman to charge him as the guilty party" in the quail decline. For M, the freedman, by habit and tradition, simply did not have the skill to hunt such wildfowl on the wing (that is, while in flight); nor did he own the proper guns and dogs for such challenging endeavors. "He is by no means the pest some believe him to be, but as a rule is useful, law-abiding, humble and contented, trusting implicitly those, who, by fair dealing, have won his confidence."⁹³

Two months later Rallywood responded, arguing that believing that freedmen could not or did not destroy quail was wishful thinking. "Indeed his [M's] faith in their simplicity is childlike and bland, whereas the craftiest diplomat that ever wore a white skin is a novice in the art of concealment compared with the Virginia negro." For Rallywood, freedmen, far from being incapable sportsmen, skillfully hid their true abilities. "Does 'M' imagine that the colored brother never interviewed a henroost because he has never seen the trophies of the interview hanging on the outer walls of his log cabin?" Rallywood did not claim that African Americans were solely to blame for the problem, but did point out "the scores of negroes from the James [River] to the Mattaponi River, and east of the Richmond & Fredericksburg Railroad," constantly "skulking along the edge woods, swamps, and thickets, and keeping carefully out of sight of white folks," who would probably be drawn to such a target as the quail. Unlike M, who wished African Amer-

icans to remain poor sportsmen, Rallywood acknowledged their competence and threat to Southern game. "I have no apology to make to the good-natured, shrewd, shiftless freedman, since I know he will take no umbrage at my saying he pops Bob White every time he sees him, if he has a fuse in his hand."⁹⁴

This disagreement soon flared into a broader debate. In March 1883, M responded to Rallywood, challenging the idea that freedmen possessed enough intelligence to hide their sport. "It would be instructive for him [Rallywood] to tell us whether his experience bears out the assertion . . . as to the skill of the freedman as a diplomat."⁹⁵ M did not stand alone. N.A.T., the writer from Texas, while acknowledging African Americans' destructive potential, did not blame them for the quail depletion. "My candid opinion is that while he is still entitled to high rank as a game destroyer, he is not quite as bad as he used to be." He believed that although freedmen took to the field in large numbers after liberation, they gave up such sporting mania within a few years. "My judgment is that there is not one bird now killed by the freedmen where there were ten killed by him in the early days of his freedom." Unfortunately, N.A.T. argued, African-American sportsmen accounted for a great deal of quail slaughter through trapping. "Bob White is the principal sufferer by these implements, and I believe his destiny is to be destroyed by the negro . . . The only way to stop him [the black hunter] is to educate him into the conviction that he is behaving badly, and this, I fear, can never be done as long as Bob White exists."⁹⁶ Although freedmen lacked the will to assail the stately quail with guns, their poor sporting methods made them dangerous.

By April, sportsman "A.F.R." of Belvidere, North Carolina, had entered the debate, suggesting a third possibility. Freedmen, he argued "in defense of the darkey," could be perfectly fine sportsmen, at least for traditional "black game." But they had neither an abiding interest in nor the talent required for quail hunting. As evidence, he found a large covey of quail near a freedman's cabin. "The head of the family owned a gun, and was fond of hunting, but, like most darkies, he didn't hunt quail, because he didn't feel sure of killing on the wing, and didn't look for them on the ground. Nor is this an isolated instance. I can today, with my setter, find at least a dozen coveys of quail within 100 rods of negro cabins." According to A.F.R., freedmen might desire more "white game," but they simply lacked the skill. They also lacked the drive. Like other contributors who linked African Americans' hunting and fishing with their shiftlessness, the writer remained confident of Southern fish and game security because freedmen "are too lazy and worthless to hunt for a living. We have lots of negroes and plenty of quail, showing that the supply of quail is not cut off in this section by the freedman." For A.F.R., the freedman was competent enough to catch raccoons, opossums, squir-

rels, and rabbits, but lacked the ability and ambition to threaten white sportsmen's best interests.⁹⁷

This debate, which began in *Forest and Stream* in 1882 and 1883, reappeared from time to time through the 1880s, with contributors split over the basic question of precisely what threat African Americans posed to Southern game. Some sided with M, believing that freedmen were too attached to smaller game and too unskilled to seriously threaten more advanced quarry. Moreover, for such observers, freedmen generally behaved properly when kept in line by the white community, and thus threatened only "black game." Another group agreed with Rallywood and asserted that freedmen would, and did, kill whatever they could, often without white observers taking notice. Too free from decent restraint, these freedmen posed a serious danger. A third group, as represented by A.F.R., believed freedmen showed competence as sportsmen, but only for traditional "black game." Blacks did not step out of place, because they were content with small game and feared turning hunting into work. These three competing ideas formed the core of the discussions of African Americans' hunting and fishing that littered sporting periodicals in the late nineteenth century. They also account for the often contradictory assessments of blacks' sporting habits and behavior.

This tendency to mix messages about black sportsmen is reflected in the writings of South Carolina's Archibald Hamilton Rutledge, a distinguished source on Southern culture who was raised on field sports and set many of his writings in and around the sporting field. Rutledge, through his many books of verse and prose, and his poems and stories for *Field and Stream*, *Harper's*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, became the most important voice in spreading stories of the South Carolina sporting field to the wider American audience, helping to frame a particular vision of Southern hunting and fishing. His vision drew heavily on representations of African Americans.

Reared on his family's Hampton Plantation in the Santee River region near McClellanville, South Carolina, Rutledge learned to hunt and fish from family tenants and other local African Americans. In *Hunter's Choice*, he described his early sporting influences, including "an old African named Galboa," a slave huntsman and fisherman before liberation, who "could always get what he was sent after; and he could get it with an ease and nonchalance that were impressive, and were likewise suggestive of a kind of eerie skill instinctive to him and a few others of his race but denied the white man." Rutledge never took to the field with Galboa, who preferred to work alone. Another black huntsman, "Phineas McConnor, a slight, stooping, yellow Negro, who speaks with a lisping drawl," played a more direct role. Rutledge learned much from McConnor, who "appears to have an es-

pecial insight into the ways of wild creatures; he seems to think their thoughts along with them (or a little ahead of them). And he knows his woods." Rutledge, in his learning about the Southern sporting field, had no greater influence. "Whenever I want to know definitely about game, whether of the moldering delta or of the swamps or of the pine-lands, I consult Phineas. Among the Negro woodsmen of my acquaintance, he is the authority."⁹⁸

Yet as often as Rutledge praised sportsmen such as Galboa and Phineas McConnor, he refused to consistently credit African Americans with true skill. One moment he praised them as the finest sportsmen, and then he derided their performance in the field. Rutledge distinguished between two kinds of black sportsmen. The most common was the "tattered Negro with a battered gun under his arm . . . If he brings home a rabbit or a squirrel or a 'possum, he will be both lucky and happy." The other is "an entirely different kind of Negro hunter," who is "found only in the more remote wilds of the Deep South." This sportsman, ostensibly because of his purer African heritage, "comes by his genius naturally." According to Rutledge, the former outnumbered the latter by a wide margin: "I personally know about a thousand Negroes who live in good hunting country. Few of them hunt at all; and only two or three are really gifted in the lore."⁹⁹ Notice again an apparent contradiction—Rutledge makes clear that African Americans made the best hunters and fishermen, but only a rare few could be counted as truly skilled sportsmen.

Rutledge would move back and forth between these positions in his writings. In *Home by the River*, he presented African-American sportsmen in one instance as more skilled than white sportsmen, then in the next as decidedly inferior.¹⁰⁰ This tension between positive characterizations of blacks' sporting abilities and negative characterizations of their behavior, work habits, and intellectual capacity underlay writings by Rutledge and other narrators of Southern field sport. Recalling a standing offer he once made to local African Americans of a 10 cent reward for each report of a game sighting, Rutledge remarked that no one had more skill at locating game. A "Negro invariably sees more wild creatures than a white man," since the "Negro's quiet way of walking, his lack of stealth and purposeful intent, his happy blending with the plantation landscape—these things and perhaps others beyond my ken enable him to see much wild game that would be frightened by a plantation owner" (112).

Despite that skill, so Rutledge believed, African Americans usually lacked the intelligence to use it. One day a black man named Isiah came to Rutledge to report a flock of wild turkeys and collect his dime. Rutledge asked when he spotted them. "Well, sah," answered Isiah, "it would be about last Friday a week ago" (112).

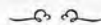
Rutledge explained this tendency, what he called "a Negro's lack of a sense of time," as an African-American character trait. "So accustomed is the Negro to having the white man set things straight that usually, instead of acting in an emergency, he will feel his duty done if he merely reports the trouble." He recalled a specific time when "I sent one of them to find a wild gobbler that I had badly wounded. The Negro found the great bird; it was unable to fly and could hardly stagger. But my man did not catch it. He walked back five miles to tell me that he had seen it. We never saw it again" (117).

As limited as African Americans' acumen for field sports could sometimes be, Rutledge did not doubt their skill in other areas. He described two tenants, Sam and Richard, whom he commissioned to build a cypress canoe. Although "they had never made one before and had never seen one made . . . with an ax and fire and adz they went to work; and by the next afternoon I had as pretty a ducking boat as you ever saw" (120). Yet even Richard, whose craftsmanship Rutledge praised, was soon criticized as incapable in the field. While shooting ducks one day, Rutledge asked Richard, who served as his boatman, to leave the boat and circle around a group of nearby ducks to drive them toward the boat. According to Rutledge, Richard could not handle even such a simple direction. "More than a mile he had gone, swimming nine huge old canals; then he had come in on the ducks from that direction," Rutledge recalled with both frustration and amusement. "On his return he took those nine canals on his stride, and when he reached me, mud and water from heel to head, he was all smiles because I had killed two mallards" (123).

The images of black sportsmen in Rutledge's stories—as instinctual yet unskilled, experienced yet unintelligent, loyal yet incompetent—reflect the common assertion that African Americans remained poor sportsmen because of essential racial characteristics. Yet despite the frequency with which Rutledge used stories of African Americans' sporting inadequacy to entertain his audience, he almost as frequently provided examples of personal experiences with black sportsmen—men like Galboa, Phineas McConnor, and others—who had "an instinct about problems of this kind that a white man rarely has" and were thus some of the finest hunters and fishermen in the Lowcountry.¹⁰¹

Whites' accounts, then, oscillated between presenting African Americans as inept, bumbling sportsmen and as savvy, veteran masters of hunting and fishing. Some even combined the two. A *Forest and Stream* contributor, commenting on the myth that African Americans lacked the skill to shoot birds on the wing, described "three negroes in the country . . . who regularly shoot quail on the wing," and he recalled meeting them in the field and hearing of their prowess. Yet the

white contributor found a way to devalue blacks' sporting skill and exalt his own. One day in the field, an African-American sportsman who claimed mastery of shooting birds on the wing led him to a gang of partridges, where he claimed he once bagged twenty-three with twenty-five shots. "Doubting his ability to repeat the performance, I offered to lend him my gun, as I should be delighted to see the best record wiped out with my Harrington & Richardson." The black sportsman, however, despite his claims, was too inexperienced with and intimidated by such a modern firearm to attempt a repeat performance. "He declined on the ground that he didn't understand 'dem new fangled guns widout no hammers,'" the white man noted with satisfaction, happy to have salvaged some personal pride out of the situation.¹⁰² African Americans may, regrettably, have become competent sportsmen, but only under limited circumstances. They may have some skill that might impinge on white huntsmen's privileges, but in method, technological advancement, and sheer courage they remained inherently inferior to their white counterparts.



Hunting and fishing by African Americans posed a dilemma for white sportsmen. If whites acknowledged the damage done by black sportsmen, they risked calling attention to lost racial control and narrowing the distance between themselves and their supposed sporting inferiors. If, preferring to uphold whites' supposed mastery of the Southern sporting field, they held to the notion that African Americans could not be effective sportsmen, they risked downplaying the wildlife depletion and delaying its remedy—the restriction of blacks' customary rights. In the end, they chose a middle approach that explained both African-American sportsmen's regrettable effectiveness and their predictable shortcomings as symptomatic of racial inferiority.

Whether whites characterized African Americans as poor sportsmen, bound by their race to "black game" and improper sporting behavior, or as skilled sportsmen, bound by their race to abuse those privileges and slaughter indiscriminately, inferiority was ultimately the central message of criticisms of African Americans' hunting and fishing in the fifty years after the Civil War. Both in sporting narratives, in which African Americans typically appeared in subordinate, usually unintelligent, and often comical roles, and in sporting periodicals, where white writers vented their most bitter complaints, white sportsmen carefully crafted a multi-pronged message about blacks' sporting habits. African Americans could not be reliable trustees of the South's rich and increasingly valuable natural environment. The major ill of the region, an increasingly recalcitrant and devolving

black population, could be seen and understood in microcosm in the sporting field. In other words, writers portrayed the problems that African Americans caused for sportsmen as indicative of the problems they created for the South as a whole. Even if whites could not agree on the specific nature of African Americans' hunting and fishing, they could agree on that larger problem. They also agreed that Southern field sports would be improved immeasurably if blacks' hunting and fishing could be diminished or eliminated altogether.

With these ideas firmly embedded, it took only a small intuitive leap for Southern sportsmen to advocate restricting African Americans' hunting and fishing rights. Indeed, those who called for local and state conservation measures between the 1880s, when these measures began in earnest, and the 1920s, when such protection became a permanent part of lawmakers' agenda, often used alleged abuses by African Americans as one of their prime justifications. African Americans played a critical role in the lives of white, Southern sportsmen, not only helping them establish their own identities but also providing an archetype of bad sporting behavior. That archetype would allow white sportsmen, landowners, and lawmakers to use the "race question" to sidestep objections to fish and game legislation and establish a comprehensive system of wildlife protection in many Southern states—which by the second decade of the twentieth century would regulate not only the region's hunting and fishing but also African-American independence.