



RAIL HUNTING

The author with basic rail hunting equipment - a small boat, a long pole and a good dog.



ING THE OLD WAY

By John Shtogren
Photos by Zack Shtogren

The outer edge of Virginia, the ocean side of the Eastern Shore, is one of those last good places, a place that looks and feels like it always has, a place in tune with the ebb and flow of its tidal creeks. Ancient names like Assateague, Chincoteague, Wachapreague beg to be chanted to a skin drum beat. The great salt marsh between the shore and the low range of barrier islands is where I go to hunt clapper rail and to reconnect with what is real and true.

Hunting at its best is about reconnecting, getting back in touch with the real world. In his *Meditations on Hunting*, Jose Ortega Y Gasset talks about the chromosome-deep comfort that comes from picking up your gun, whistling up your dog and reconnecting to a Paleolithic time when, “we still lived within the orbit of animal existence...within the bounds of nature and man.” A time when we knew our link in the great chain.

When you feel the need to get away to heal those head wounds that come from living every day, go over the Bay Bridge and find yourself on the Eastern Shore. Take your gun and a good dog, and hunt for rail birds in the great marsh. With luck, rail will grace your table, and perhaps the hunt will feed your soul.

Back to Basics

The best way to hunt rail is the old way, pure and simple. You need a small boat, a long pole and an old gun.

The Bird: Clapper rail, or marsh hens, are often heard but seldom seen. They live low in the marsh grass and when pressed will run first, swim second and fly only when out of cover. When seen, they appear chicken-like - a dusky brown, some fifteen inches tall with long legs, a curved beak and turned-up tail.

The Moon, the Tide, the Wind: Rail are most huntable for only a few hours on a few days in autumn, when the full and new moon tides flood the marsh and drive the rail to patches of high ground or mats of floating reeds. Still the hunter has to reckon with the wind. A west wind will push back the ocean, and the tide will not rise to cover the marsh. Conversely, an east wind is the hunter's friend.

The Boat and the Pole: You need a shallow-draft boat to float above the marsh grass and a fifteen foot pole to push the boat. I hunt from a Merrymeeting Bay sculling boat designed over a century ago.

The Gun and Shot: An old gun is the best gun for rail hunting, one that can take abuse. Salt water does terrible things to metal and does it quickly. I carry my Dad's Sears Roebuck sixteen gauge double that he bought from the catalogue in the '30s, and use dove loads.

The Push: Typically a rail hunt is a two-man affair with each taking his turn poling and shooting. If the tide does not rise high enough to cover the marsh grass, the hunters can walk and try to flush the birds, but without a flood tide the odds favor the rail.

Wachapreague, the Little City by the Sea: The rail hunter's Mecca has always been Wachapreague, halfway up the ocean side of the Eastern Shore. For over a century the Sports came down from Baltimore and DC to have local watermen pole them over the marsh. Few watermen are still willing to bend their backs for visiting Sports, but the great marsh abideth forever and welcomes the hunter willing to carry his own load.

September New Moon

This September's hunt was for Boomer, my aging Yellow Lab. He sat out last season after a bad tumor and a tough chemo



Boomer, the author's Lab, bringing home a rail

The author scanning the marsh for rail cover at high tide

follow-up, as if he had not already paid his dues with two new hips on his first two birthdays. But Boomer has a hunter's heart and accepts pain as part of the package. After his treatment and my summer of family funerals and chronic jetlag, we were both ready to get away.

On the September new moon we roll into Wachapreague just before dark. As I unload the Merrymeeting, Boomer stands at the edge of the marsh, nose into the steady east wind, ears planing like wings, and drinks in all the wondrous marsh scents. Finally he sneezes, flips over on his back, and kicks at the sky - joy to the world, all the boys and girls!

Sleep comes hard for us before the hunt. Boomer paces as I toss and turn, both of us tense with anticipation and hope for the new morning.

As the tide rises on the east wind, the marsh turns into a grassy lake. I pole the Merrymeeting along the edges of the flooded guts, and the rail rise magically



from the last of the marsh grass. I am both pusher and shooter. As a bird takes wing I stow the pole, pick up the double gun from its rack across the mid-deck (mindful of Boomer in the bow) and take the bird before it can find new cover. Boomer goes out and back eight times on the rising tide.

On the hour of falling tide we take six more birds, but I keep Boomer onboard to save his strength for the next



After hunting hard and well, Boomer watches over the bounty.

day's hunt. I pole the boat so he can pick up the birds from the bow as we drift by them, dead on the water. He delivers each rail to my hand, walking proudly from bow to stern, tail high and strutting his stuff all the way.

That night I awake to Boomer's pacing and whining. He senses the wind has turned and is now blowing from the west toward the ocean. Another restless night for us with nagging doubts about the coming tide.

The next morning we wait in the Merrymeeting, feeling the west wind and incoming tide facing off in their age-old fight for dominance. The wind wins and the tide fails to cover the marsh grass. "Back to the dock or get out and hunt?" I ask Boomer. He answers by going over the side.

I tow the boat with the wind at my back and leave the hunt to Boomer. I marvel at all that he knows that I never taught him. Deep in his Lab brain there is a playbook that tells him to circle wide and work the edge of the gut back toward me, driving the rail into the wind as if he were working fencerows in Iowa for pheasants. I follow Boomer for hours as he does what he does so well. When we turn back into the wind, we are miles from the landing, but Boomer has brought nine rails back to the Merrymeeting. For that he gets to ride as I slog our way home. We have worked hard and done well.

That evening, weary and content, I go over to the Island House Restaurant for cherrystone clams, fresh-caught flounder and a cup or two of auld lang syne. I have my table for one overlooking the

marsh. In the fading light I can now see clearly back through thirty rail seasons - - my dad down from Michigan, still strong and laughing, my sons as boys and men, retrievers and friends come and gone, shots passed and taken, hits and misses....

That night Boomer and I share the same dream of returning on the November moon for the last rail tide and the arrival of the first snow geese down from the Arctic, and we both smile and sleep the sweet sleep of the dead.

After the Hunt

The pleasures of rail continue in the kitchen. Rail tastes like a cross between wood duck and quail, not at all like chicken. Rail Choucroute is one of the mains at our Indian Summer feast, along with Snow Goose Cassoulet, Dove in Cornbread and Venison Rendang topped with poached seaside oysters. Henry



Rail at the Indian Summer Feast

Reidy, the owner of Strawberry Street Vineyard in Richmond and an avid hunter himself, chooses big Virginia wines for us—Whitehall Vineyards Viognier for the rail, Stone Mountain Vineyards Cabernet Franc Reserve for the snow goose and dove, and Horton Vineyard Syrah for the venison.

If You Want to Go

If you have your own boat or want to rent one, call Captain Zed’s Tackle Shop in Wachapreague for the latest rail and tide info: (757) 787-3222.

If you want to go out with a guide, check out the Chincoteague Hunting and Fishing Center, www.chincoteaguehunt-fish.com.

If you prefer a non-hunting nature experience on the marsh and shore, check out Broadwater Bay Ecotours, www.broadwaterbayecotours.com.

Besides being a hunter, the author is an international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands.

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