

# Rail Birding in South Jersey

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*Rail Skiff races at Tuckerton Seaport's Annual Baymen's Seafood and Music Festival the 4th weekend in June 2005.*

*Photo by Sandra Anton*

Rail birding is an increasingly rare hunting tradition that still thrives in South Jersey, particularly on the Maurice River. It first emerged as a popular recreation in the mid 1800s. By the 1920s New Jersey was the hot spot for rail birding, attracting influential and wealthy "sports" from Philadelphia and New York. An elite sport it appealed to both presidents (Benjamin Harris and Theodore Roosevelt rail birded in South Jersey) and artists.

There are three kinds of rail birds gunned in South Jersey — two of which, the Virginia rail and the Sora or "Carolina" rail, are attracted to wild rice which grows in freshwater marshes. The third type of rail bird, the clapper rail, eat fiddler crabs and frequents salt marshes. Hunters employ the more common duck boats to gun for clapper

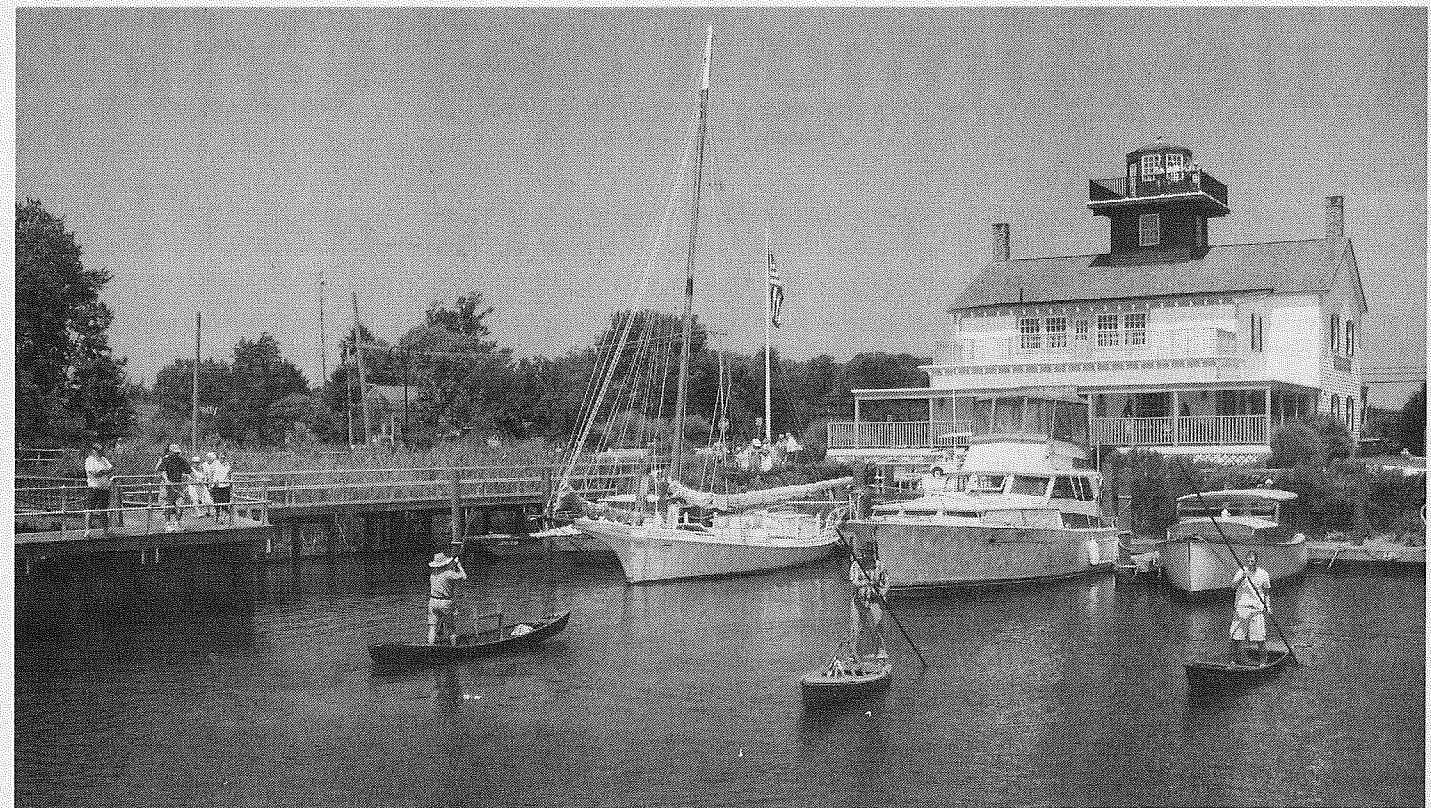
rail. But it is the freshwater marsh rail that invokes the spirit of New Jersey's rail hunting heritage.

In New Jersey, wild rice used to grow abundantly in the Delaware Bay tributaries along the Cohansey River, the Maurice River and even on the Rancocus. Unfortunately, wild rice stands have died off over the years as a result of development, invasive species like phragmites and an extending salt line. Salt marshes have largely replaced the former fresh water marshes leaving the Maurice River as one of the last

places left with enough wild rice stands to attract the Sora rail on their fall southern migration.

Historically, city "sport" rail birding in South Jersey employed local baymen and farmers as guides and "pushers". The tradition continues today in Port Elizabeth, NJ where the Camp

family still guide gunners on rail bird skiffs into the marsh. The "pusher" navigates by poling the boat through the marsh, a technique that takes balance, skill and practice; while the hunter stands in the bow, gun poised to shoot, as they flush out the rail. For the pusher, it is a strenuous task, but for the gunner — it is probably the least labor intensive of all waterfowl hunting. As rail bird hunter, carver and preservationist J.P. Hand explains, "One old timer referred to railbird hunting as providing 'just enough



*John Reitmeyer, J.P. Hand and Kevin McCormack at the start of the 1st Annual Tuckerton Creek Rail Skiff Race. The 2005 race was sponsored by the Fennimore Family and presented by the Jersey Shore Folklife Center at the Tuckerton Seaport.*

*Photo by Sandra Anton*

fresh air to do a tired man good."

The sport and the region were memorialized at the turn of the century by rail birding enthusiast and American artist, Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) of Philadelphia. One of the most outstanding artists of the 19th century, Eakins was a frequent visitor of Gloucester and Cumberland Counties painting scenes of the Maurice River and Delaware Bay. Thomas Eakins hunted out of a rail bird skiff that was built in Fairton, Cumberland County NJ where his father owned land. Two of Eakin's most popular paintings depict South Jersey's rail birding traditions. "Starting out after Rail" (1874) portrays a hunter sailing out in a Delaware Ducker and "Pushing for Rail" (1874) illustrates a hunting party poised on skiffs in the meadows.

Romanticized by artists and steeped in history and tradition, freshwater

marsh rail birding has an appeal partly due to the use of classic rail bird skiffs. Rail skiffs are shallow draft and almost always double ended boats. In South Jersey the skiffs were also used as work boats. For instance in Cumberland County where the marsh is very soft, rail skiffs were used for tending a trap line. Early rail birders on the Delaware Bay would launch the boats and sail the skiffs out to the rice meadows where they pulled the mast and began pushing. When done, they would step the mast, unfurl the sails and sail home with their catch for the day.

The "Delaware ducker" is a distinctive lapstrake skiff once common on the Delaware River and tributaries of the Delaware Bay in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. As J. P. Hand explains, the name "Delaware Ducker" is actually a bit of a misnomer for lapstrake rail skiffs, since most of them were built on both banks of the Delaware River or in

South Jersey. The earlier boats were mostly lapstrake rail gunning skiffs but by the end of 19th century boat builders began making flat sided, flat bottomed rail skiffs that were easier to build.

Today, there are only a few guides like the Camp family in Port Elizabeth offering rail birding tours to the faithful. Four generations of Camps have pushed rail birders through the marsh in September and October along the Maurice River in NJ. A smaller group of enthusiasts own their own skiffs. As rail birder Kevin McCormack explains, "Rail birding is not just one pursuit. It's not just the hunting. It's about the boats, the boat building...it's everything really. Rail birding embodies the whole cultural history of South Jersey."

