

Chapala Riviera History Notes

Tony Burton

1. Hunting at Lake Chapala during the 19th and 20th centuries

Before their partial drainage and reclamation at the start of the twentieth century, the marshes at the eastern end of Lake Chapala, where the River Lerma flows into the lake, were teeming with wildlife.

The productivity of this area had been recognized for centuries. For instance, in the late 1570s, when it became evident that the growth of sheep numbers in central Mexico had outstripped the carrying capacity of local pastureland, the enlightened Spanish Viceroy, Luis de Velasco, took various steps to prevent sheep herding from threatening indigenous land rights and food production.¹ Among them, he encouraged the Spanish practice of *agostadero*, a form of seasonal grazing in which flocks (often numbering tens of thousands of sheep) were moved annually from central Mexico to seasonal pastures near Lake Chapala. While the term was originally applied to summer (August) grazing in Spain, it was adopted in New Spain for "dry season" grazing, between December and March.

So important was this annual movement of sheep that provision was made in 1574 for the opening of special sheep lanes or *cañadas* to the eastern end of Lake Chapala, notwithstanding the considerable environmental damage resulting along the way by the large migrating flocks.

In the words of historian Francois Chevalier:

By 1579, and doubtless before, more than 200,000 sheep from the Querétaro region covered every September the 300 or 400 kilometers to the green meadows of Lake Chapala and the western part of Michoacán; the following May, they would return to their *estancias*.²

The distances given by Chevalier seem to be round-trip totals, given that most sheep farms were within about 160 kilometers (100 miles) of the prime dry season pastures on the flat, marshy swampland at the eastern end of Lake Chapala.

The Jiquilpan district alone supported more than 80,000 sheep each year, as is evident from the Geographic Account of Xiquilpan and District (1579):

More than eighty thousand sheep come from other parts to pasture seasonally on the edge of this village each year; it is very good land for them and they put on weight very well, since there are some saltpeter deposits around the marsh.³

¹ See Melville, Elinor G. K. 1994. *A plague of Sheep. Environmental consequences of the conquest of Mexico*. Cambridge University Press.

² Chevalier, F. 1963. *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico*. University of California Press.

³ Acuña, R. (ed) *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: Michoacán*. Edición de René Acuña. Volume 9 of *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. 1987.

Most early travelers visiting the area were far more interested in shooting the wildlife, especially the birds, than in viewing them.

1827

The earliest reports of outsiders arriving to hunt game date back to the early nineteenth century. In 1827, Sir George Henry Ward, the British consul, was one of the first to go water-fowl shooting in the marshes near La Barca:

"I found there a prodigious variety of every species of waterfowl, - wild ducks, geese, swans, bitterns, and herons, some of enormous size, with many others, the notes and plumage of which were equally new to me. I tried in vain to get within shot of the larger kind, [but] . . . contrived to shoot several ducks and a couple of wild geese."⁴

1885

Another Englishman, writer and adventurer E. Ernest Bilbrough [https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=13589] wrote an article for *The Field* in 1885 describing the opportunities Mexico offered for hunting, especially in the marshes or ciénegas at the eastern end of the lake. As these excerpts show, Bilbrough recognized the important role played by the ciénegas in the local ecosystem:

"These 'cienegas' form the most valuable pasturage for cattle and horses when drained, partially levelled, and well ditched; but are excessively dangerous to man and beast in their natural state, being nothing less than bogs with a thin crust of treacherous, safe-looking soil. Their value, however, is really derived from the very same cause which makes them dangerous: this being the porous or penetrable state of the lower strata, which receives the overflow from the lake at a period of the year when there is no rain, and promotes the growth of the grass when nothing but surface irrigation, at immense expense, would otherwise produce such an early crop."⁵

"The best—that is, the most abundant sport, was duck and geese shooting. Of the former, mallards, green teal, blue teal, redhead, wood-ducks, tree-ducks, and pintails were the most numerous varieties; while grey and white geese were in tens of thousands on some fields where the grass was sprouting. Snipe were fairly plentiful (one morning I shot eight, and three the same afternoon), hares and quail likewise. Curlews, sand snipe, glossy ibis and white ditto, green shanks, pelicans, grey cranes (*Grullas pardas*), spoonbills, avocets, and stilts were numerous; water hens (which are never eaten there) and thrashers (yellow-throated and red winged) very abundant."⁶

"Ground squirrels were plentiful in the hedges, and I believe rabbits flourish during the rains (May to October), when hares are also more prolific. There were several coyotes, but I never managed to get near enough, unfortunately, to kill one; though common owls, which hooted over my room at night, I used to shoot by moonlight, and some fine horned specimens were bagged also."⁷

⁴ Ward, Henry George. 1828. *Mexico In 1827*. London: Henry Colburn. LCTTA, chapter 18.

⁵ E. Ernest Bilbrough. 1885. "Sport and travel in Mexico." *The Field*, 24 October 1885, 585-6.

⁶ Bilbrough.

⁷ E. Ernest Bilbrough.

"But of all the varieties of sport, none had the same interest as the pursuit of white cranes, called also soldier cranes (Grullas blancas), which are the shyest birds and the wariest it has yet been my lot to stalk. Deer are much less difficult to approach, for a sharp cry or whistle will generally make them halt long enough to give you a chance to get your rifle to bear. Not so white cranes; the least sound, the least movement, and they are off."⁸

"The rifles at the hacienda were not true enough for such sport, and I was obliged to use ball in my gun. Even thus handicapped, pelicans, grey cranes, greater ibis, geese, etc., were added to the bag, but not till the last days of my stay did a white crane crown the whole. It was feeding with four others.... This time, however, I had a fair shot, and saw the bird fall, shot through the wing and body. He was a fine specimen—5ft. 3.5in from tip of beak to toe, 7ft. 1.5in. across the wings, and weighed 14.5lb."⁹

A MEXICAN SPORTSMAN'S CLUB.—Mexico City, Oct. 2.
—A meeting was held yesterday to arrange the preliminaries for the organization of a shooting club called the Chapala Shooting Club. The object of the club is to purchase grounds for shooting purposes adjacent to Lake Chapala on the Guadalajara branch of the Central Railway. The proprietary members are: R. S. Towne, New York; E. C. Brown, San Luis Potosi; E. W. Gould, Jr., E. H. Whorf, W. A. Frost, A. C. Michaelis, E. W. Jackson, Guillermo Landa y Escandon, Charles Sommer, Daniel Turner, W. H. Keller, Thomas Braniff, R. M. de Arozarena, Geo. D. Barron, E. Harris, H. C. Payne, Mexico; H. A. Vaughn, Guadalajara; S. W. Reynolds, Boston; H. C. Pierce, St. Louis; M. S. McCay, E. V. Sedgwick, San Luis Potosi. Other applications for membership are in hand which will soon be dealt with. Besides the 25 proprietary members, there will be 25 associate members elected. The necessary grounds will be secured forthwith and a club house erected thereon, and boats, etc., will be bought, a committee having already been appointed for the purpose. The lake and district of Chapala abound in game, and the members of the club will have excellent sport there. A hunt will be organized just as soon as the club house is erected. The principal game will be duck, snipe and geese.

Forest and Stream, 15 October 1891

1891

One of the earliest (if not the earliest) special-interest groups was the Chapala Shooting Club, which held its first meeting on 1 October 1891.¹⁰ The club was formed to purchase grounds for shooting purposes adjacent to Lake Chapala on the Guadalajara branch of the Central Railroad, near Ocotlán. The founding members were: R.S. Towne, New York; E. C. Brown, San Luis Potosi; R. W. Gould, Jr., E. H. Whorf, W. A. Frost, A. C. Michaelis, E. W. Jackson, Guillermo Landa y Escandon, Charles Sommer, Daniel Turner, W. H. Keller, Tomás Braniff,¹¹ R. M. de Arozarena, Geo. D. Barron, E. Harris, H. C. Payne, all of

⁸ E. Ernest Bilbrough.

⁹ E. Ernest Bilbrough.

¹⁰ Forest & Stream: A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, Shooting. 15 October 1891; Vol XXXVII No 13, 251.

¹¹ Mexican-born Tomás Braniff Ricard (1878-1942), not American-born Thomas Elmer Braniff (1883-1954).

Mexico City; H. A. Vaughn, Guadalajara; S. W. Reynolds, Boston; H. C. Pierce, St. Louis; M. S. McCay, E. V. Sedgwick, San Luis Potosi. Members planned to build a club house, purchase boats, and organize sport shooting of duck, snipe and geese.

1895

A few years later, Italian Count Alessandro Giuseppe Valerio Antona rode from Atequiza to Chapala with three friends one spring morning to go shooting. Their main objective was to hunt "the wild teal duck, which made their homes in the tangle of matted vegetation on the shores, and render Chapala a veritable paradise."¹²

"[They] procured a native boat and an Indian who served both as a steersman and oarsman, and embarked just before sunset well provided with ammunition and Parker guns, our zest for sport heightened by the tract of morass visible in the distance... which our greed told us could not but abound with prey.

"Our craft, made from a hollowed tree trunk, had for oars and rudder a single pole, such as might be called a slender flag-staff in the states, and used for such on national holidays, and which our Indian boatman and guide, Feliciano, maneuvered much like a laundryman attempting to fill a receptacle of soiled clothes."¹³

By moonlight, with the stars twinkling overhead, the men:

"gradually and cautiously approached the feeding grounds, and leaving the smallest of wakes behind us, slid gently through the reeds and grasses and anchored behind some great logs near a mud bank."¹⁴

As hundreds and hundreds of ducks started feeding in front of them, the men opened fire:

"Out of the reeds and sedge flew the terrified fowl, hundreds of wounded concealing themselves in the rushes, others half-swimming, half-wading away in their fright, the loud flapping of wings of the thousands in flight seeming like distant thunder, while dull thuds and loud splashes made known where our shots had told upon water and upon land."¹⁵

After waiting a few minutes—and as surviving ducks returned to feed—the men opened fire again... and again:

"Each man emptied his barrels as quickly as possible into the black clouds, loading up again every three minutes as long as ammunition lasted."¹⁶

When the dawn light came up, they collected "200 ducks, or 50 apiece, all blue-winged teal."¹⁷

¹² Guiseppe [Giuseppe] Antona. 1895. "Shooting Teal Duck at Lake Chapala." The Detroit Free Press, 3 March 1895, 11. See also <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=13540>

¹³ Antona.

¹⁴ Antona.

¹⁵ Antona.

¹⁶ Antona.

¹⁷ Antona.

1904

Some visitors, like ornithologist and explorer Charles Beebe¹⁸ (1877-1962) and his wife, Mary Blair Rice (1880-1959), wanted primarily to view the birdlife and record their findings. Armed with a shotgun, rifle, and two revolvers, the Beebes explored 'The Marshes of Chapala' in the latter half of March 1904:

"When the marvel of the bird-life of Lake Chapala and its marshes revealed itself to us, the feelings we experienced cannot be put into words; such one feels at a first glance through a great telescope, or perhaps when one gazes in wonder upon the distant earth from a balloon. At these times, one is for an instant outside of his petty personality and a part of, a realizer of, the cosmos. Here on these waters and marshes we saw, not individuals or flocks, but a world of birds! Never before had a realization of the untold solid bulk in numbers of the birds of our continent been impressed so vividly upon us. And the marvel of it all was the more impressive because of its unexpectedness."¹⁹

Beebe was impressed that local farmers had banded together to prevent the indiscriminate hunting of plumed egrets, highly prized for their plumage by milliners:

"Short tolerance had the first plume-hunter – an American – who began his nefarious work in the Chapala marshes. The rough but beauty-loving *caballeros* who owned the haciendas surrounding the lake talked it over, formed – to all intents and purposes – an Audubon Society, ran the millinery agent off, and forbade the shooting of these birds. There was no fine or imprisonment for shooting egrets, – only a widespread verbal 'revolver law,' more significant and potent than many of our inscribed legislative enactments."²⁰

1904

At the start of the twentieth century, President Porfirio Díaz made regular hunting trips to the marshes to see what he and his friends could bag. In January 1904, after a short stay in Chapala at "the elegant residence of Eduardo Collignon, one of Guadalajara's manufacturers," it was reported that Díaz was "well pleased with his outing" and that he and his party had "enjoyed some fine shooting and got a lot of water fowl."²¹

1905

The following year, the president (Díaz) returned to Chapala and went deer hunting. That trip came to an abrupt end when one of his aides, José Espinosa, accidentally shot himself in the head. Fortunately, "President Díaz was standing near when the accident occurred and he gave the wounded man his personal attention."²²

1905 was also the year when Baron Alphonse Rothschild and his brother Louis (sons of Baron Albert Rothschild, head of the world's greatest banking house at the time) spent about a week shooting at Lake Chapala.²³

¹⁸ (a) <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=4297> (b) LCTTA chapter 49.

¹⁹ Beebe, Charles William. 1905 *Two Bird-Lovers in Mexico*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Company. [and LCTTA chapter 49]

²⁰ Beebe.

²¹ Jalisco Times, 23 Jan 1904.

²² Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), 25 April 1905, 9; The Mexican Herald, 21 April 1905, 3.

²³ The Mexican Herald, 2 April 1905, 13.

1906

Within a few years of work beginning in 1906 to construct an embankment at the eastern end of the lake and begin drainage programs to reclaim former lake bed for agriculture, the habitat for birds was greatly altered and the appeal of the area for hunters declined, though hunting trips were still commonplace into the 1950s. One unintended and unwelcome legacy of game shooting, aside from the obvious impact on wildlife numbers, is the gradual decomposition of the spent cartridges which almost certainly continue to release lead into the local soil and water.

By 1907, in some parts of Mexico, game hunting had already become highly commercial. Hunters in the Valley of Mexico, for instance, rigged batteries of between 50 and 100 guns set in a row to cover entire shallow lakes where ducks were known to feed. By pulling a single wire, all guns would fire simultaneously slaughtering birds in huge numbers.²⁴ Sport shooting on Lake Chapala, by contrast, was more gentlemanly.

1908/9

Enthusiastic British-born journalist William English Carson,²⁵ who visited Mexico just before the start of the Mexican Revolution, was disappointed by the opportunities the lake offered for sport fishing. However,

"For the sportsman Chapala is far more attractive. Lying along some parts of the lake are extensive flats that are overflowed at high water. During the winter months these swamps are favorite resorts for myriads of feathered visitors from the north, ducks of all kinds and sizes, snipe, plover, geese, swans, and in fact all varieties of birds that like muddy creeks and shallow waters here congregate and fatten. While I was in Chapala a retired English naval officer, who had been cruising about the lake, brought in thirty geese one evening, the result of only one day's shooting. He said that Chapala afforded the finest wild-fowl shooting that he had ever enjoyed in his travels."²⁶

1909

Another author, Charles Bernard Nordhoff²⁷ (1887-1947), best known for co-writing *Mutiny on the Bounty*, was similarly impressed when he visited the area five years later, in November 1909. According to his notes, later published in *Condor* magazine:

"The fresh water marshes of Lake Chapala, in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, form another haven for waterfowl. At one end of the lake there is a great area of flooded land cut by a veritable labyrinth of sluggish channels, 400 square miles, I should say. The far interior of this swampy paradise, reached after three days' travel in a native canoe, is a vast sanctuary for wildfowl, a region of gently rolling damp prairies, set with small ponds, and traversed by a network of navigable channels leading to the great lake. I saw as many geese, White-fronted (*Anser albifrons*) and Snow (*Chen hyperboreus*), as I have ever seen in the Sacramento Valley, and the number of ducks was past belief, with some interesting species like the Masked and Florida Black or Dusky, to lend variety."²⁸

²⁴ The Salt Lake Herald (Utah), 25 November 1907, 8.

²⁵ (a) <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=9381> (b) LCTTA chapter 52.

²⁶ William English Carson. 1909. *Mexico: the wonderland of the south*. New York: Macmillan.

²⁷ (a) <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=805> (b) LCTTA chapter 54.

²⁸ Nordhoff, C. B. 1922 Notes on some water-fowl. *Condor*, 24: 64-65.

1909

Explorer, naturalist and writer Witold de Szyszlo²⁹ partied at Chapala with President Diaz in 1909:

"Taking advantage of my stay in Chapala, I decided to go hunting and climbed in a tiny canoe with a young Indian. On arriving in a cove which had a quartz rich sandy bottom, I was surrounded by hundreds of galaretas, gallinules with pretty blue feathers, who had only their heads sticking out of the water. I fired into the middle and felled a large number. As a hunting trophy, I brought a live gallinule with a leg wound back to the hotel. When the bird saw a lighted candle, it sprang to it and threw it down, a manoeuver that was repeated several times. Each time that it wanted to peck me violently with its beak, it first leaned its head backwards so as to hit more forcefully. The lake waters are home to a large variety of aquatic birds of all kinds: ducks, flamingos, egrets, herons and strange looking pililes."³⁰

1910

A typical report, this one originally in the *Guadalajara Times* in November 1910, read:

"Local hunters have been bringing in good bags of doves and plover and a few woodcock this week. Duck shooting has begun on the adjacent ranch "presas" [ponds] and around Lake Chapala. Blue and green winged teal sell on the streets at 10 centavos each; mallards at 15 to 18 cents; canvasbacks, 25 and 35 cents; doves, 5 cents; woodcock, 10 cents, and plover, 15 cent each."³¹

That same month, an American newspaper correspondent, Harry H. Dunn, traveled to the marshes at the eastern end of the lake in search of a supposed "white tiger" which was reported to have killed several individuals from nearby Ocotlán and Jamay. After a week of lying in wait at a watering hole, Dunn and his guide finally shot and killed the albino jaguar that had been terrorizing the area.³² Two years later, in an unrelated incident, Dunn was unceremoniously arrested, imprisoned and thrown out of Mexico.³³

Wildlife did occasionally impinge on day-to-day life in Chapala. In 1918 the town's inhabitants were understandably alarmed when it was reported that a "large tiger" had its lair on Cerro San Miguel and was prowling the streets at night, carrying off poultry and roosters. A few days later the mountain cat was surprised and killed as it sought yet more victims.³⁴

²⁹ (a) <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=3833> (b) LCTTA, chapter 55.

³⁰ Szyszlo, Witold de. 1913 *Dix mille kilomètres à travers le Mexique, 1909-1910*. Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie. Translation by Marie-Josée Bayeur, as published in LCTTA, chapter 55.

³¹ Reprinted in *The Oasis* (Arizola, Arizona), 12 November 1910, 11.

³² Harry H Dunn. 1913. "The Trail of the American Tiger". *Outing*, Volume LXII, [Sep 1913], p 664-677

³³ Anon. 1912. "Dunn reaches Laredo." *The Kingston Daily Freeman*, Number 7, 25 October 1912.

³⁴ *El Informador*: 15 September 1918, 2.

1950s

Hunting plays a part, too, in the superb novel *La Canoa Perdida*,³⁵ by Mexican author Ramón Rubín,³⁶ about the social, economic and ecological challenges facing Lake Chapala as it confronted a multi-year drought in the 1950s. As historian Wolfgang Vogt has rightly pointed out, Rubín's extended descriptions of the lake in the novel's early chapters are among "the best ever written about the lake."³⁷

The novel's protagonist, Ramón Fortuna, comes from "Las Tortugas," a ranch located between Chapala and Ocotlán. Fortuna is an impoverished fisherman who supplements a meager income by hunting birds, and dreams that he might be able one day to save enough to buy his own canoe. By chance, while out hunting, he stumbles across two ringed birds. Fortuna learns that their tags, which indicated they came from Winnipeg, Canada, are each worth the princely sum of five dollars. This unexpected good fortune gives him the chance to win the heart of "La Guera Hermelinda," the ambitious daughter of a neighbor, and woman of his desires. Fortuna writes to claim his reward, but fails to include any return address, and therefore waits in vain for any money to arrive.³⁸

Aside: The real-life ranch named "Las Tortugas," located very close to Ocotlán, was where pioneering American photographer-hotelier Winfield Scott made his home at the start of the twentieth century. Slightly further east were El Fuerte and the Hotel Ribera Castellanos, both of which played important roles in the early tourist development of the region.³⁹

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³⁵ <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=5245>

³⁶ <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=5239>

³⁷ Vogt, Wolfgang. 1989. "El Lago de Chapala en la literatura". Estudios Sociales. (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara), Año II #5, 37-47.

³⁸ Rubín, Ramón. 1951. *La canoa perdida: novela mestiza*. Guadalajara: Ediciones Altiplano.

³⁹ (a) Winfield Scott: <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=3040> (b) Hotel Ribera Castellanos: <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=10387> and chapter 6 of *Lake Chapala: a postcard history*.