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Friends of Eric Bienvenu

Eric Bienvenu — In Memoriam

— by Sue and Dan Cecchini, Jr.

The falconry community has produced an impressive lumber of artists. Among one of the finest sculptures of raptors was Eric Bienvenu of Louisiana. Sadly Eric passed away on November 15, 1989, and we will miss him very much.

Eric was bom in 1947 in Houma, Louisiana. He spent much of his youth in the out of doors in southern Louisiana.

Dan first met Eric at the 1978 NAFA Meet in Alamosa, Colorado, where he was displaying some of his beautiful miniature porcelain sculptures of raptors. Dan was so struck by the beauty and detail of the pieces that he ordered a lovely little female merlin sculpture on the spot for \$90 (even though he was only making \$400/month as a graduate student in Montana at the time). He just had to have it! We were simply in awe of Eric's enormous talent and feel fortunate to have collected some of his pieces. We feel enriched when we can study the beauty and detail of Eric's work; we feel happy to have known him. Eric was doing miniature wood carvings of raptors in the early 70s and switched to porcelain in 1975.

We had the opportunity to visit Eric's studio in New Orleans in 1983. The pieces which he had done in wax, but never got around to casting were incredible. His talents and interests went beyond raptors, but birds of prey seemed to hold a very special place to Eric. To us Eric appeared to be a rather shy person, but he was kind and generous; we could always count on Eric to gladly donate one of his exquisite pieces to the NAFA Meet Raffles each year. He was a strong supporter of NAFA in his own quiet way.

Eric seemed to love miniature things. His pieces were mostly scaled down replicas of falconry raptors, although he did do a beautiful full sized white gyrfalcon and a jack merlin. This predilection for petite things followed through to the types of raptors which he flew, Eric enjoyed flying merlins and



sharp-shinned hawks. We vividly remember the fine little tiercel sharpy which Eric was flying at the '84 NAFA Meet in Lamar, Colorado. He was flying it at the sparrows in the bushes around the hotel in which he was staying. It was the only 'musket' which we have ever seen at a NAFA Meet.

We miss not being able to talk with Eric on the phone or in person anymore. The American falconry community has lost a fine member. We hope those of you who never had the fortune to meet Eric will come to know a little of Eric through the following photos; although, photos have never been able to capture the delicate beauty of Eric's work. On the day Eric died he wrote a note to his friends. Eric's mother sent us a copy of Eric's last letter. Eric's mother also said, "If you ever hear the song, 'The Wind Beneath My Wings' by Gary Morris, think of Eric. It fits him perfectly." The following is from Eric's letter. "...Do not mourn my passing, but rejoice in all of the positive experiences that we have shared with each other. Peace & love, Eric".

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North American Falconers' Association

The Art of Eric Bienvenu

by Tom and Jennifer Coulson



years Tom was amazed to find another falconer from southeastern Louisiana. This chance encounter led to a great meet and the start of a long friendship. Tom was invited to hunt with Eric and his friends; one of them Alan Beske, is a very dedicated game hawk and friend to this day. After the meet Eric returned to his post in the army and they lost touch.

Several years later, when Eric moved back to Louisiana he called Tom about legalizing falconry in the state. And there ensued countless, endless hours talking about and trying to figure out how to trap migrant merlins. In the winter of 1975 Tom was flying a prairie

The falconry community is small, such that the death of one member is profoundly felt. In Eric Bienvenu's passing, American falconry lost both a falconer and an outstanding falconry artist. The porcelain miniature hawks and falcons we own of Eric's are treasured possessions. We wrote this article at the request of many falconers who inquired about his artwork. Regretfully, we lacked the foresight to make this tribute while he lived.

Tom first met Eric at the 1970 NAFA Field Meet in Yankton, South Dakota. Upon seeing Eric's last name across his army jacket, Tom commented that there was a bayou by that name near his house. Eric said, "Yes, I know. I'm from Houma, Louisiana". In those



falcon (at a spot that is now fondly referred to as "the merlin field") when his falcon was buzzed by a merlin. Until that time, neither had known that merlins wintered in New Orleans. The rest of the winter was spent trying to trap that merlin. Eric kept a vigilance from dawn till dark at the merlin field for days on end. They went to such

1994 NAFA Journal

extremes as to cut the middle out of the merlin's favorite oak tree to insert a small net. The merlin got caught several times in this contraption but the trappers could never retrieve it before it broke loose. Tom had the honor of trapping Eric's first merlin.

As far as we know, Eric and Tom were the first to trap merlins on the Louisiana coast. The coast served as a sort of funnel point for the fall migration, concentrating the merlins. Their most common way to trap along the coast was to set up dho-gazzas baited with pigeons. Eric was a rugged, determined individual and never one to give up. No one could outstay him in a hawk-trapping blind. He manned those dho-gazza blinds as if it were a matter of life and death. As both a falconer and an artist, he held a life-long fascination for merlins.

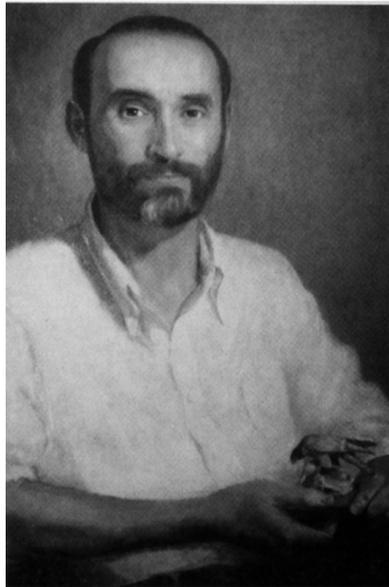
Eric was the first falconer to find a Cooper's nest in Louisiana. The nest was fairly inaccessible; the nest tree was very tall with no branches for the first 30 feet. Eric set up an observation blind to determine the age of the eyases while Tom geared up for the climb. Too bad there aren't photos to document Tom practicing on the telephone pole in front of the house. For his virgin climb, he had to climb 70 feet up a tupelo gum (*Nyssa aquatica*) in a light, slippery rain. Tom and Eric each took an eyas from that nest, lightening the parent's load to a more manageable two. Eric had success with his tiercel, taking sparrows with it at the 1980 NAFA Meet in Alamosa.

One of Jennifer's early encounters with Eric was an embarrassing phone call. In 1984 she had to call and tell him that an agent of wildlife and fisheries had assigned him as her sponsor. She listed Tom as her sponsor, but apparently he had his full quota of apprentices at the time. Eric was incredulous and somewhat aggravated at first; this was not a matter to be taken lightly. He had only met her once and probably did not remember her. Not to mention the fact that he lived almost an hour's drive away, making it difficult for him to effectively monitor

1994 NAFA Journal

her falconry activities. However, he realized that she had nothing to do with this mistaken appointment. Because she was a good friend of Tom's, and Tom had agreed to sponsor her, Eric eventually consented.

If you ever saw Eric at one of the NAFA Meets selling his wares, you would immediately recognize that he



Portrait of Eric painted by Dorothy Billiu.

was no businessman. His miniatures were ridiculously underpriced, and he was certainly no salesman. Once when Jennifer called him to buy a merlin miniature, he had forgotten the price. Needless to say, he never had any money. He was also generous to a fault...every year Eric would give Tom one of his larger miniatures.

If you have the good fortune to view his works, you will find that he captures the essence of each raptor. Eric never used artistic license that compromised the bird's true anatomy. In contemporary wildlife art, it is not unusual to see the juxtaposition of a hawk's head on a falcon's body, or a sloppy representa-



tion of the raptor's feet. Eric was truly a master of detail, possessing the falconer's eye for birds of prey.

After his death, Eric's family broke the molds, fearing that no other artist would faithfully do them justice. Eric's mother, Nell, has a substantial collection of his artwork, for he fondly made her copies of most of his pieces. This collection is awe-inspiring. Sadly, some of his best works are unfinished. A prairie falcon, almost completely painted, lies beside a covey of tiny Gambel's quail. Eric intended to create a desert diorama of the falcon in hot pursuit. The life-sized merlin, cast but unpainted, waits



Prairie falcon pendant, 1" wingspan.

for his hand. His mother alone holds his most prized possession—his life-sized gyr falcon, "Arctic Lord". He almost had a buyer for this piece. He hoped it would fetch \$15,000.00. He tried many times to make a replica of the "Arctic Lord", but his casts kept cracking. Nell Bienvenue also has the hooded saker fitted with Arab gear on a block perch. Eric titled this piece "Al Flur". The moving tribute "Eric Bienvenue—a Memorial" by Sue and Dan Cecchini, Jr. (1990 Journal) shows photos of Eric refining his "Arctic Lord" and holding "Al Flur".

On the day he died, his hawk-trapping friends at Cedar Grove saw a gyr falcon fly over. They watched it till it flew out of sight, thinking of him. At Eric's request, his ashes now rest at his



Red-tailed hawk, 1978, 4.25" high.

favorite Wisconsin haunt.

Many things remind us of Eric: making dho-gazzas, sitting in a hawk blind, or gazing on his porcelains. We cannot see a sharp-shin or a merlin without thinking of him. Sensing that he was near the end, Eric gave Tom his Katona watercolor of a jack merlin. It hangs over our mantelpiece. Rarely does one find such zealous enthusiasm for falconry and the birds coupled with the artistic talent all in one man. But Eric would not want us to lament. So in his memory we find comfort in what he left behind—he put so much of himself into these, his porcelain hawks and falcons. May his art bring him yet another form of immortality. Special thanks to Cesar and Terri Diaz for their assistance and to Nell Bienvenue for opening up her home, feeding us lunch and sharing her memories.

