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 born 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.

Well 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”.

The Art of Eric Bienvenu
by Tom and Jennifer Coulson

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

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 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
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 traps 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. One could not outstay him in a hawk-trapping blind. He manned those dho-gaza 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 in front of the house. For his virgin climb, he had to climb 70 feet up a tupelo gum (Nyssa sylvatica) 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, an artist, he held a life-long fascination for merlins.

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, 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 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 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 representation 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 for him to effectively monitor his asking price.

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