

Buzzard King

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Instructor: Wade Heaton

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When I was a boy growing up in the often interesting, often restricting, but always unique land that is Southeast Louisiana, every chance encounter could lead to adventure. In the course of my adventures, I learned from a "creature of the wild" that some of the most significant events in an individual's life take place on a very small scale. I was quarry to one of these defining moments one sunny day when I left my house with as much fishing gear as my little nine-year-old body could carry to reach my fishing hole by the Bogue Chitto River.

I planned my journey to lead me to a little slew filled with mud-cats and bream. I sat near its murky waters for many hours in my childhood. There I would often daydream of pulling great whales out of the depths before me and leading lost underwater civilizations from their containment within the dark waters below. As I fished, I longed to accomplish great things. I thought those great accomplishments would be large, overt actions. However, I found that instead of helping King Triton and the remnants of Atlantis out of the stagnant liquid where my line and bait rested, I could be of better use by helping a pitiful stranger in need.

The fish were biting well; the trouble was that I wasn't catching them. Those knaves always knew how to manipulate crickets and worms off my hook. They enjoyed quite a meal at the expense of my mother's trampled and hole-pocked flower bed. By subjugating those silly plants, I had a virtual bait factory.

After several hours of fishing, I began to feel that internal rumble that binds the lives of all humans, and I started home for lunch. As I was on my way, suddenly, I saw a dark flash in

the woods before me. I froze in horror with the thought that some vile entity of doom lurked ahead. I was sure I was about to meet the green-eyed swamp monster who preyed upon mischievous children, like those who damaged their mothers' gardens.

"Hey, boy," a voice boomed out of the brush with a gruff rasp.

I timidly replied as if I was in a crowd, "Y, Ya, You talkin' to me?"

"Yeah, you. Ain't cha dat' Husser Boy?"

"Uh..., yeah, yes sir, I am," I said, terrified that this deep voice in the woods was indeed a fabled swamp monster of ancestral lore.

"You alone, kid?"

What could I have done? How could I have protected myself? I remembered the preacher lecturing to the youth on the safety of numbers; so I made use of the preacher's advice. In doing so, I decided to lie. I worked every inventive muscle in my body.

"No! I am not alone. *We're* hunting monsters! Have you seen any? If you're a monster, you best look out."

"Monster! Ha!" the mysterious being replied with laughter. "I'm Boshack, you silly boy; I used to work for your Gran'pappy."

Thank goodness! As I was delighting in the comfort that no sinister monster was about to devour me, a dark figure suddenly emerged out of the thick, absorbing cover of the swamp. Boshack raised his imposing frame. He looked at me with a leathery face so baked by many years of field labor in the hot Louisiana sun that it could have doubled as a knife sharpener. Cigar ash fell from his yellow, tobacco-stained beard as he extended his rough, muscular, black hand. It was difficult to tell if there were more holes or fabric in his outfit. Telltale scars from work and battles immemorial tattooed the exposed skin on his arm.

"I'm jest passin' thew these parts. I spent the night under a lean-to that I made. I'ysa wonderin' if you got any food you can spare."

I remembered this old man as one of my grandfather's farm hands when I was little. It was he who showed me my fishing spot. When my grandfather died, he left town with the explanation that he had some "sight-seeing" to do. It had been several years since anyone in the community had seen him. I heard he was in jail for cutting a man's ear off down in Grand Isle. I judged him from this rumor, but I still felt that he was a good man. At that moment, out of some strange marriage of logic, fear, and attempted self-control, I reasoned that whatever he did, the other fellow probably deserved it. Having made this "rational" assessment, I decided not to run away. I told Boshack that I did not have any food on me, but if he waited around, I'd come back with something.

My body was roiling with emotions. There I had been, isolated in the wilderness, when an old acquaintance appeared from the thicket. While I feared him, I felt a sort of almost avuncular fondness for the man. I was pulled to flee for safety and not return to the aid of this poor soul, but some force compelled me to render assistance. I gave him my fishing gear and told him to meet me at the fishing hole. He said he knew what to do and would have a reward for me when I came back.

I returned home with many thoughts playing in the gymnasium of my pre-adolescent mind. My mother had my lunch prepared and waiting for me on the table. However, I convinced her into packing my lunch into a brown bag so I could return to the fishing action that I explained was too hot to miss.

I then ran as fast as I could to feed my pal Boshack. When I was about half-way to the hole, I remembered that I had an old tent that would be much better shelter than an old plastic

lean-to. I reversed my course and rummaged for about fifteen minutes for the tent and some supplies for Bo'.

He was grinning so cheerfully as I approached, one could have seen the ancient remnants of a full set of teeth three miles away. Boastfully, he explained that he was no common bum and that he intended to pay for his dinner. As thoughts of financial rewards enticed my nascent capitalist spirit, I saw Boshack reach behind his back and show me a squirmy brown ball of fur. I approached it with trepidation. Slowly, I inched closer and closer to the bouncy mass. Then, I found this fur to be feathers.

"What de heck?" I exclaimed in shock at seeing organisms outside of my expansive knowledge of woodland creatures.

"Baby Buzzards! I found these three on side of the road on the way up here. That one in the middle with the funny eye - I call him Luke - he was in the ditch. They musta' just started growin' feathers. You want 'em?"

"Sure, Bo!" I exclaimed as I felt all of my past apprehension of Boshack fade from my conscious and out of my fingers while I reached for the dirty little birds and said, "This is the neatest pet any boy at school will have."

"You're probably right, Jason. I hated to see dem little fellars die. We scavengers gots to look out for our own, you know."

"Why do you think they were beside the road?"

"Probably somebody robbed them of their nest, and threw 'em out since they were half-dead and no mo' fun to mess wit. One of' em had a goofy ribbon stuck on its chest that says 'Winner of the First Annual Buzzard Race.' Anyways, I was walkin' along the blacktop, and I seen' em. Ole' Ms. Sally, you know dat ole woman who runs the animal shelter in town? Well,

she stops and looks on 'em. The dog catcher was with her, and he looks on' em also. I sho' didn't 'sped 'em to jest leave 'em. But I look on 'em, and I had 'passion fer' em. So I pick' em up. I planned to find somebody to take care of 'em. Here are two big worms to feed 'em wit. I'll find more if that ain't enough."

"They hungry?" I inquired.

I didn't wait for a response; my enthusiasm for my new playmates was so intense. As I handed Bo' the brown-bag-lunch, tent, and supplies, I said, "Well, I brought you this, Boshack. I hope you have some use for it."

He heartily thanked me, and we spent the rest of the evening reminiscing about the "good ole' days," before he had made some of what he called "stupid-bad" decisions. I left Boshack that day full of happiness to see him again, pride for my brood of buzzards, and contentment for the accomplishment of one more great adventure.

I may not have made a world record catch that day. I may not have discovered the lost city of Atlantis or a mythical swamp monster, but I did help a man in need. It was worth it: before surrendering the buzzards to the authorities, I won the pet show for having the most unique pet. At our post-pet show awards ceremony, the boys of my school playground christened me "Buzzard King" and "Savior of the Scavengers."

I guess Boshack made it to wherever he was going. Neither I nor anyone else in the community heard from him again. To this day, I wonder just what happened to that unique man. People mock me sometimes because I often smile when I see buzzards. I never get upset at these people's taunts; old Bo' would have appreciated somebody smiling upon those searching for food as they are "just passing through." Aren't we all?

Mr. Heaton's Comments: *Jason Husser is a busy lad dedicated to graduating in record time. Luckily for us, he did have leisure growing up to enjoy his youth in rural Louisiana. I hope someday he takes some time off from his political consulting to assemble some of his adventures for us to enjoy.*