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DOGGED DETERMINATION

KELLI BOZEMAN
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The makers of Marsh Dog treats are converting a new breed of canine conservationists'

Photo by David Humphreys

Veni Harlan has rescued, shown and judged Borzois for three decades. Her brother Hansel, long partial to Jack Russell terriers, now dotes on a glass-eyed Catahoula. As masterminds behind the Marsh Dog brand, the pair has channeled this passion for pooches into a canine crusade.

Hansel first hatched the idea for a new kind of dog treat in 2011 while struggling to find a healthy protein source for an allergy-suffering terrier. Having studied in South America, he was familiar with nutria and related animals, which are considered a delicacy in places like Venezuela. Meanwhile, here in Louisiana, where nutria was imported for the fur trade decades ago, the otter-like mammals had become an invasive species, and their insatiable appetite for marsh plants was endangering the state's precious wetlands.

"Hansel felt strongly that nutria meat would make an ideal protein source for dogs," says Veni. "The semiaquatic animals have to be removed from the wetlands, but why waste it? The added benefits were that the meat was lean, eco-sustainable, and free of antibiotics and artificial hormones."

Veni, a graphic designer and photographer, says she knew a good idea when she heard one. She took on the tasks of packaging and branding nutria dog treats while Hansel, an attorney, focused on recipes and products. After nearly a year of research and plenty of taste-testing by their family pets, they introduced Marsh Dog and its first product, crunchy wild nutria biscuits called Barataria Bites. Surprisingly, Marsh Dog was then and still is the only company using nutria meat commercially for any purpose.

Acceptance of the unusual new treats has been widespread, both by dogs who, according to Veni, almost universally love the taste of nutria, and by humans who appreciate the cause and the company's fresh approach. "We keep it local and natural, using regional ingredients and nothing artificial," says Veni. "Dog owners are increasingly sensitive to what they feed their companions."

In fact, Marsh Dog packaging proudly proclaims that the biscuits only contain eight ingredients, and seven of them are sourced in Louisiana. The company uses whole brown rice from Crowley, for instance, while their sweet potatoes are harvested in Iota.

The Marsh Dog product line, which has grown to include wild nutria jerky known as Bark, is sold at pet-centric retailers around the state as well as online.

"We have shipped to every state in the country," says Veni. Slow expansion to nearby states is on the horizon, along with new products, including freeze-dried wild nutria and a kibble seasoning blend. Meanwhile, the sibling team—which now also includes sister Gretel Kelly of Dallas—enjoy the satisfaction of spreading their message.

"We didn't wake up and think, 'Let's get into the dog treat business,'" Veni says. "We wanted to solve a problem and bring an awareness to an environmental issue—one that contributes to a football-field-an-hour coastal loss. Harnessing the marketplace allows us to do both."

For more information, see marshdog.com. (<http://marshdog.com>)

The William Bartram Trail *Dedication*

Commemorating the 240th anniversary of naturalist William Bartram's visit to Louisiana with five historical markers being dedicated in September.



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