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Decoy Carving and Duck Hunting

BY NANCY SOLOMON

From the earliest days of hunting and fishing, hunters have tried to lure waterfowl into range of their nets and weapons with decoys made of rush, reed, or wood. Decoys were essential tools for both the commercial and recreational hunter. During the 19th century, baymen worked as professional duck hunters, shipping wildfowl to New York City, where duck meat was highly valued as an epicurean delight and where feathers were equally valued. Indispensable to the hunter were decoys, used to attract birds in flight to the hunters' "gunnin' boats" or shoreline duck blinds. Carvers made decoys out of wood, cork, and other materials. Working decoys were painted with simple broad strokes, and finished with a hand-carved wooden head. The decoys were attached to a simple anchor by a length of cord or line to prevent the decoy from floating away. They were simple, but highly effective tools.

Like many baymen, George Rigby's ancestors made a portion of their livelihood from commercial hunting and as hunting guides. His father worked at Wildfowler Decoys, based on Long Island, and was one of the first members of the Long Island Decoy Collectors Association. George is also active in the South Shore Waterfowlers Association. His grandfather was an active sportsman who also worked as a hunting guide. He often took his grandson hunting, a tradition that started when George was eight years old. His grandfather was also a duck boat builder.

George Rigby, Sr., was an active hunting guide, taking small groups of sportsmen for a day of hunting. Those days typically began at 4:30 a.m. and lasted until the early evening. Most of his customers were local residents. Rigby preferred hunting to clamming. Like many hunters, he made his own decoys, using them every season.



George Rigby, Jr., is an award-winning decoy carver. Photo by Nancy Solomon.

George Rigby, Jr., began hunting at an early age, along with decoy carving. He remembers going at two or three o'clock in the morning with his uncle, carrying a double barrel shotgun down to the beach where houses stand today. When he was in school, he would ride his bike down to the beach at 4 a.m. and would go to the Connetquot River on the east side of Roberts Creek every weekend. "We used to go down in my duck boat and shoot broadbill in Bellport Bay and Smiths' Point," in Great South Bay. His hunting friends included Bill Joeckel,

who is also a well-known duck hunter and decoy carver. Another friend, bayman John Buczak once said on the radio that, "whoever is shooting sure knows what they're doing." George describes: "a perfect day for hunting—a sunny day is no good—ducks only move in cold, nasty weather. The colder the weather, the better it is for ducks. Ice is good." George also likes just being there. "It's just fun being out there."

Like other hunters, George also carves his own decoys. He has won over 100 ribbons for competitions from Long Island to



A bufflehead decoy is unique to the Mid-Atlantic maritime region. Photo by Nancy Solomon.

decoys used in hunting. “I kind of stick to my old ways. If you’re going to use a machine, why bother? I still use a paintbrush and an oil or latex paint. Some guys use airbrushes. I used to work at Wildfowler Decoys, painting the birds. But I haven’t made any show decoys in a long time, because the competition is crazy.” George worked at Wildfowler when he graduated from high school, so he could save some money and buy a boat to work on the bay.

Like other traditional baymen and carvers,

California. His award winners include a canvasback. George explains, “I used a hatchet to carve it out with a chisel and a drill press to hollow it out. I painted it with gesso and combed it with a baby comb through wet paint. It was time-consuming, and I still have that duck; it’s one of my prized possessions.”

For working decoys, “I have some that I made years ago that I still use. I use a lot

of cork, which I bought from a friend of mine. My good ones I make out of that. You can buy the cork, which is the best to use. The wooden ones are a little tougher. The cork—I use a keel and keep the head separate. You have to rig them differently, because the tide is against the wind.”

Although some traditional carvers make show decoys, George prefers making working

George now has to work part-time on land as a contractor, but he prefers to make his living off the water. He worries about the regulations and whether he will be able to continue his way of life. In addition, more waterfront homeowners lodge complaints about the hunters, forcing many of them to remote places where dangerous storms can place them in jeopardy. Fortunately, waterfowlers generally hunt in groups, providing safety for each other. In addition, some have bay houses, where they can escape the wind and any storms, if necessary. The Seaman’s bay house, rebuilt after Superstorm Sandy, is also home to the Merrick Rod and Gun Club. The Pattersquash Gun Club, established in 1922, will rebuild their bay house, one that was also destroyed by Sandy. All that remains is for the wildfowl to return, an uncertainty as our local climate changes. ▼



Hunters like Ben Sohm make frequent use of their bay houses. Photo by Martha Cooper.

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