

Decoys For Ducks



Text by Tom Broderidge

Photographs by Sharon Broderidge

Hold a wooden duck decoy in your hand. Feel its weight and how finely it balances in your fingers. Imagine how lifelike it will look in the water. Then run your fingers around the smooth curve of the body. Feel the hundreds of tiny flat surfaces left by the tool of the carver. This bird was made the way decoys were made a hundred years ago: gauged by eye and carved by hand with a sharp knife. Now look at it closely. What a steady hand must have painted the fine line of white feathers along the wing of this pintail drake. And its

maker even gave it brown eyes. How well he must know ducks and duck hunting.

And in fact, Henry Brewer has been hunting ducks in northern Florida for 30 years and carving decoys for almost as long. Working in a two-story barn just north of Tallahassee, Brewer makes his living carving replicas of antique decoys — decorative and realistic birds — as well as practical hunting decoys like that pintail.

Although the duck decoy has evolved to be many things, from an example of true American art to a

decorator item for the home, Brewer's decoys have traditionally been made with hunting in mind. He still thinks of his birds, first and foremost, as tools to lure ducks.

Brewer grew up on the ponds and lakes of Leon County where he still hunts today. In addition, he has hunted ducks in Louisiana, Canada, and the famous Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland. Whether he's after diving ducks on large bays or puddle ducks on small ponds, decoys play a major part in his strategy.

When attracting diving ducks like canvasbacks, redheads, or ring-necks

to open water, Brewer likes to set his decoys out in three distinct groups in front of him. Two groups will be farther away, one to the right and one to the left. The third group will be just in front but slightly to one side of his camouflaged boat. He leaves open water in the middle of the triangle as a landing area for incoming ducks. Since ducks will generally land into the wind, Brewer sits facing the water with the wind coming over one shoulder. That way he can shoot at descending birds that are approaching the landing area at a slight angle from over his outer decoys.

On big, open water there's no limit to the number of decoys a hunter could use, Brewer says. But on a smaller pond, where his string is meant to attract puddle ducks such as mallards, teal, black ducks, or pintails, he may set out fewer than a dozen birds. Setting the decoys in a specific pattern isn't as critical as planning for a clear shot at ducks that are likely to be dropping down almost vertically between the trees.

The ratio of male to female decoys in a string can be important if there is a marked difference between their plumage. A typical dozen of Brewer's green-winged teal decoys, for example, would have eight drakes to four hens because the drake's contrasting red, green, and white coloring is visible from a greater distance than the hen's light and dark browns. For maximum visibility he sets the string far

enough away from banks and overhanging branches so that the decoys can be easily seen from the air.

When Brewer sets his decoys out in the water, he places each one gently, being careful not to splash it. A wet decoy has an unnatural shine. To make decoys as nonreflective as possible, they are painted with flat paint and sometimes the upper half of their bodies is even constructed of cork. Because the rough, irregular cork reflects less light than most wood, the finish of the decoy appears flatter and more realistic even after it's painted.

If Brewer is using more than one species of decoy, he segregates each species into its own group. The decoys within each group can be set quite close to each other in the water but, like real ducks, they must never be so close that they touch.

Although there is an ongoing debate among duck hunters about just how realistic a decoy must look to be successful, the final judges are always the ducks. Brewer's decoys are used by hunters from California to Maryland and appear to attract all the common varieties of ducks, on big water as well as small.

Sometimes his decoys even fool hunters.

Once Brewer watched two experienced hunters sneak up on his string of black duck decoys from more than a quarter of a mile away. As they closed in, Brewer heard them talking excitedly in their boat, getting ready to shoot because the

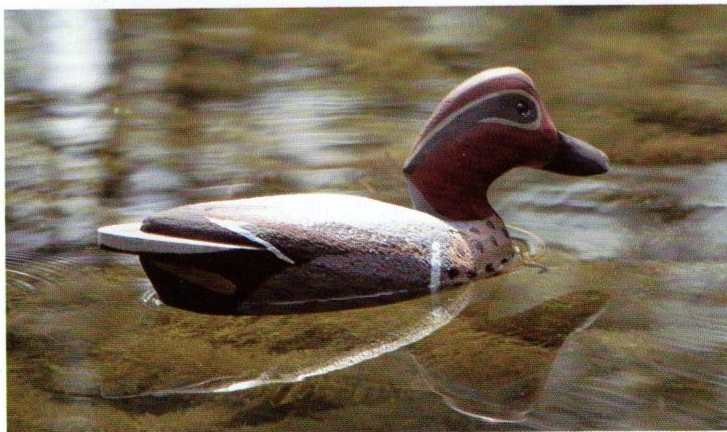


birds "must be about to jump any second." Brewer stood up and waved them off before they got into range.

Another afternoon he had set out a string of mallards on a pond and was sitting out of sight when a small plane banked and then circled overhead several times before flying away. Before dawn the next morning, Brewer was again set up at the pond when another hunting party arrived. The newcomers were disappointed to see Brewer. They had checked out the spot from the air the day before, they said, and had seen no sign of any hunters but had seen a fine flock of mallards on the water. Brewer shone the light out onto his string, giving them a hunter's-eye view of his birds instead of a duck's-eye view, and said modestly, "You mean these mallards?"

It's not at all surprising that Brewer's decoys sit so realistically in the water — his birds have won many awards at national carving competitions where the judging is based not only on the decoy's appearance but on its ability to self-right and float correctly after being submerged in a large tank of water.

Brewer actually float-tests each decoy himself and then adjusts its floating position by screwing a spoon-shaped lead weight to the decoy's underside. Positioned in precisely the right spot, this counterweight compensates for any imbalance due to imperfections in the wood or the bird's design and allows the decoy to float correctly.



As the decoy ages and absorbs water, it may need repair. Cracks must be filled and chips replaced. As the balance of the decoy changes, the counterweight can be adjusted to keep the bird floating just right.

The overall weight of the decoy is important too. A wooden decoy acts like a real duck partly because it is relatively heavy, typically weighing nearly a pound. It behaves realistically enough in light waves but really "comes alive" when the wind is up around 10 knots.

Still another feature of handmade birds is that no two are identical. Brewer's decoys are all slightly different sizes, and each one sits at just a little different level in the water. Some birds are made with longer necks, some with shorter. Some heads are higher, some lower. And, as would be the case in a group of real ducks, the heads in a string of Brewer's birds all point in slightly different directions.

He ensures the individuality of each decoy by not using machinery to duplicate the birds' shapes. Instead, he draws each head and body freehand on a block of wood, saws the basic shapes, and then carves them out by hand. His decoys are recognizable enough that some hunters have even given names to each bird in their string.

Brewer's birds generally don't need much maintenance. One sturdy string of his ring-necked duck decoys has been used for several hundred hours over the last 15 years without even needing a new coat of paint.

But the ease with which a bird can be repainted is one of the criteria used in traditional decoy judging and is also a factor taken into consideration in Brewer's hunting birds. Patterns are simple rather than elaborate. Colors, besides being lifelike, are easy to duplicate. These features make it easy for Brewer to rejuvenate a decoy's paint job, if necessary. Also, by returning decoys to their maker for both repainting and repair, the owner is able to protect his considerable investment.

Although handmade birds cost about ten times more than today's cheapest plastic decoys, birds made by an established carver represent the same kind of value as a fine shotgun. Furthermore, owning the work of a skilled craftsman adds to the enjoyment of hunting.

Nowadays, the quality of the experience has all but replaced the quantity of the harvest as the measure of success of duck hunting. The quantity days — the times of wide open hunting lands, enormous duck populations, and unlimited duck harvests — are gone forever. More important than the number of ducks a hunter takes is the quality of the time he spends engaged in the sport. Brewer says he hunts over his own decoys not only because he believes they are the best way to lure ducks, but because they also make

him feel "nostalgic" and "close to tradition."

"Fine decoys add to the hunting experience," he says, "whether you ever shoot a duck or not."

As time goes on, your well-used string of decoys becomes a reminder of all that has gone into making the experience: the special places and the old friends; the spectacular wing shots and the unbelievable misses; the nervous anticipation before each hunt and then the telling and the retelling of the stories when it's over. Memories become a part of an old decoy just as surely as the cedar wood and the cork and the paint.

And when you think of the many autumn mornings yet to come when your grandson and perhaps his son, too, will hunt over these same decoys, you know what's in store for them. Because when those days come, your decoys will still sit high and proud in the water, and still swing smartly in the breeze, and they will still lure even the wisest old ducks.

And for a duck hunter that is a pleasant thought indeed.

Tom and Sharon Broderidge are a free-lance writer/photographer team specializing in outdoor subjects. 📷

