

# Waterfowl Decoys

*Over 500,000 waterfowl decoys are sold per year in the USA alone – used by 1,5 million wingshooters who harvest 3,5 million ducks and geese*

Hollow decoys were, and are, preferred for use on lakes and rivers, where better bouyancy and easier transportation were more important criteria. Cork is not as durable, but was said to ride the water better, though the heads, tails and keels were necessarily still made of wood. Fresh-water stools were made with flat bottoms. Both fresh and salt water decoys were weighted with lead to achieve the desired bouyancy, and self-righting properties. Eventually industrialisation got into the

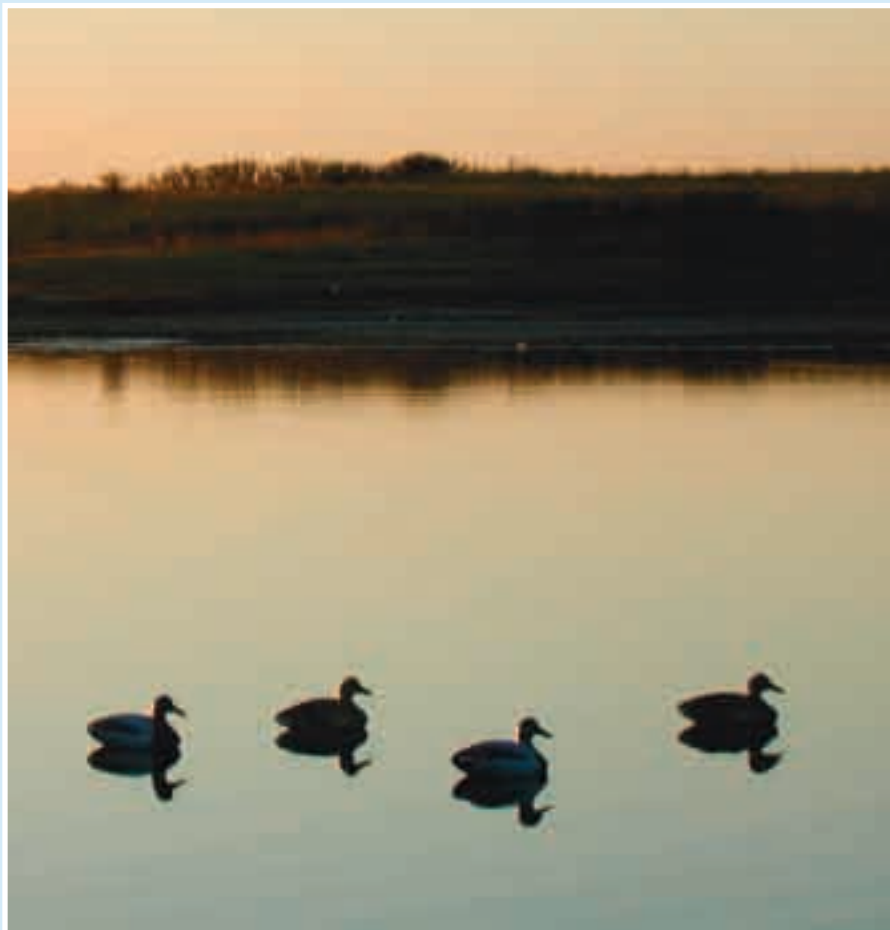
act (just after the Civil War) and several factories in the USA produced excellent wooden decoys – the best known being the Dodge and Mason factories of Detroit and the Stevens factory of Weedsport, New York State – in many shapes, sizes and species.

Wood remained the preferred medium for the next century, though folding tinplate land-bird decoys were quite common. For a while, compressed paper decoys were used, mainly to improve weight and portability. Though these worked well on land, their prolonged use in water caused

quite rapid deterioration unless they were continuously checked and frequently repainted. The demand for decoys was high in the heyday of market gunning, and then fell off markedly after 1918 when restrictive legislation was passed in the USA; but since then the demand has returned as the numbers of leisure hunters have increased.

Over 500,000 decoys are now sold per year in the USA alone, and used by about 1,5 million hunters who annually harvest about 3,5 million ducks and geese.

After 1945, plastics came to the fore, →



## Duff on Ducks and Decoys – Part 2

with the obvious advantages of lightness and durability – the Italians especially producing an excellent product. In fact almost all that one now sees appear to have been made by the Sportplast organisation. Sadly the quality of their product has diminished somewhat over the years, – the sides are perilously thin in places.

In America, the largest maker is the Flambeau Products Corporation, with an excellent range of products, though there are many others, such as “Carry-Lite” and Griffin & Howe. Try [www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com) or [www.llbean.com](http://www.llbean.com) to see just what a huge range is offered.

The only draw-back to modern mass-produced decoys is that the shapes are limited – generally the bird stares fixedly ahead – sleeping and preening ducks, those with their heads on their breasts, dabblers or feeders, and ducks looking to one side or the other being generally ignored. Dabbling “duck-bums”, however, are available in Europe and the USA, but not locally. As these birds indicate to others that all is well, these omissions are surprising. **The one decoy you should never see is that with an upwardly out-stretched neck – the alarm position!**

Both mallards, widgeon and teal – which can be repainted to represent our local species – are available, amongst many others, mainly diving ducks, which are less applicable.

The American Canada geese decoys can likewise be repainted to mimic both our Egyptian and Spurwing geese.

Since the aim is to present a contented group or family, there is a lot to be said for making one’s own varied shape decoy rig, and for most South African duckshooters, a dozen decoys will suffice for most occasions as our waters are usually quite restricted.

Making wooden decoys is not that difficult and surprisingly few tools are needed. Books are available on how to carve and paint decoys, and reference to local bird books will give pointers on what colours to use. Artist oil paints are preferable to acrylics in that they are duller. Never use shiny paint finishes, and always allow some weathering before use. The first collapsible decoys were made of rubber, and were most ingenious in design. A fastening point was formed by a bulge in the front

of the body of the duck, which was filled internally with a glass marble. Stability was provided by a metal ring that fitted tightly into a hole at the bottom of the body. In use, the decoy is tossed through the air, and as it falls into the water, air is trapped and so inflates the decoy. In practice, the decoy frequently falls on its side; the hunter then curses and winds it in to try again. Positioning the decoys in the cold air of pre-dawn also means that, as the day warms up, the trapped air expands, and eventually starts to escape, causing some hilarity as the hunter is then surrounded by ducks passing gas!

Conversely, if shooting the evening flight, the trapped air contracts as the sun goes down, causing the decoys to start collapsing, which is not nearly so hilarious.

The focus of more modern decoy design has been towards increasing lightness and stackability, so that the hunter can carry more decoys in less space. Some now have removable, and thus obviously moveable, heads. But lightness in itself brings problems as the decoy cannot then be thrown out, but has to be placed in position – necessitating waders or a





boat for a successful display. Also, unless carefully weighted, a decoy can suddenly skate sideways in a gust of wind and thus scare off live birds.

Modern American practice is to make the decoys from hollow shells of foamed plastics. Sometimes these are locally available. These stack beautifully, as the heads are removable – but they are excessively light and high winds can cause them to flip over. A weighted rim would be a distinct improvement. Also the advised method of anchoring – with a line threaded through two holes pierced through the shell – is flimsy and does not survive much rough handling. If used on land (such as with the geese decoys), they can be pegged down fore and aft, which does help, but makes even more holes in the shell.

Another innovation has been realistically printed silhouette decoys, which are especially popular for the larger geese species.

### Positioning of Decoys

The positioning of decoys successfully is an art that requires practice. The beginner should follow the following guidelines:–

- Decoys must be within shootable range, but not too close to the hunter (10 – 30 metres).
- The more the merrier, within practical limitations of getting them to the locality. Twelve are about the bare minimum. I routinely use 25–26.
- The decoys should be in place, and the hunter hidden, before flighting commences.
- The pattern is most important. Briefly, the most successful displays allow the live birds space to land within the pattern; a ‘figure-of-eight’, a ‘horseshoe’ or a large ‘C’ are recommended. In the case of the latter two, the arc should face into the wind; preferably with one arm close in to the hide. **Birds will not come into land over others already on the water.**
- Especially when shooting geese, some grazing decoys on the land also work well. (Much goose shooting is of course, entirely on land).
- The decoy set must be visible, out in the open, and not hidden in reeds. This


can be accomplished by having plenty of decoys, and also by using larger than life decoys. This is why a good decoy set usually has a couple of geese mixed in with the ducks.

- Generally speaking, the larger the decoy the better, as visibility is paramount. (Six foot geese decoys that double as hides are known to work, for example, though the law of diminishing returns also applies with regard to their portability). If you have to choose between 6 very large deeks and 18 smaller, go for the smaller as their pattern will cover a larger area.
- Always use an uneven number of decoys with one off a bit by itself – it will pull in the single stragglers more powerfully.
- Ducks never bump into each other – nor should decoys. One to two metres apart is the rule.
- The birds are most likely to approach from downwind, so your hide should not be so placed in relation to the decoys that the birds come in over the hide.
- Anchor lines, with lead weights to prevent wind drift, are essential, and the weights must be balanced to the decoy. If the decoys are going to be thrown into position then a more than adequate length of securing line is needed as well. However it is always preferable to place each decoy rather than throw it.
- Decoys that will be placed in position by wading, or from a boat only require a single anchor line. This should be at least 1.5 times as long as the water depth.
- Those that will be thrown into place firstly must have weighted keels and secondly a tethering line, which needs to be at least double the distance you intend to throw the decoy.
- In very windy conditions, it may be necessary to double the anchoring weight, else the decoys can drag and lose position.
- Movement in very still conditions can be accomplished by leading a tethering line from a decoy through an airbrick or a heavy weight, back to you. A tug on this every now and then will cause satisfactory ripples. Alternatively, with a looped line and two weights you can make the decoy “swim” back and forth.

One point needs to be stressed, most of our huntable species, and this includes our geese, will not land in amongst other birds, but slightly behind. The reason is postulated to be that they fear mid-air collisions with any birds that might be taking off. Thus always allow a good-sized landing area. The Americans are undoubtedly the most expert at the use of decoys, and of course they have had many years to perfect the art, plus the Pacific, Central, Mississippi and Atlantic migration flyways to practise on annually.

Many books have been written on the subject of waterfowl shooting, and my advice is to read all you can lay your hands on – it is surprising what one can learn from even the most esoteric sources.

“Successful Waterfowling” by Zack Taylor (Stackpole Books) is especially good on blinds, boats and decoy deployment. “Making Decoys, The Century-Old Way” by Chesser and Badger (Stackpole Books) is excellent on carving and painting. Another expensive, but well-worthwhile volume is “Duck Decoys – And How To Rig Them” by Ralf Coykendall (Lyons & Burford).

The names of the best duck shooting localities (and sources of hand-carved decoys) on the Eastern American seaboard roll off the tongue with a romantic ring — Barnegat, Chesapeake, Delaware, Shinnecock, Great South and Devil’s Bays; Susquehanna Flats, Spesutia Narrows, Currituck Sound, Ironbound Island and the especially beautifully named Havre de Grace. 

— Next Issue: BLINDS

