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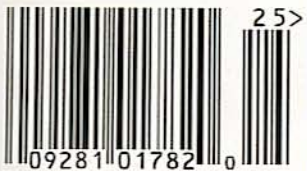
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A Pictorial Survey of Collectible Decoys

By Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr. and Traci Sobocinski

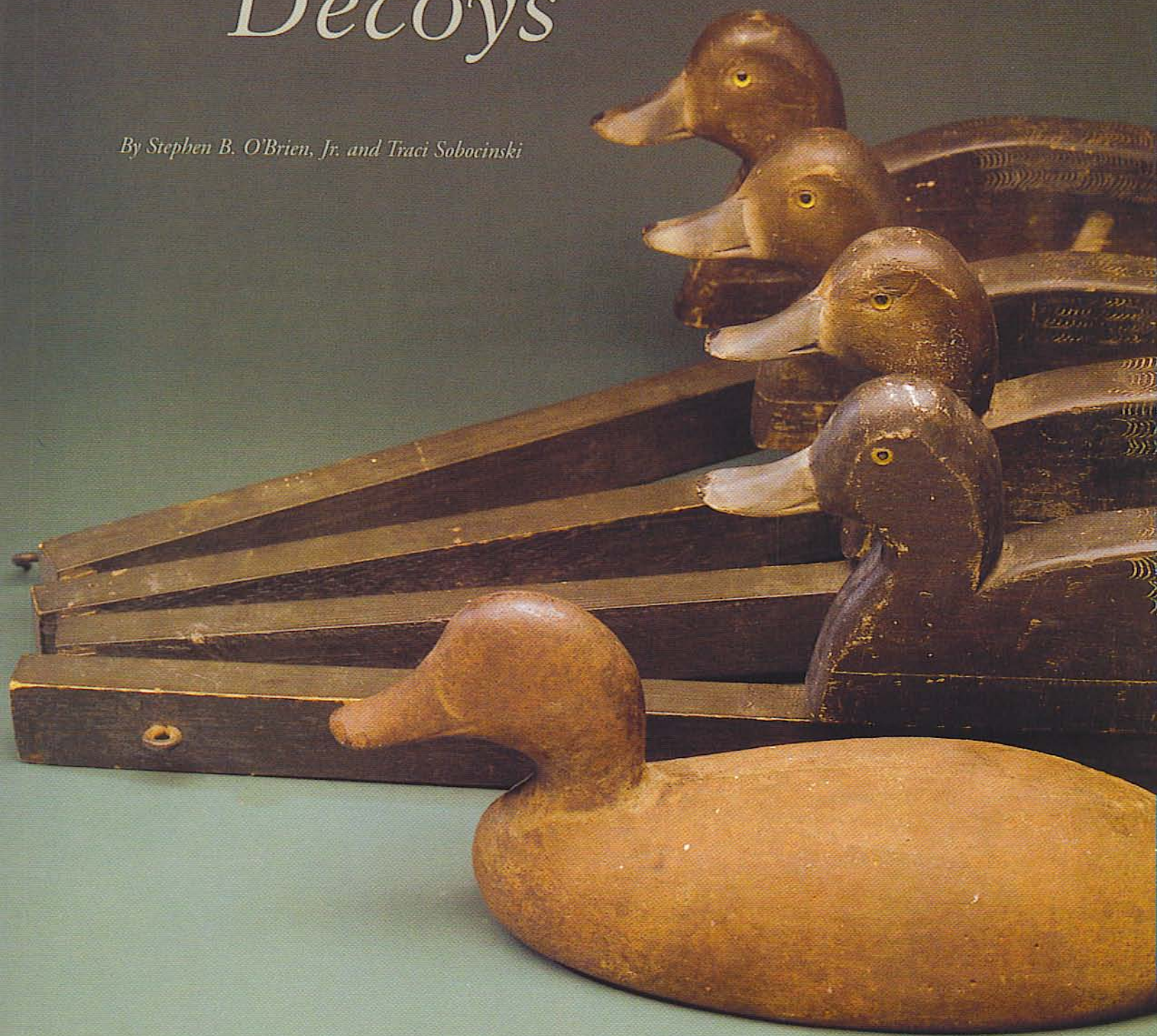




Fig. 7: Shadow Decoys
Bluebill shadow decoys, Dines Brothers, Upstate New York, ca. 1905. Carved and painted wood. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.

Fig. 8: Wing Duck
Iron wing-duck decoy, maker unknown, Long Island, New York, ca. 1875. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.

For over two thousand years, hunters have used decoys to attract a variety of waterfowl for food, for their plumage, and for recreational sport.¹ While most hunters today use mass-produced plastic decoys, individual craftsmen still produce handmade and decorated decoys for competition or sale to collectors. The heyday of the carved and painted antique decoys so admired today, however, spanned the period between the 1870s and the 1940s. It was during these decades that some of the greatest decoy carvers and painters worked, among them Gus Wilson (1864–1950) of South Portland, Maine; Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) of East Harwich, Massachusetts; Harry V. Shourds (1861–1920) of Tuckerton, New Jersey; and Nathan Cobb, Jr. (1825–1905) of Cobb Island, Virginia. The factory-made decoys coveted by collectors were also crafted during this time by companies such as the Mason Decoy Factory of Detroit, Michigan (in operation from 1896 until 1924).²

What was the impetus behind the rise in decoy production that resulted in such a surge of craftsmanship? The answer lies with two nineteenth-century hunting practices. The first had its genesis in the mid-nineteenth century Victorian enthusiasms for epicurean delicacies and for elaborate ladies' hats. In response to these consumer demands, hunters used whatever methods they could to kill as many birds as quickly as possible.³ During this period, flocks were so enormous and hunting practices so lethal that decoys were not always necessary. Those that were made were generally crude and often crafted by the hunters themselves. As the vast flocks began to wane from over-hunting, better methods of drawing the birds close needed to be invented. Decoys with more animated forms and realistic paint were one such manifestation. Further refinements were made with the decrease in market gunning after the passing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. Since decoy makers had fewer birds to produce, they invested more time in carving and in painting accurate representations, either for their own purposes or for sale.

Somewhat concurrent with commercial gunning was an interest in hunting for sport. By the 1870s this gentleman's pursuit was fast becoming a component of the



Fig. 1: Working Ducks
Black duck and merganser hen, Henry Keyes Chadwick (1865–1958), Martha's Vineyard, Mass., ca. 1900. Chadwick was a carpenter by trade and used an axe to shape his decoys. The intricate checkered surface is extremely rare. Shaped and painted wood. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.

cial culture among the middle and upper classes. Benefiting from the economic boom and resultant leisure time following the Civil War, those who hunted for sport required elaborate equipment for their forays, including finely carved and decorated decoys, which fueled the market for their manufacture.

The paint, form, and lead weighting on these “working birds” (Fig. 1) correspond to the species and to the regions where they were hunted, and illustrate the wide range of hunting practices used at the turn of the century. They also represent the creativity, thrift, and ingenuity of some very talented artisans. Carved in a variety of realistic poses—preening, sleeping, and hissing—decoys were usually fashioned out of pine, cedar (old railroad ties), or “junk” wood that was scavenged and inexpensive. By the early twentieth century, lightweight materials such as canvas, scraps of leather, and cork were being used as components, or sometimes for the entire decoy, to minimize their weight and make them easier to transport. By the 1940s, inflatable rubber decoys were produced in a number of factories. Illustrated here are the main types of decoys traditionally used over a hunting season that lasted from the fall into the spring.

Shorebird Stick-Ups

The majority of shorebird decoys were created with holes in their undersides into which a wooden or metal stick was inserted to be driven into the ground, hence the term “stick-up” (Fig. 2). Some were fashioned to spin on their mount in the breeze. Likenesses of plover, yellowlegs, curlew, and other shorebirds were carved and painted according to the plumage of the intended species during the appropriate hunting season. While most shorebird decoys have carved wooden bills, some feature iron or baleen (particularly those from Nantucket). Glass eyes were also used.

Shorebird decoys are among the earliest examples of the folk decoy genre. The desirability of these small birds was driven by the millinery trade, which used thousands of the feathers in the fashioning of ladies’ hats, and they were also on the menus of the finest hotels. Following the 1918 law curtailing market gunning, further reductions in shorebird populations resulted in their hunting being outlawed altogether in 1928. As a result of their disuse, many shorebird decoys were destroyed, and so these tend to be among the rarest.

Shorebird Tinnies

Tinnies were also made to lure shorebirds. Molded out of tin and nested

Fig. 2: Shorebird Stick-Ups
An early group of Long Island, New York, shorebird decoys, ca. 1850–1890.
Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.





Fig. 3: Tinnies
Sanderling decoys, Strater and Sohier, Boston, Mass., patented 1874. Molded sheet tin. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.

together for portability, the halves were hinged together and set on sticks (Fig. 3). Strater & Sohier of Boston, Massachusetts, patented tin birds in 1874 and sold them by the dozen. Other companies manufactured tinnies after the original patent expired, but were not as successful.

Ice Decoys

Employed when ponds and lakes were frozen, the iron legs of the ice decoy—if not equipped with a foot—could be heated and jammed into the ice to secure them and attract passing flocks, or they could be carved with a low body profile without legs and set on wooden platforms directly on the ice (Fig. 4). Charles Schoenheider, Sr. (1854–1944) of Peoria, Illinois, is considered the master of this exceptionally rare type of decoy.

Flyers

These decoys were constructed to simulate ducks or geese in flight (Fig. 5). They were set on stakes and often had strings attached that a hunter could yank to create lifelike movement. These decoys could be made to imitate birds swimming, flapping their wings, and quacking. Damage from weather and the effects of water, however, made them impractical for the sportsman. In the late nineteenth century, more than seventy patents were registered for mechanical birds, but because of the dubious engineering and corrosion of their parts, they quickly fell out of favor.

Flatties

From the mid-nineteenth century on, hunters carved these typically crude, lightweight silhouette decoys called “flatties” (Fig. 6) to entice shorebirds, geese, and ducks to approach gunning blinds. In a similar manner as stick-

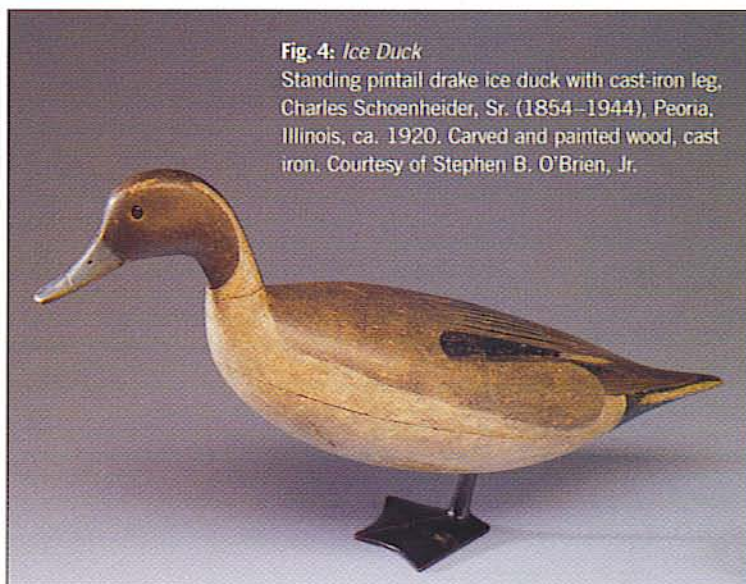


Fig. 4: Ice Duck
Standing pintail drake ice duck with cast-iron leg, Charles Schoenheider, Sr. (1854–1944), Peoria, Illinois, ca. 1920. Carved and painted wood, cast iron. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.

Fig 5: Flyers

Flying mallard decoys from Wisconsin, ca. 1925. This rare pair exhibits unusual three-dimensional crossed-wood construction. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.



ups, these silhouette decoys could be staked into the ground. Lightweight and less expensive to make than the full-bodied decoys that used entire blocks of wood, when positioned properly in a rig with profiles toward the oncoming flocks, flatties were capable of luring birds in the same manner as full-bodied decoys.

Shadow Decoys

These were often used for duck hunting along sea coasts. The decoys were attached by means of fingers, or V-boards—floating strips of wood joined in the center and held in place with a central drop line and weight (Fig. 7). Lightweight and easily transportable, many bear sophisticated painted decoration. Often rigs of shadow decoys were made to nest alongside each other with up to six pairs stacked in a single set.

Wing Ducks

Sink box hunters used decoys made out of wood or iron called “wing ducks” (Fig. 8). Though their use was outlawed in the late nineteenth century, sink boxes were ideal for hunting ducks. These coffinlike contraptions rode low in the water, with the gunner on his back and having easy access to flocks overhead.⁴ Placed on pontoons that jugged out and supported the boat, wing ducks both balanced the boat and attracted flocks flying overhead. With this type of decoy, weight was not an issue, the lower the boat sank in the water, the better its camouflage. The example shown is cast out of iron and weighs approximately twenty pounds. Iron wing ducks are relatively rare because many ended up at the bottom of bays, lost by boat upsets in rough waters.

Confidence Decoys

At the turn of the century when gunning for market was still legal, hunters employed live decoys called “tollers” in addition to using carved decoys. The goal was to use tame geese to lure flocks flying overhead. Along with the live lures, carved “confidence” decoys (Fig. 9) — representing species such as seagulls and heron that usually feed with ducks or geese—were used to simulate an authentic and safe environment for the wild prey. The confidence decoys represent some of the most interesting and rare species in the decoy world. Either used like stick-ups or weighted and used as floaters, they were also set on the bows of low-riding sneak boats, flat skiffs that replaced sink boxes.



Fig 6: Flattie/Silhouette Decoy

Pintail drake by Charles Walker (1875–1954), Illinois River, Illinois, ca. 1925. Unusual hinged construction with glass eyes, carved bill, nostril, and mandible. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.



Fig. 9: Confidence Decoy
Swan decoy by John "Daddy" Holly (1819–1892), Havre de Grace, Maryland, ca. 1860.

Loomers

Probably the largest of decoys, loomers were constructed of wooden slats and sometimes made as large as an actual gunning blind (Fig. 10). Its size was intended to provide an easily distinguishable form to birds flying high overhead.

Tip-Ups

One of the most intriguing forms of decoy is the tip-up (Fig. 11). Known also as "duck butts," these roughly hewn blocks were fashioned to represent a dabbling duck with its head submerged, feeding. The carvers who aimed for authenticity would make several of these decoys to complete a decoy rig.

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1 The earliest documented decoys were made by indigenous Native American peoples around 100 to 200 B.C. The use of decoys in waterfowl hunting is primarily a North American phenomenon, as hunters in England and Europe preferred different methods of hunting birds, and the commercial gunning market was not as advanced as in America.

2 At this period, factory decoys were largely handmade: While their bodies were turned on a lathe, the heads were generally carved and the bodies were hand-painted.

3 These "market gunners" greatly reduced bird populations, making some species extinct, such as the passenger pigeon and Eskimo curlew. This destructive practice went uncontrolled until the passing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, which regulated the use of wide bore punt guns, night hunting, and live decoys.

4 Sink boxes were replaced by sneak boats, which are not as low or as camouflaged, and are still used today. Since they do not have pontoons, wing ducks are not used on sneak boats.



Fig. 11: Tip Up
Hollow tip-up brant duck decoy, New Jersey, ca. 1900. Painted wood. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.



Fig. 10: Loomer
Canada goose by Elmer Crowell (1862–1952), East Harwich, Mass., ca. 1910. Wood. Courtesy of Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr.