

Selections from the Noyes Decoy Collection

With captions by Gary Giberson



One gross of bluebill decoys (144) in the yard of Fred and Ethel Noyes at the Franklin Inn, Port Republic, New Jersey. Purchased from the Mud City Gun Club in Manahawin. Some of these decoys, true hunting lures, remain in the Noyes collection. When you shake them, shot rattles inside a few of them.

Decoy carving is a craft of long-standing in South Jersey. At their best, decoys capture the likeness and deportment of the waterfowl they emulate, for they have utilitarian origins: they needed to dupe live birds. Today decoys are considered examples of folk art, each carefully and uniquely crafted. They are specimens of a long-established and deeply rooted American tradition.

Before the arrival of European settlers, Native Americans created waterfowl decoys from reeds. These early decoys were intended to lure game into range. European settlers followed suit, but turned to carving decoys from local cedar. Hunters and sportsmen visiting the Jersey Shore in the late 1800s and early 1900s sought field guides who offered not only the best hunting locations, but also the most realistic decoys sourced from local

carvers. Today, while some decoys are still fashioned and used in the hunt, many are carved for display alone. South Jersey has an especially rich carving heritage, given the longstanding baymen's lifestyle. Skilled carvers dot the map, offering their skills for collectors and hunters alike.

This brief selection brings this utilitarian art to light, featuring decoys collected by Fred Noyes Jr. for South Jersey's Noyes Museum of Art. Gary Giberson, who aided in the purchase of many of these decoys, describes each—Giberson is himself an expert carver. We hope his descriptions with accompanying photographs, bring to life the spirit of each decoy, both in service and art.

Sarah E. Augustine

SoJourn



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The following captions are edited versions of comments made by Gary Giberson on Armistice Day, 2018, when Stockton students Claire Riley and Shannon Stolz visited Giberson, who selected the decoys and described interesting details.

HUDSONIAN WIMBRELL CURLEW (PREVIOUS PAGE)

The shorter bill of this Curlew decoy marks it as none other than a Wimbrell, a decoy carved by Harry Boice out of Absecon. A curlew is a bigger bird, which we can see by the body that is longer than most. Curlews vary by the length of their bill, long versus short, and this decoy is an example of a short-billed Curlew. At the Tuckerton Seaport sits a long-bill Curlew on loan from the Noyes collection that is one of a kind, the only decoy of its nature made. When Fred Noyes bought that long-bill, I drooled over it. I put it on posters and everything.

GREEN WING TEAL (THIS PAGE)

This is a little Green Wing Teal. It is smaller than the average decoy at only 9½ inches long whereas most decoys are twelve or fourteen inches. It is a two-piece decoy with recessed lead in the bottom and has the Seabrook brand meaning that Bobby Seabrook, of Absecon, carved this decoy. Teal fly a little earlier in the season than the Black Ducks and the Mallards, following the Atlantic flyway and arriving in our area about two weeks before the other species. Decoys of the species are quite common. This was carved in 1979.



RED HEAD (THIS PAGE)

This decoy is a Red Head. This species' decoys are unique to Manahawkin Bay in New Jersey because the Red Heads would fly into the bay with Canvasbacks. When you see something like this, you know it's from north of us, like Manahawkin and Tuckerton. We never got any Red Heads or Canvasbacks in Great Bay. The maker of this decoy is unknown. It was carved around 1900, and is made unique by the half-section of the tail which the carver just cut off, allowing the tail area to just go back a little further.

RED BREASTED MERGANSER (NEXT PAGE TOP)

Joel Salmons was copying the master with his four-feather cuts, leaving this decoy from Tuckerton, New Jersey, to appear very Harry Shourds-like. The Red Breasted Merganser was thought by some to be not fit to eat—they were diving ducks that ate small fish, giving them an overwhelmingly fishy taste. However, others favored the taste of Mergansers in their stock pots. "What are you shooting that for?" someone would

say, "It ain't fit to eat." The answer was yes, they were: the breast, leg and thigh meats were all utilized to make a tasty fish chowder with no fish bones.

JERSEY BRANT (NEXT PAGE BOTTOM)

This 1915 Jersey Brant is special because "it's a Horner." Renowned carver Roley Horner from Mayetta, New Jersey, is considered by many to be New Jersey's best decoy maker. This Jersey Brant is almost eighteen inches long, which is bigger than the average decoy, and made from readily-available Atlantic White Cedar, which is an excellent carving material. Atlantic White Cedar is cut down in winter when the sap is down into the root system allowing the tree to get through the winter. This prevents thick, crystalized summer-time sap from dulling the carving tools. I cut Cedar down during Christmastime by lifting the butt of the tree to keep moisture from getting in. When I come back to get it and drag it out in April, I have the best wood in the world.

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BRANT (THIS PAGE)

This is an decoy of a Brant, which is a small goose with a real short bill and real long neck. It is beautifully restored, but the identity of the carver is controversial. Both Liberty Price and Joe King have been named. I think it was carved by Liberty Price. It is one of the most beautiful New Jersey decoys that was ever made. I love this decoy. I carved many necks for Brant decoys; they are made with a cocked head, mimicking the Brant's undulating neck as it swims.

JERSEY PINTAIL (NEXT PAGE TOP)

This Pintail decoy was made by an unknown New Jersey carver from the Maurice River area. Dated around 1928, it is unusual in Fred Noyes' collection as Pintails are not common in this area. This sixteen-inch, two-piece decoy is hollow and hand-painted. Notice the greens, blacks and whites used in painting this decoy. Ducks must have unbelievable color recognition because if they didn't, Pintails wouldn't flock to decoys like this.

CROW (NEXT PAGE BOTTOM)

This crow decoy poses the question: who would shoot crows? The answer is "anybody." Because the crow is an enemy to the farmer. He eats the corn; he eats the seedlings. If not stopped, crows will damage and destroy a field. To be rid of the crop-eating crow, farmers would put up owl decoys—the crow hates the owl. They are mortal enemies. Or they would use crow decoys to attract the bird, and mimic the crow emergency call to alert them. Sometimes farmers would dip their corn kernals or whatever they were growing into a solution of tar and coal oil. That did not stop germination, but crows would pull one or two and find that they couldn't eat them and avoid that field. Between their language skills and their ability to remember bad-tasting kernels, I argue that crows are one of the smartest creatures in the world.

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BLUE BILL (THIS PAGE)

This Blue Bill decoy, carved by Rowley Horner, is similar in style to decoys by the famous Harry Shourds, one of the area's most prolific carvers, except that Horner's ducks are a bit sleeker. One can tell a Horner decoy by checking the bill. At the bottom of the bill, Horner carves on an angle, like signing his name. This decoy, from Tuckerton, New Jersey, is very valuable.

YELLOW LEG (NEXT PAGE)

This decoy is by **Charles "Shang" Wheeler**, a famous maker who hailed from Connecticut. It's a testament to Wheeler's personal style, particularly in the raised wing, as well as the split in the tail. When a carver added this defining touch, it made the decoy even more valuable. Some of the other birds we see have smooth wings, but Wheeler carved this in.

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PINTAIL (PAIR)

This pair of ducks, hen and drake (from left to right), were carved by the Ward brothers, Steve and Lem, of Crisfield, Maryland. They are very valuable and, in my opinion, are the best of Fred's collection. I remember helping Fred buy them for only \$150 apiece.

Fred and I had signals that we used when evaluating decoys, because dealers would come to Fred to sell him decoys and one time he bought a fake one, and I couldn't say anything in front of the dealer. So I called Fred the next day and said, "You and me, we got to get together. I let you buy a fake." I explained how I knew and my reasoning and we agreed on a set of signals that meant "buy more," "cut off," or "we don't need this one." To say "no" to a dealer, you would have to have a reason, and I wasn't going to give away my information about what I knew of decoys to some smart dealer.

The Ward brothers carved all species. Their decoys are just absolutely, drop-dead gorgeous. I got to meet the brothers one time. I went down to Lem Ward's one day and I got to talking to him. I told him he had a beautiful style about his decoys, the back of the neck has this Lem Ward curve. And he said to me, "How do you draw your decoys? Do you draw them left to right or right to left?" Then he took his pencil and showed me how he threw his curve, backwards, from the top of the neck to the nape, and it gave the beautiful Lem Ward curve. It is just beautiful. The eyes of this decoy are inset a little and have glass eyes, as taxidermist supplies were available to carvers. Eyes help date decoys, and show that these were made around 1930.

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The old time decoy makers had sharp tools and ways to keep them sharp. When you talk about hand tools, the saying goes, a sharp tool will do what you want it to do; a dull tool will hurt you. So all their tools were sharp. They had sharpening methods for everything; they had oilstones and whetstones to keep their edges sharp. Most of the early tools were made out of carbon steel, which means it could be sharpened, even with a file. You could file it down and then hone it to a sharpness that is unbelievable. All the tools today, after World War II, are made with this Rockwell steel. It is stainless steel, case-hardened, and they sharpen differently. It's just something that old tools are easy to sharpen because they are made of carbon steel.



CANADA GOOSE (THIS PAGE)

This is a beautiful Canada Goose, made by Taylor Johnson around 1880 in Barnegat, New Jersey. It is about twenty-six inches long, making it a larger decoy, and made out of hollow cedar in a paddle-like shape, which is a Truex-type shape. The head is in the style of early Barnegat decoys.

At one point Fred Noyes had 3,500 decoys. Today in the Noyes Museum of Art of Stockton University 350 decoys remain. Fred would meet dealers at his home. He kept his decoys in his house on string. They were tied to the rafters and the ceiling joists. Many of them were still in barrels and barrels and barrels. It was just so much fun. Fred would call me up and say "Gary there's a guy here and he wants to sell me some decoys." And I would say, "I'll be over there in two minutes." Growing in knowledge about decoys with Fred was such fun. We grew together.

RED KNOT (DOWITCHER) (NEXT PAGE)

This Red Knot (Dowitcher) decoy is carved by Boyce. The decoy is distinguishable as a Red Knot by its shorter bill and red breast. Shot holes can be seen in this decoy. Hunters used to ground-swipe these birds. When the birds flew into the flock on the shore, they just got a big bunch of them together and shot. This left some ducks dead, a few injured, and a couple flying away. Ducks that hunters would shoot like this were not only good for meat, the breast and thigh meat on Red Knots, but also for sale to the millenary trade in the 1800s: the feathers were used for fancy hats. I recall a picture of a woman who wore a whole swan on her head, "wings and all."

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TRUMPETER SWAN (THIS PAGE)

When I first saw this swan I fell in love with it because it was so folky. I didn't care how much it was, I thought we should have it. I remember standing with Fred and the dealer and giving the "go more sign" to Fred. Originally from Maryland, the trumpeter swan is perhaps the biggest decoy in the collection. It is distinguished from other varieties of swan, such as the whistling swan, by its bill. A trumpeter's bill will be all black, while a whistling swan will have a yellow/orange cobb on the top of its bill. This decoy is easy to fall in love with: it is extreme folk art at its best.

These three images (and the three on the following pages) are from original photographs made to record each decoy's appearance at the time of purchase.

EIDER (NEXT PAGE TOP)

Here is an interesting decoy from the state of Maine. This is an Eider, similar to a Scoter. In Maine, they inlet the head of decoys into the body—see the head is inset—so it's very easy to distinguish a Maine decoy. This decoy has a cracked neck which has been repaired

with a wooden dowel. It is all handpainted, probably with regular house paint. Old-time carvers would use whatever was at hand: "there's an old can of black; there's an old can of white." It was carved by Gus Wilson, around or just before 1920.

BLACK DUCK (NEXT PAGE BOTTOM)

This decoy is a Jersey Black Duck, carved by Harry Vanuckson Shourds out of Tuckerton, New Jersey, in 1900. Thicker than most, the shape of Shourds' decoys results, in part, from the materials he used. Cedar trees grow wider in shape towards the roots—they have bell bottoms—and sawyers, like my grandpop, would trim this excess leaving slabs of cedar about four-foot long. Grandpop would throw the slabs under the carriage for the decoy makers. This is where I met them, because they came to our sawmill to get the slabs: decoy carvers John Updike and Jake Barrett from Somers Point. Starting with such cedar slabs contributed to the signature shape that is characteristic of the Shourds Black Duck.

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MERGANSER (THIS PAGE)

This decoy is made by C. R. Huey in Friendship Island, Maine. It is a red breasted merganser. See the carved eye. What's neat about this duck is on the bottom. Huey stamped his name and a little blind duck. It's easy to spot the Huey merganser because it has a unique style, but there's no missing it when you turn it over and see the signature. This decoy dates to 1900 and is quite rare. Huey only made ducks for his personal use.

BASE OF MERGANSER (NEXT PAGE TOP)

Visible on the bottom of this decoy: the name stamp of C. R. Huey and two of duck images. Also visible is Fred Noyes' identification stamp, 199.

GOLDEN EYE (NEXT PAGE BOTTOM)

The trained eye can see and determine that the bill on this decoy was broken off and replaced at a later date. The original date of carving is 1880 by Captain Dan Showell of Absecon, New Jersey. This is one of the earlier decoys to be found in the collection.

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FRED NOYES JR. AND MACKEY

This is a great picture of Fred. He was in a good mood that day. He has his Greek fisherman's hat on, which he loved to wear. He's fondling his little dog Mackey. But Mackey was a mean thing; he bit so many people. He bit my wife. Fred named him after William J. Mackey Jr., the biggest decoy collector of his time, who Fred bought many of his birds from.

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FRED NOYES AND NIKKI GIBERSON cataloging decoys. Nikki is holding a decoy as Fred stamps identification numbers on the bottom.

GARY GIBERSON'S FIRST DECOYS

I started carving in 1948. My father went over to Marine Mart in Atlantic City to buy some decoys, because our decoys were borrowed. Marine Mart was a beautiful store up in the old inlet; I think it was on Gramercy Avenue and Massachusetts. And when you opened the door to the store, all you could smell was steam tar. They steam tarred the rope; they steam tarred the string; they steam tarred the nets. Don't ask me how they did it. I would love to know how they steam tarred. They steam tarred everything. So when you opened the door that smell hits you. And they had everything in there. All the furnishings you needed for a boat, from all the propellers, the rudders, the shafts—they didn't sell engines there—but you could buy anything else you wanted for a boat. All the gear, the ropes, the chocks—anything you needed to put on a boat or build a boat—including decoys for hunting.

So my father came back with this rig of J. W. Bowen decoys. They had little teeny heads and great big bodies, and I said to my father, "They'll scare more ducks than they attract. They are so ugly." And he said to me, "Well if you think they're so ugly, why don't you get together with your grandpop across the street and make some decoys?" So I did.

I went across the street and grandpop helped me. He band-sawed the heads out for me and showed me how to carve and how to chop the bodies with a hatchet and then shape them with a rasp and how to build a unique bench called a schnitzelbunk—it's German so its spelled exactly how it sounds, otherwise I'm the worst speller—but I used the schnitzelbunk. So I made this dozen decoys for my father and there was this State Police Captain who gunned with our neighbor down the end of the road and he come down and saw my decoys on the back of my father's boat and asked if he could buy them.

Well, I run home really quick, it was just down the road here a ways, I run home really quick and said, "Daddy, can I sell those decoys, I can make you some more." And he said, "Sure go ahead, does someone want to by them?" So I went back and I knew that Updike and Hendrickson were selling decoys up the Mullica River and they were getting thirty dollars a dozen for 'em, so I decided I would want a little more than them, so I got thirty-two dollars a dozen.

"And how old were you?"

1948—thirteen years old.



Learning about Decoys. Gary Giberson, Mayor of Port Republic, New Jersey, and long-time decoy carver, describes the Noyes collection to Claire Riley, Tom Kinsella, and Shannon Stolz.



THE GAME SEASON.

There is excellent shooting on the Jersey bays just now, and sportsmen should go there early before the birds become wild. Black ducks, mud hens, mallards and teal are plenty, and redheads, bluebills and whistlers will arrive within a week. Snipe still frequent the flats at low water, but are hard to reach. Barnegat is the most favorite resort for wild fowl, particularly brant. Sportsmen must remember, however, that the law forbids the placing of decoys more than three rods from the edge of the marsh, the pursuing of game after dark with a light, or Sunday shooting. The fowl now to be had are young and quite tame, and can be paddled on quite easily. Good rail shooting is still to be had, although many of these

birds have gone South. The second brood of quail are found, but the birds are in very poor condition and very small. The open season for this game, however, is not until November 1st.

But few deer are killed now, although the game is plenty and in good condition. A buck, the largest ever seen in South Jersey, was captured a few days ago by Alfred Mathis, of Franklinville. It weighed 258 pounds, and was killed near Beaver Dam. Fishing is about over, and is chiefly confined to creeks and rivers. Striped bass weighing from half a pound to two pounds, and a few blues are the chief results.

From *The Bridgeton Pioneer*, October 29, 1885, 4.