

33RD OCEAN COUNTY DECOY AND GUNNING SHOW

By: Victoria Ford

Now in its 33rd year, the Ocean County Decoy and Gunning Show has likely “explored every possible aspect of waterfowling and decoy collecting,” according to organizer German Georgieff. The two-day event takes place in Tuckerton the weekend of Sept. 26 and 27 this year, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. Admission is free, and parking is available at the Tuckerton Seaport, Pinelands Regional High School and Freedom Fields Park. A shuttle bus system will run continuous loops to and from Tip Seaman County Park, where the majority of the action takes place on the lake beach and surrounding lawns.

The question of “what’s new” to the Show becomes harder to answer as the years go by, but what’s old is new again to the thousands who come for the antiques and collectibles; the traditional trades, crafts and music; the living history in every carver, skeet shooter, dog handler and duck caller who brings forth their talent and skill. Many contestants come from states away to make the Decoy Show an important stop on the national contest circuit.

The heart and soul of the show has always been the decoy contests, Georgieff said. The very first “decoy show” was a few local guys buying and selling decoys off the tailgates of their trucks.

The earliest decoy carving, of course, wasn’t about making art, or collectibles, he noted. Decoys were tools to attract and harvest ducks. And the working decoy categories endure. The working decoys get broken down into different categories and

styles of carving, e.g., Barnegat Bay-style, Delaware River-style, traditional shorebird rig, contemporary and miniature. The Show will have a few hundred displayed under the lakeside tents, plus another 50 or so decorative decoys inside the park community center, categorized by fish, bird of prey, game/song/ wading bird, shorebird, waterfowl. The decorative decoy entries are fewer due to the time and attention to detail



Program Cover: Ocean County Decoy & Gunning Show
Photo credit: Tuckerton Seaport



Youth Carving Club.
Photo credit: Tuckerton Seaport

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invested in each one – some artists woodburn each individual feather, Georgieff said.

Regional carving styles trace their histories back to pre-automobile days, when areas were more isolated from each other, Georgieff explained. Nowadays, a newcomer to the hobby would have plenty of resources to learn how to carve, from books to classes to YouTube videos. But in the old days, carvers had not so much as a field guide to offer assistance; they either looked at nature or (more likely) copied from a friend. As a result, given schools of carving developed commonalities based on proximity.

Such regional distinctions started to taper off about 50 years ago, he said. But most collectors can pinpoint a pre-World War II decoy’s area of origin based on telling characteristics. Point Pleasant decoys, for example, have greater detail and more relaxed postures, because the style of hunting was such that the hunters would let the real birds settle in among very convincing fake ones and then drift up on them.

The divergence between market hunters and recreational carvers was most noticeable in the attractiveness of the work – whereas recreational carvers could spend more time enjoying the process, market hunters had a job to do. Gradually recreational decoys got even fancier, as carvers poured their artistry into decoys that



Decoys at Sunrise.
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks Department

were meant to sit on a shelf and be admired. And species of decoys expanded to include not just game birds but also songbirds and birds of prey.

The Decoy Show honors all forms of decoys that represent carvers’ appreciation for natural beauty. Photography and other artistic mediums are part of the show, too, because the Show celebrates not just waterfowling but the many trappings of the lifestyle surrounding the bay-



Setting the Rig.
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks Department

men and their families.

In terms of value on the collector’s market, a decoy is judged not necessarily by how pretty it is but by its carver and condition, Georgieff said. A beautiful decoy by an unknown carver may fetch \$300 to \$400, but a rare or perfect-condition example from Harry V. Shourds or Nathan Rowley Horner might climb into the six-digit range. Certain limited-edition decoys, such as Shourds’ seagulls – referred to as “confidence birds” because a gull in a rig would signal to other birds that all was well and lend confidence to land there. Shourds made only a handful of gulls, whereas he made countless black ducks, Georgieff said. (Incidentally,

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the eldest of three generations of Shourds, Harry V., was from Tuckerton.)

Of course, true collectibles achieve their desirability from having never been intended to be collectible. When the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 banned market hunting, decoys lost their usefulness – “They became firewood,” he said. Therefore the ones that survived have genuine appeal.



Decoys on Table.
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks Department

Fishing lures and oyster cans are “the next big thing,” he said. The collector’s market is always evolving.

Over the years, the Decoy Show has brought some big names in exhibition shooting to entertain with their tricks, including the late “Shooting Star” Tom Knapp (holder of three world records for hand-thrown clay targets, he died in 2013 at age 62) and “Ultimate Shooter” Tim Bradley who shoots professionally for Benelli rifles and shotguns. Skeet shooting is an exciting event that harks back to the days of Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show, Georgieff remarked.

Speaking of crowd-pleasers, the contests for the retrievers and Delmarva Dock Dogs are always a huge draw. The retrievers demonstrate their hunting skills, while the dock dogs show off their athletic prowess as they take the fastest, biggest possible running leaps into the water.

The Show also highlights trades associated with sporting – blacksmithing, for example, was vital for making tools such as clam rakes, and boat builders made sneak boxes for duck hunting and garveys for clamming and oystering. Developed in South Jersey, these boats are specially suited to their particular uses and waterways. Garveys are stable, flat-bottomed boats ideal for shallow waters, working platforms that could withstand the weight of the day’s catch without tipping.

Music and food have always played an important part in the Decoy Show. The music tends to be of the country/ folk persuasion; this year brings the Basement Musicians and the duo Gary Struncius and Debbie Lawton to the stage. The food is a wonderland of vendors with non-competing menus for maximum variety. Spaces are given free to local nonprofit groups to sell edibles as a fundraiser. The Seaport always offers fresh local seafood – scallops, shrimp, clams and oysters.

The Show also supplies the needs of the modern hunter with state-of-the-art commercial equipment, gear and accessories for sale, Georgieff added. In that way the event reconciles the traditions of the sporting world with the latest technologies that will carry the industry into the future. On a final note, Georgieff said, some naturalists object to the sport of hunting and, to some extent, certain user groups of public lands may always be at odds; but the Parks Department’s position is everyone who pursues outdoor activities has a stake in preserving the environment and therefore a common enemy in the spread of development, which eliminates habitat and, along with it, opportunity to enjoy the many benefits the wilderness holds.