

Solid lead wing duck is rarest of all

By Chad Tragakis

Most collectors of Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys are familiar with “wing ducks” – flat-bottomed decoys carved out of wood or cast in iron specially made for sinkbox or battery shooting. The heavy cast iron decoys were placed around the wooden rim of the box, weighing it down so that it floated flush with the water, precisely the level desired by the hunter. The lighter wooden wing ducks were placed on the canvas-covered “wings” that surrounded the box to provide additional camouflage and concealment. As rare as the cast iron and carved wooden examples are, there is a third variety of wing duck decoy that surfaces with even less frequency – those made from solid poured lead.

In a 1964 Decoy Collectors Guide article and again in his 1965 book, *American Bird Decoys*, collecting pioneer William F. Mackey, Jr. addresses the reason for their scarcity: “The principal quarry in battery shooting was Canvasback and Redheads. The Greater Scaup ran a poor third. These are, in that order, the species the collector can have reasonably good hopes of finding duplicated in wing ducks. But the search for rare and unusual items need by no means end there. Although cast iron is typical of this type of decoy, some fine examples were cast in lead. The scarcity of lead wing ducks today is probably a result of the discovery that with little effort one duck made an almost endless number of fishing sinkers. This is what happened to them.”

Simple science bears out Mackey’s theory. Casting iron sinkbox decoys required temperatures of at least 2,200°F and involved the use of large, heavy and specialized equipment that relegated their manufacture almost exclusively to foundries. Lead, on the other hand, has a relatively low melting point (only 621°F), and so casting was something that almost any ambitious hunter could do in the backyard with only a sturdy metal vessel in which to melt the lead (such as a steel or cast iron pot), a steady heat source, and a mold. And fishing sinkers were only one possible fate for the lead birds when sink box gunning was outlawed after the 1934-1935 season. There were dozens of practical household,



Two views of the unusual solid lead “wing duck” found in a Charlestown, Maryland estate. Like their cast iron and wooden counterparts, lead wing ducks were used in most of the major gunning regions that utilized the sinkbox, but few survive today.

commercial and recreational uses for lead and lead alloys. For duck hunters in particular, lead could be used to make decoy anchor and ballast weights.

Mackey and other historians believed that lead wing ducks were made and used in most of the major gunning regions that utilized the sinkbox. Two early examples used on Great South Bay from the collections of Frank Murphy and George Combs, Jr. were illustrated in the January 1973 issue of *Toller Trader*. A circa 1915 bluebill drake stylishly cast in lead that was part of the Hard rig used off of Long Island, New York, sold at auction in 1996. More recently, a solid lead wing duck from North Carolina surfaced when the Roy Willis collection was sold at auction in the fall of 2013. The example Willis collected, used on Core Sound, has no paint left at all, but exhibits a wonderful

primitive form. Examples of lead wing ducks from the Chesapeake Bay region, however, have been elusive.

Fast forward to early 2014, when two solid lead wing duck decoys from the Susquehanna Flats, both canvasback drakes, surfaced in Cecil County, near the head of the Chesapeake Bay. The birds were discovered in a small group of decoys that came out of a Charlestown, Maryland estate. One went north with a Pennsylvania collector, but the other stayed in Cecil County, having been purchased by well-known collector and dealer Chuck Usilton. At the April 11-12 gathering of the East Coast Decoy Collectors Association in St. Michaels, Maryland, Chuck had practically just unpacked the bird as I spotted it while walking across the parking lot. A deal was quickly struck and I was soon lugging the hefty can back to my truck.

The bird weighs 35 pounds and measures 14½ inches long from bill to tail, 6½ inches across, has a body thickness of 1 inch, and a head that is 4¾ inches high. It is difficult to date with certainty, but was likely cast toward the end of the sinkbox era. The surface shows traces of many coats of paint, with heavy flaking. And because lead is softer and more malleable than iron, it also exhibits some heavy dings in places. Overall, it gives the impression of a much loved vintage leaden toy soldier, showing the signs of heavy use and play. Close examination of the head and body style suggest the decoy may have been cast on a Scott Jackson (1852-1929) canvasback pattern. From other angles, its form and lines resemble the work of Jim Holly (1849-1935). But whether it was made by Jackson or Holly or simply by an anonymous Susquehanna Flats hunter who fashioned a mold from one of their birds, we will likely never know.

In addition to wood, iron and solid lead examples, there were hybrid wing ducks from the Susquehanna Flats region, as well, made from wood but hollowed out from the underside, into which molten lead was poured to add the required weight. A handful of these have survived intact and are known in collections today. In the chapter on market gunning in *Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway*, Dr. George Ross Star pictures and discusses one of these rare hybrids made by Henry Lockard of Elk Neck, Maryland.

Lead had numerous maritime construction and repair applications, and would have been found in great abundance down on the Havre de Grace waterfront. According to accounts of sinkbox shooting from the late 1800s and early 1900s published in *Field & Stream*, *Outing* and other sporting publications, large sections of sheet lead were commonly used on sinkboxes as part of the splash guard. With so much lead on hand and in related use, it's not surprising that some Susquehanna Flats hunters, guides and decoy makers would employ the material in the form of wing ducks. Many Flats decoy makers as well as gunners would cast their own lead ballast and anchor weights. Casting a sink box decoy from lead required more material and a bigger mold, but it involved essentially the same process.

As the collector who is fortunate enough to be the next caretaker for this historic relic of a bygone era, I am very happy that at least this decoy did not wind up as "an almost endless number of fishing sinkers." I know Bill Mackey would agree.

Got a Question? Use the Directory

BY PRESTON LOWE

I was fortunate this fall to acquire a Dodge factory decoy I knew little about. Wanting information, I had a choice of wading through "Detroit Decoy Dynasty" or tracking down a Dodge collector, emailing pictures and waiting for a reply – but first you have to know a Dodge collector and how to contact him.

Fortunately there is a great little reference book, the *Midwest Decoy Collectors Association Directory*, a little gem that lists 930 members with their telephone numbers, addresses, emails and their collecting interests. Though my primary interest was contacting a Dodge collector, I thought it would be interesting to know how many collectors collect what. So on a snowy January day I decided to categorize each member by his/her field of interest. Their choices ran the gauntlet, with some picking three or four favorites, to others who listed just decoys in general and others who listed nothing at all.

If you were to take a wild guess as to what was the most collected decoy you might pick Masons, at least that's what I thought. But you'd be wrong as 142 collectors, or 15% of the membership, picked Illinois River decoys. Masons took second with 108 choices or 11% of the respondents. Calls of all types were selected by 74 members, followed by 60 for Wisconsin decoys, 47 for general sporting collectibles and Michigan at 40.

There were 24 members that just listed factory decoys, while 36 specified a preference for Evans, 13 for Dodge, six for Peterson and 18 for Wildfowler, for a total of 22% of the responding members. There were 55 members with an international appreciation, listing Canadian or Ontario decoys. Fish decoys were listed by 28 collectors, 17 were looking for fishing lures, 34 picked shorebirds and six chose paper mache decoys. My area of choice, Upstate New York and the St. Lawrence River region, had 21 fans.

It took two emails and one phone call to get all the information I needed on my new Dodge special order gray hen broadbill with fancy paint, a pinched breast and an extra-long spoon bill sporting nostrils and a rare "jowl tuck" on the bottom of the base.

So if you aren't yet a member, why not make a New Year's resolution to join the *Midwest Decoy Collectors Association* and get a copy of the directory. Check it out and if you have a question on Ken Harris or St. Lawrence River decoys, give me a call.

The Directory has now entered the digital age. They've created an online tool in the Members Only section of their new website – www.MidwestDecoy.org – that allows users to search for other members by last name, city, state and/or collecting interest, eliminating the need to thumb through every page to find them all.



Wildfowler Decoys
Great selection of all the factories
in good to excellent condition

Dick LaFountain
(631) 725-2034