

W.L. "OLE" OLSEN

*Montana's candidate for
the "old coot club"*

by Robert John Bump

Ole Olsen, an avid decoy maker and waterfowler, spends much of his time in his small Montana workshop.

"I'm a member of the old coot club, but if you're looking to write about some long-dead decoy maker, then I guess I have to take exception," laughed Montana decoy carver W.L. "Ole" Olsen, when asked if he'd be willing to be interviewed for a story about his decoys. Very much alive, Ole has nonetheless become a well-known carver in the Northwest. Upon reassurance that a living carver is, indeed, of interest, he was happy to discuss his favorite subject, resulting in hours of conversation about decoys, waterfowl hunting and woodcarving.

OLSEN WAS BORN in 1929 in Bemus Point, on the shore of Lake Chautaugua, near Jamestown, New York. He jokes, "I'm one-quarter Swede, one-quarter Norwegian and half German, kind of a Heinz 57." He attended school in Michigan, where he met his wife Mary. After 29 years as a logging engineer with the U.S. Forest Service, Ole now enjoys hunting waterfowl and carving wildfowl decoys. Ole and Mary live near Townsend, Montana, with a sweeping view of Canyon Ferry Reservoir, his favorite waterfowling area. Ole laughs, "I must be getting old as I can only hunt four or five days a week instead of seven like I used to do."

Olsen enjoys participating in decoy shows around the country, where his work is appreciated, but at the local county fairs he notes, "I never got first place." Ole collects photographs of waterfowl and studies live and dead specimens to improve the realism of his decoys. He has no formal training, and his designs, patterns and carving techniques are his own. "I was self-taught, as I was never exposed to carving as a youth," he says. "The process is fairly simple, just whittle off the part that doesn't look like a duck."

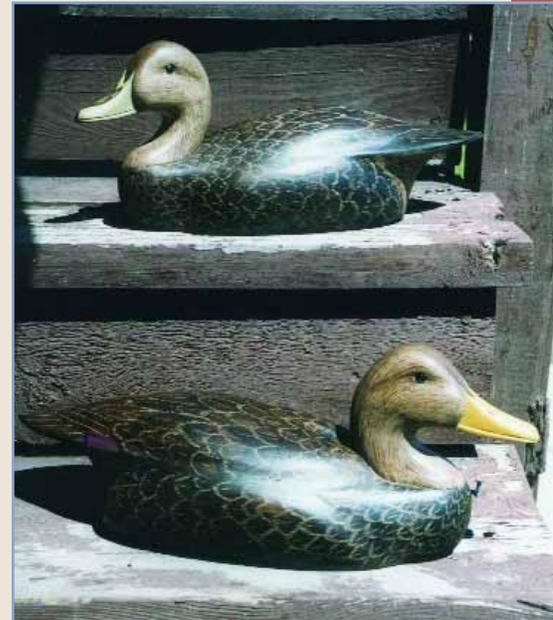
About his early decoys, which were made in 1942, he recalls they "were made from red cedar, but none of them are in existence – they all checked. They were



Mallard hens are Ole's favorite species to paint.



Redhead pair.



Black duck hens.



Canvasback pair.

pretty rough so Mom used them to fuel the wood stove to cook breakfast.” He didn’t make another decoy until 1959, when, “I carved a batch and shot over them until a few years ago,” he says. Pointing to a row of well-used decoys on the top shelf in his painting room, he continues, “One of those decoys was so convincing that a

female canvasback once fell in love with it on the water, and was extremely put out when I took her companion home.”

In recent years Ole has made waterfowl hunting an art and science, and decoy carving is his obsession. “I made 194 decoys in 2003, a big year,” he claims, “and in my lifetime I must be approaching

1500.”

Olsen’s highly collectible hand-carved and painted decoys are made in his small one-man shop. The sign on the door proclaims the place, “Olsen’s Bull Rub,” indicating another of Ole’s pursuits, elk hunting. The shop is orderly, with all the equipment of his craft. His decoy patterns hang on the wall above the workbench, while waterfowl pictures and calendars adorn the neighboring walls. A band saw, drill press, planer, sander and various tools are neatly arranged about the room. “I made my own patterns and my own tools – chisels, carvings blocks, glue press and all,” he explains. Demonstrating his round-rasping technique on a fresh block, he reveals one of his quality-control secrets: “I do a lot of measuring; they should kind of look alike.”



Bluebill pair.





A small group of mallards in various stages of completion in the paint room.

The basic head and body patterns that Olsen uses were developed for his 1959 hunting rig. He carves mostly mallards, pintails, redheads and wigeons, generally in batches of four to a dozen. Ole can make a pair of mallards on an average day, but some days are longer than others. "Once I made seven teal in one day," he says. But he has experimented with a much larger variety of species: "Some scoters, oldsquaw, blue-winged and cinnamon teal and about 20 loons," which he's found are particularly popular among his customers. When larger wood is available he produces a fine Canada goose decoy, and he's made a few hollow decoys as well, which "are all in my own rig," he says.

Each summer Ole and Mary load their truck, trailer and fishing boat and head for the white cedar forests near International Falls, Minnesota. There Ole carefully selects wood that is sawed into 8-foot planks the width of a decoy at a local mill. To prevent cracking, the wood is stored, dried and seasoned in his carving shop. When dry, the planks are cut to decoy lengths, placed and glue jointed, matching top to bottom. The heads are made from Michigan basswood, which are also glued on and secured with a long wood screw. Using an unpainted decoy he points out the nearly invisible seam on the two-piece body, but explained, that "with wood this light, there's no need to hollow it out."

Olsen's decoys are typically life size. They have flat bottoms and the profile displays prominent "side pockets." His diving duck decoys have the high point of the back about a third of the way back from the breast, while the puddle ducks reach their acme about a third of the way further. The divers have round paddle tails set at the water line, while the puddle

ducks have upswept tails.

The heads on Olsen's decoys are distinctive, with puffy cheeks, and the bills have carved nostrils, nail and mandibles. The heads are inletted into the body, glued and held in place by a long brass wood screw inserted from the bottom. He uses a drill press to insure the high quality German-made glass eyes are properly set. "I have not made any decoys with painted eyes," he says, "but I did make a limited number of early models with tack eyes." To repair a broken bill is a simple matter; Ole removes the screw, cuts off the head, and replaces it entirely.

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The decoy painting is done in a special room in the house away from the sawdust of the shop. Each species has a distinctive paint pattern that is immediately identifiable and he uses a scratch-painting technique to make them come alive. "I like to paint mallard hens the best," Ole says. They are first painted with a light yellow-brown base coat. When dry, a darker topcoat is applied and the pattern is scratched through to the base. The drake puddle ducks have a combination of scratch paint and a fanned brushed feather pattern. The hen and drake divers are finished with the fan brush pattern exclusively.

Since the decoys Ole makes are gun-

ning models, the paint must be especially durable, and he accomplishes this by first sealing them with epoxy then applying the artist oils and exterior marine paints over the sealer. "That makes it hard as flint," he guarantees. Olsen mixes his own paints and uses a variety of brushes depending on the species. "I can wear a bunch of brushes out in short order," he says.

An oak keel and lead weight is added to each decoy to ensure they float correctly. Some of his older decoys have ¼-inch sheet lead or fishing weights screwed to the bottoms, or the keel, if present, but his current method of adding ballast is to drill the oak keel and lead it from the inside prior to assembly, making it invisible on the finished decoy. Ole also makes his own anchor weights in a round mold his father made in 1944. He heats the lead over a propane stove using an iron pot and ladle. The weights are circular, easily slipping over a decoy's head.

Ole has records on all his decoys since 1959. Each is serial numbered. He uses a metal die set to stamp the lead decoy weight, indicating the year and the identification number. Referring to his early models, he says, "I don't sign my working decoys. What they're supposed to do is work, not brag." But his later decoys are branded "Waterfowl Decoys, Ole Olsen" on the bottom and/or side of the keel. The early decoys have a single hole drilled in the forward portion of the keel to attach the anchor line; later models are drilled both fore and aft. Many of his later decoys have been donated to Ducks Unlimited to assist in their fundraising efforts.

It's hard to tell whether Ole prefers carving decoys or using them. He brags, "I can pick a duck by hand without a mechanical duck plucker in two minutes." And he enjoys talking about his hunting partner, a 5-year-old black Lab named Lars. "Lars likes to be photographed, he's a ham," he claims. Afraid to be left behind, he's often found in the bottom of Ole's duck boat, even during the off-season. "You have to drag him out," he swears.

Come autumn, Ole's Jon boat is stacked full of his personal rig of hand carved cedar decoys, each stored in a specially made canvas bag with dividers to prevent damage during transport. His miscellaneous waterfowling gear is always nearby. Both Ole Olsen and his trusted companion Lars stand ready. To a spectator, it would be difficult to say which of these "old coots" is more excited to go. 

Robert Bump lives on a garlic farm in Dillon, Montana. An avid waterfowler, he carves working decoys during the long winter months.