

Preserving a Waterfowl Tradition

WRITTEN BY KEITH HENDRICKSON

Since 1987 the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild looks to the past, but embraces both the present and future of carving

A traditionally carved Core Sound style ruddy duck created by guild member Jerry Talton. He uses only hand tools including a hatchet to rough out the shape.

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The class description said to bring your own knives and hatchet. Obviously this wasn't going to be just any ordinary class at any ordinary school. I had signed up to take a traditional decoy carving class at the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild. What used to be a boat dealership located just before the bridge leading onto Harkers Island is now the Guild's meeting hall, workshop, and classroom. And what a classroom it is. The main room in the building is lined with memorabilia commemorating the history of the guild and decoy competitions of the past. Complete with a paint room and workshop for all the heavier wood working tools, the building is a dream to any carving or collectors guild.

An idea that turned a dream into reality; that is how the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild got its start. While talking about the history of the Core Sound-style decoy, current guild board member Jerry Talton, suggests, "It sometimes helps to know where you have been, to know where you are going." That statement holds true for this carving guild and even the history of decoy carving along the coast of North Carolina,



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CORE SOUND DECOY CARVERS GUILD

Left: Jamie Hand teaches a hatchet carving class at the guild. Top: Carver Curt Salter, one of the original guild members, passed in 2013.

dating back well into the 1800s. Decoy carving back then was a way of life for many, and decoys were considered to be nothing more than a tool needed for hunting waterfowl. The craft was handed down from

generation to generation for many coastal families that made their living on the water.

Coming from a long line of decoy carvers and boat builders, Wayne Davis and David Lawrence were both natives of Harkers Island and spent as much time as they could carving decoys, hunting and fishing. They often traveled into Virginia to attend decoy shows around Virginia Beach and Chincoteague, and on down into Currituck. Carvers at Chincoteague had their own carving guild so the two began wondering if there would be enough interest to start a Harkers Island guild, pulling from the many Core Sound carvers back in their own state.

On Aug. 11, 1987, Davis decided to celebrate his birthday by having the seven known carvers on Harkers Island come to his house where they had their first official guild meeting. He, David Lawrence, Gregory Lupton, Curt Salter, Norman Hancock, Carl Huff and James Gordon Salter enjoyed hot



A carver starts to shape a rough-cut decoy blank.

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clam stew made by Davis' wife and settled on naming their group the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild. Those seven agreed to seek out and invite other area carvers they knew of, and they voted in Wayne Davis as president, Gregory Lupton as vice president and David Lawrence as secretary-treasurer of their newly formed group. Before the next meeting in September, they called in two additional local carvers, Roy Willis and Gerald Davis, which increased the number of the original board of directors to nine.

At that September meeting, around 30 carvers showed up. For their first year, the guild met in the library of the Harkers Island Elementary School. During their meetings, they would show home movies, discuss carving and also do a little carving. Their membership began to grow, and they started talking about holding their own competition and carving festival since North Carolina didn't have one. Most of the waterfowl shows were being held in the spring after hunting season ended. Since these guys were all serious carvers, they wanted to be able to sell their goods, so they decided to hold their show early in December, before the Christmas season swung down. Eventually they decided the first full weekend in December would be the date of their annual show.

Since there was no way they could plan and execute a show in just two months, the first Core Sound Decoy Festival was planned for Dec. 3–4, 1988. Now the festival is going into its 27th year and has grown to the point that it takes the entire elementary school to



CORE SOUND DECOY CARVERS GUILD

Five of the original guild founding members are shown here. L–R: Carl Huff, Norman Hancock, Curt Salter, Wayne Davis and Gregory Lupton.

host it. The festival has many attractions that include antique decoy exhibits, retriever demonstrations, competitions including duck calling, loon calling, head whittling, and a live and silent auction. There's always delicious food offered by the school staff and volunteers (including their famous clam chowder and banana pudding), and plenty of shopping opportunities from the many vendors who fill all of the school's classrooms and gymnasium each year.

As the guild developed, the members continued to meet at the local elementary school library but eventually outgrew that room and had to move their meetings to the lunch room. It was decided that they also needed to consider developing a museum that celebrated the region's waterfowl heritage, so several members began researching that idea. Before long they selected a separate board for the museum, and through initial grants and donations, the museum was able to move into a building that was formerly a doctor's office next to the school. The guild then moved its meetings over with the museum. The guild and museum continued to work closely with their programs; the guild's purpose is to promote decoy making and all who are decoy carvers, painters and collectors, wildfowl artists, wildfowl photographers, taxidermists, and anyone who has an interest in waterfowl, wildfowl art and waterfowl heritage. The museum's mission is to interpret the region's waterfowl traditions and coastal cultural heritage: "to establish a facility that will enhance the community, state and region by creating a resource which brings together the historical, cultural, artistic, environmental and educational elements needed to preserve the rich waterfowl heritage of eastern North Carolina associated with the Core Sound area."

HOW THE DECOY GUILD BEGAN...

*A group of carvers got together
To try to create a wooden feather;
With a knife and a hatchet, to see if they could
Make a real bird out of a piece of wood.
A real bird they couldn't make,
But an old decoy they did create.
And when them old carvers are gone on their way,
That old decoy will be there to stay.
And if later, someone looking at that old piece of wood,
Would say, I know who carved that, he was pretty — good!
Then it would all be worth those lonely days
Knowing, although we've gone, part of us stays.*

— Wayne Davis



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A traditional Core Sound bluebill decoy carved by Wayne Davis. A close resemblance was good enough to draw waterfowl into shotgun range.

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THE CORE SOUND DECOY CARVERS GUILD MISSION STATEMENT

- To document the history of decoy making and its development as a folk art form.
- To increase awareness and appreciation of waterfowl and the need for protection of its natural habitat.
- To provide demonstrations of traditional decoy making through workshops, classes and daily demonstrations.
- To bring to this area decoy carvers, collectors, artists, photographers and waterfowl writers from other waterfowl regions of the United States.
- To develop educational youth outreach programs.
- To provide an annual decoy festival thereby presenting a showcase of decoy carving and wildfowl related art.

THE CORE SOUND DECOY STYLE WITH JOEY EUBANKS

Joey Eubanks comes from a family of decoy carvers in the Beaufort area. He began carving in 1990 and a year or so later joined the Core Sound Decoy Carver's Guild. His carving technique with traditional Core Sound style decoys has been refined to the point he has won many Best of Shows in the annual Core Sound Decoy Festival. When asked just what it is that makes a Core Sound style decoy different from other styles, Joey had this to say:



Joey Eubanks

- The decoy style dates back to the early 1900s and the blocks were typically chopped out of whatever was available using a hatchet and then refined a bit using a draw knife, plane or spoke shave. The heads were carved with a knife. Little or no sanding was done since sandpaper was expensive back then.
- The predominant wood used was juniper, pine or cypress — often recycled from shipwrecks. Juniper was the preferred wood that has a unique, easy-carving grain feature giving the decoy that “old time” feel. Juniper often cracks or checks, but these cracks had little effect on the performance of this rot-resistant wood.
- The decoy looks like a decoy, not a duck. It only had to fool the birds to come in close enough for the shotgun's reach. The bodies were carved with hard side chines much like the old boats had. The backs were rounded up and the sides rounded down to a typically flat bottom.
- The heads were blocky with fairly flat cheeks and no eye channels or glass eyes. They were nailed onto the body and no carving or putty was used to blend the neck into the body. Usually a dowel, large nail or long screw was inserted through the top of the head to help keep the head from falling off when the neck cracked.
- The paint was usually mixed from whatever was available in the boat shed. The colors just needed to be close, not exact. Absolutely no feather detail was painted on; color variations from the head, backs and belly were block painted using straight lines
- and no blending. If wing colors were painted on, they were exaggerated in size to be more visible to the duck.
- The hardware on the decoy was again often recycled from old shipwrecks. The weight could be anything from a strip or flat piece of lead nailed to the bottom, a rail road spike, to even a cut piece of old propeller shaft. The line ties were as simple as an old large-headed nail hammered into the front of the bird to a loop of old shoe leather or canvas nailed in the bottom front of the decoy.
- Decoys were purely functional. If a head broke off another was nailed on. Carvers produced decoys by the thousands during the market gunning days, so there was no time to make a “pretty” bird. Once a block became too worn and split for use, it was often thrown into the wood stove, making the remaining old birds highly collectable.



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BRENT HOOD

Left: In the decoy competition, decoys are placed in a tank of water to be judged. Top: Shows the sequence of development from blank to finished decoy. Above: The decoy festival includes a live auction that uses proceeds to benefit the guild.

Through all the work the guild has conducted over the years, its mission is to safeguard and preserve the memory of those pioneers who helped define the Core Sound decoy carving heritage by offering an honest view of the past, while increasing awareness and appreciation of waterfowl, and providing demonstrations and workshops so that the decoy carving heritage will continue on to the next generation. It is their hope that “by providing a glimpse into the past, and a look at the present, the future of decoy carving may be preserved.”

Holding true to the guild's mission statement, it conducts weekly carving sessions every Thursday. Members have monthly meetings and hold several major carving workshops during the year. They also organize and hold several fun decoy competitions; in May they celebrate Loon Day with an open decoy competition where the birds are floated at the Harkers Island Bridge, and in June they assist with the Kent Hood Memorial Core Sound Hunting Rig Competition that is organized and held at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center. The guild's major International Wildfowl Carvers Association sanctioned competition is held during the Core Sound Decoy Festival. On the third

Saturday of most months, the guild conducts a ‘Kids Carving Program’ where members work with youngsters to introduce them to carving. Some members demonstrate traditional carving techniques at many of the decoy shows and competitions all over the state.

It was one of these demonstrations that caught my attention where a couple of members were carving decoys with old carpenters' hatchets. This past June, the guild managed to talk master carver Jamie Hand, from New Jersey, into conducting a two-day workshop on hatchet-carving a traditional Jersey style black duck that I knew I had to take. The class used traditional hand tools to carve a hollow Jersey style cedar decoy from start to finish. This class gave its students a serious look at how birds were carved a hundred years ago, and increased everyone's awareness and appreciation of this art form that some will go on and teach to others.

Education through workshops, shows and demonstrations is the guild's future. Carver Monte Willis said it best during one of their competitions; that “the best carver in the world

can acquire all the knowledge and technique it takes to carve a perfect decoy, but that knowledge does no one any good if it is retained within just that carver. That knowledge has to be shared or it is worthless and will die with that carver when he or she is no longer

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with us.” The guild's goals are met by having some of the best carvers in the world (and many will easily argue that they do in fact have the best in the world) that are more than willing to demonstrate and share their knowledge to anyone that is willing to listen and learn.

For more information about the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild, check out their website at: decoyguild.com or look them up on Facebook. ☞

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