34th Ocean County Decoy & Gunning Show

By: Victoria Ford



The 34th Ocean County Decoy and Gunning Show will be not only the epicenter of "every possible aspect of waterfowling and decoy collecting," according to organizer German Georgieff, but also an alluring festival-style event for those looking to soak in the sights and sounds of the whole culture surrounding the baymen's lifestyle, that includes family, food, music and camaraderie.

The two-day event takes place in Tuckerton the weekend of Sept. 24 and 25 this year, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. The majority of the action takes place on the lake beach and surrounding lawns at Tip Seaman County Park. 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.

Some of the area's oldest traditions offer delight and intrigue anew, 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 demonstrating their craft and expertise. Enthusiasts come from near and far to support and take part in the Decoy Show and its many contests, making it an important stop on the national contest circuit.

Each year the festival highlights a different species of waterfowl. The 2016 Bird of the Year is the Atlantic Brant, *Branta bernicla*, a small sea goose and cousin to the Canada goose, with similar coloring but slightly different markings, flight pattern and call. Decades ago, Georgieff explained, brant were delicious to eat because their diet consisted mainly of eelgrass. But in the '30s, when a blight wiped out the eelgrass beds, the birds adapted to sea lettuce, which makes them less tasty, though still exciting to hunt.



Branta bernicla.
Photo credit: supplied by artist

Music and food also play an important part in shaping the event's identity. The music tends to be of the country/ folk persuasion;

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this year brings the talents of the Basement Musicians Guild and the duo Gary Struncius and Debbie Lawton to attendees' ears. Helping to contribute to the festive atmosphere, the duo will set up near the food vendors, which offer non-competing menus for maximum variety. Spaces are given free to local nonprofit groups to sell edibles as a fundraiser. In addition, the Seaport offers fresh local seafood – scallops, shrimp, clams and oysters. It all comes together to create a sense of a neighborhood gathering and community support.

Now a far cry from the earliest decoy shows, which basically amounted to a handful of local guys buying and selling decoys off the tailgates of their trucks, the heart and soul of the show has always been the decoy carving contests, according to Georgieff.



Authentic boat builder and artists.
Photo credit: supplied by artist

The earliest carving was not about art but hunting; decoys were tools to attract and harvest ducks. The working decoy categories endure – differentiated among styles such as Barnegat Bay-style, Delaware River-style, traditional shorebird rig, contemporary and miniature.

Hundreds will be on display under the lakeside tents, with another 50 or so decorative decoys inside the park's community center, categorized by fish, bird of prey, game/ song/ wading bird, shorebird, waterfowl.

Regional carving styles trace their histories back to the days before how-to videos on YouTube, automobiles and field guides, when carvers looked to nature or fellow carvers for examples. As a result, commonalities were a function of proximity. Point Pleasant decoys, for example, have greater detail and more relaxed postures, which suited the waterfowling methods.

Over time, recreational decoy carving grew more prevalent, and fancier, with painstaking detail – designed not to catch birds but rather to be displayed and admired. Species expanded to include not just game birds but also songbirds and birds of prey.

The Decoy Show honors all representations of 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 baymen and their families. 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. Exhibition shooting, retriever contests and the Delmarva Dock Dogs are always huge draws.

The ever-evolving collector's market adds another layer of excitement to the event. Decoy values can range from a few hundred dollars to six figures, with the most sought-after being those never intended to be collectible. The ones that

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survived the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 that banned market hunting, rendering decoys useless for all but firewood, have genuine appeal. A household name among collectors is third-generation carver Harry V. Shourds II, who carved the decoy that served as the model for the 2016 Decoy Show collector's pin, featuring the brant. The special commemorative cloisonné pin is for sale at the Ocean County Parks and Recreation Department show booth, the entrance gate and the Seaport.



DelMarva Dog Dogs in Action.
Photo credit: DelMarva Dock Dogs

The Show also supplies the needs of the modern hunter with state-of-the-art commercial equipment, gear and accessories for sale, reconciling the traditions of the sporting world with the latest technologies that will carry the industry into the future.

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