

Barnegat Bay Field Days

Decoy Show Displays Contests and Carvers

By MARIA SCANDALE

The seasons of Barnegat Bay sound a timeless call to the life on and around it, a call heard by the baymen and sportsmen who have answered by developing traditions all their own.

With every autumn come the huntings dogs' restlessness to follow the scent of migrating waterfowl, garveys rippling through a bay reflecting the slate sky, the stoking of fires to accompany an artisan carving a canvasback from aromatic Jersey white cedar, a quickening pace of a clammer treading in the cooler water.

Over the years, Barnegat Bay has inspired a style that has only increased in significance, like a mellowing with age. When we talk about the "Barnegat Bay style" we mean a type of carved decoy developed as a tool, now a valued object of folk art. We refer to the ingenuity of baymen like Hazleton Seaman, who in 1836 adapted a boat called the "sneakbox" that still can't be improved upon 150 years later.

It's a way of life that ought not fade away.

Tradition is indeed the password to an event held every year to assure that the Barnegat Bay style is not only preserved but continued.

Last year, 31,000 people came to the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show. This year, as many are welcome at Tip Seaman Park in Tuckerton, where the tradition comes to life in music, contests of skill, and displays. Many of the 400 exhibitors offer goods for sale — carvings, art, books, waterfowl-related accessories, outdoor clothing, wooden boats.

The show has grown since 3,000 outdoor enthusiasts enjoyed the first one in 1983, but it remains a tribute to authenticity.

What sets this decoy show apart from others around the country, say some who have enjoyed it, is its attention to the genuine.

"Ours is probably the most traditional, the most back to basic," agreed organizer Michael Mangum, a naturalist with the Ocean County Parks Department. "A lot of the shows have gone away from the true working decoy and have more decorative things."

That's why the skeet shoot contest takes place from a sneakbox on the park's Lake Pohatcong, and the decoys in the "working"



Tim Moersh

AUTHENTICITY is the name of the game here. For a retrieving demonstration, Jim Allen rows the real thing out into Lake Pohatcong.

category are judged while bobbing in the water.

"We wanted to try to make them as close as possible to if you were actually hunting, if

you were looking at the decoy how the ducks were looking at it. That's why we use the lake," Mangum explained.

Continued on page 6

Calling a Goose, Fooling a Fowl



Tim Moersh

SITTING DUCKS: A prize-worthy working decoy will lure in passing ducks — so entries are judged in the natural medium at Tip Seaman Park.

Continued from page 4

Winning in the show's contests and knowing the bay go hand and hand — an entrant can't very well do one without the other. The fowl-fooling working decoys are judged on how effectively they would lure in the unsuspecting ducks flying overhead; the duck callers the same.

Yes, duck calling is on the agenda; the show is the occasion of the New Jersey State Duck Calling Championships, no less. The winner will fly his vocal abilities due southwest to Stuttgart, Arkansas.

Duck calling this year is part of a brand new contest called team waterfowling. "It's meant to simulate actual waterfowling out on the bay," said Mangum. Contestants must also shoot skeet from a sneakbox and row a sneakbox properly — these indigenous boats are rowed facing forward — to capture the prize in this triathlon of the sport the locals term "gunning."

Helping to judge will be Sean Mann, two-time world-champion goose caller.

If Mangum had to guess, though, he would say the most popular contest is the test of canine retrieving skill.

"If I had to pick one thing that people love most to watch, I think it's the dogs," he said. "The kids love it."

Ideally, the hunting dogs must "demonstrate obedience to the owner at all times," the official contest rules state. What usually happens can be as entertaining as the procedure of a "perfect" pup.

The Makings of a Show That Tens of Thousands Flock To

Humble beginnings don't apply in the case of the Barnegat Bay decoy show. Someone suggested it; it started; it was a success. Born of a request for "a tailgating, picnicking type of thing where the guys could come in and buy, swap and trade decoys," the show became far more than that in its first year.

The New Jersey Decoy Collector's Association contacted Tip Seaman Park officials Mangum and Joe Smith in 1983 with the idea of the decoy swap/get together, as Mangum

recalls, and Tip's Hardware owner Bud Seaman, a descendant of Hazelton, refined the plan to "Why don't we have a decoy show?" They did, with Mangum and well-known local decoy expert Jim Allen organizing.

"Our theme was going to be trying to preserve the original way of carving a Barnegat Bay decoy, and also encouraging the Barnegat Bay sneakbox builders," recalls Mangum. "They were dying crafts for the most part."

Mangum added, "It also encourages younger people to get into building the boats and carving the Barnegat Bay style decoys. A lot of the boat builders are older."

While old garages and sheds still harbor these vestiges of a simpler time, tomorrow's keepsakes are being made in their likeness today. It's a testament to the function of the original works.

"The sneakbox is still the duck hunting boat of choice here in South Jersey," Mangum related.

Continued on page 28

DECOY SHOW 1991

Show

Continued from page 6

Just how did it do the "sneaking"? Camouflaged with burlap bags and eelgrass, or just floated out to a camouflaged "blind," the stealthy little craft drew so little water that, as folklore goes, "it could follow a mule as it sweats up a dusty road." It was used in all seasons.

The Barnegat Bay decoy evolved accordingly. Hunters needed a decoy that could be piled in the stern to carry out to the hunting site. Explained Mangum, "A Barnegat Bay decoy was carved hollow, and the idea behind that was you wanted to put a lot of decoys on the sneakbox, and they had to be fairly light. They wanted to make a decoy that they could maximize on the boat, because the boat wasn't that big."

More lore of the bay is presented during the show by movies at Pinelands Regional High School. Shuttle buses carry travelers between the park and the school.

The show is one spectacular decoy to entice the outdoor lover.

Mangum said, "We've had people come from just about every state, from Alaska, the



Yukon in Canada. They know about the show. Some of them are interested in Barnegat Bay decoys. I've got more calls from people in places you can't believe about the sneakboxes."

Said Allen, "It has a lot to show the younger kids the way it used to be; the tradition end of it. Because a lot of the kids would never see it. Even the adults learn

the way things were done, what the sneakboxes were used for. And I think it's good for the whole community. It's a nice, relaxing weekend."

Mangum added, "The show wouldn't be possible without the volunteers that help us. We have a lot of good people who work hard. This is what they live for each year."