



Terry McNulty: 2026 Conklin Awardee

By Pat Johnson

At age 85, Terry McNulty is still an avid duck hunter though this coming season he will have a friend with him rather than conquer the elements alone. McNulty has recently found a retriever that he is training and almost every day he takes his dog to Peck's Bay. He has two workshops in his Egg Harbor home—a carving shop in the garage where he also stores his duck boat and an office for painting his decorative and hunting decoys. His wife of 64 years, Peggy, has always been supportive of his work. "Every day I still go down to the river. When I come home for coffee, she asks, 'Well, is it still there?'"

McNulty was raised in Riverside, New Jersey and no one in his immediate family hunted or were outdoorsman, he said. But as a boy he was always outside, mucking about on the Delaware River and Rancocas Creek. He learned to hunt ducks with his boyhood friends. "When I was 15 I had to learn to hunt. My first gun was an Ithaca pump (shotgun) and I remember my first duck, a drake mallard and I stood there with my mouth open, watching it fall.

"I started carving because I needed a decoy rig. I gathered a bunch of old decoys and started fixing them up—painting them and repairing necks and bills. Eventually I went to the next level. I started carving cork

decoys in the 1960s—a half dozen at a time, mostly black ducks. By the 70s I figured it was time to go to wood. I carve hollow decoys in traditional Barnegat Bay and Delaware River styles, ones you can actually hunt over."

McNulty was one of the last Delaware River "scullers." He liked to scull close to the riverbank using his long-handled traditional scull oar and "push-poles" to literally push or propel the boat forward. And he never goes hunting in winter without his long-handled ice hook.

He no longer has the scull but he treasures his Barnegat Bay, feathered-edge sneakbox that is over 50 years old. "My parents took a picture of me when I was five or six years old standing on a sailing sneakbox on Long Beach Island. There must have been something in that boat that went all through my system."

The fact that he has hunted all his life has contributed to the lifelike quality of his carvings. McNulty has won numerous awards for his decoys starting with the Ward Foundation Show in Maryland, Ohio Decoy Carvers and Collectors Show, US Nationals Long Island Show and the Clayton, New Jersey Decoy show.

Above: McNulty at his workshop. Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

He entered his first show at the Ward Foundation in Salisbury, Maryland and won a third place in the decorative category. “I thought, ‘Wow but I can do better.’”

“Two years later I entered a hen mallard. Out of 15 in the tank I came in 7th and had my heart broken. I asked the judge—Paul Verdet what I might do better. He said I did a great job on the eyes and then he proceeded to ‘take an ax and chopped it up in little pieces.’ I thought I would never enter another contest until I know what I’m doing.”

“Then in 1976 I felt more comfortable and went to the U.S. Nationals on Long Island and won Best in Show for my pintail. That was the beginning when I started making decorative decoys and started competing. I went back to Maryland and won Best Puddle Duck in Decorative. And in 1985 I won Best in World Hunting Decoy. I got more and more involved in decorative but I get more enjoyment making hunting decoys. A fancy bird is nice but it just sits on a shelf.”



McNulty Swan. Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

For years he entered in shows all over the country—and won Best in Show in north and south California, in Clayton, New York and the Ward Foundation among others.

“My tendency is to try and recreate a real duck. That’s what I love and I’m told to do what you love.”

When he hunted in Brigantine, he used to sell his decoys right out of his boat to other hunters.

He started teaching others to carve from a shop in his trucking company in Riverside. “Two fellows got really good- Caleb Mater and Horace Jennings,” said McNulty.

McNulty also volunteered at the Tuckerton Seaport and did carving demonstrations in the Jay Parker carving shop. He enjoyed demonstrating for the public and one year he carved a life-size swan that kept folks coming back to watch his progress.

McNulty declared, “I love everything about duck hunting, the decoys, the boats, the guns.. I hunt over hand-carved decoys and I collect some. I put them on a shelf and on days I can’t get out, I sit in my lounge chair and pick a decoy or two and think about that duck bouncing on the bay or river.”



McNulty Pintails. Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.