

Carving a future for creating duck decoys

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Photo by [Kyle Bursaw](#)

NEWVILLE — When Bob Swann saw a thousand ruddy ducks on Lake Koshkonong, he decided to carve decoys replicating the bird.

No one was selling ruddy decoys. He figured he'd quickly create a few with cedar wood and use them to hunt.

But it proved to be more difficult than he thought. Six months later, long after duck-hunting season had ended, he finally finished the decoys.

“I enjoyed the process so much, working with wood and making decoy sculptures, I just stayed with it,” said Swann, who has carved 1,600 decoys of 21 duck species.

More than 30 years later, Swann, who lives in Newville, is teaching six locals the art. He was selected among 11 professional decoy carvers in the United States to teach the craft.

The National Endowment for the Arts awarded the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art a grant to support the project.

The goal is to help preserve and promote the tradition of decoy carving, Swann said.

“It’s original American folk art,” he said. “Back in the 1700s and 1800s, the growing nation lived on wild game, deer and duck.”

Students in the class are carving and painting ruddy ducks, black ducks, scoter ducks and wood ducks, Swann said. Most of the ducks are carved in cork.

“It’s a real neat process in that you don’t have to take it too seriously,” he said. “It’s a relaxing outlet.”

The decoys eventually will be placed in water to attract real ducks during a hunt.

Jim R. Leute, Janesville, a student in the class, has been carving ducks for 50 years, but he has never had much talent for painting them.

The class has helped him learn feather patterns, color matching and other skills required to make the duck appear realistic, he said.

During a recent class, Leute was painting a black duck. He had paint, brushes and water. His hand trembled slightly while he brushed small strokes along the duck’s head.

“I’m doing more erasing than painting here,” Leute said.

He wanted the paint just right. If it wasn’t, the ducks might know it’s a decoy when he hunts.

“A lot of carvers just put it on randomly, but there is a pattern,” Swann said. “It just doesn’t look right, if you know the duck.”

Kurt Buggs, a Janesville duck hunter, is carving a surf scoter decoy in the class. He’ll use it to hunt ducks on Lake Michigan.

He’s made a few decoys in the past, but the class has taught him the finer points such as setting the eyes and detailing the bills.

The class has been worthwhile, he said.

“I think it’s a great thing, especially for the guys who have very little or no experience,” Buggs said.

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