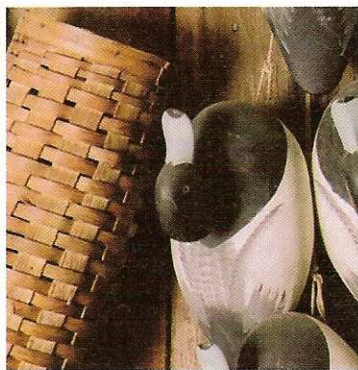
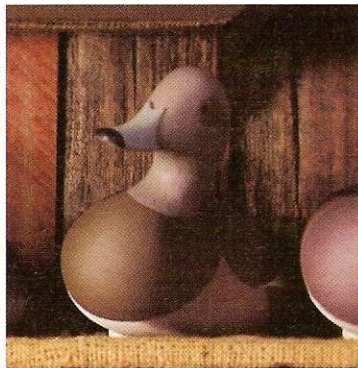


CALLING

BY MARK FITZGERALD ✎ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY CLARK

Maryland's "Harbor of Grace" also happens to be a harbor for decoy carvers—and Bryon Bodt is among the best.



IF BRYON BODT'S DUCKS COULD TALK, they would tell him to put down his drawknife and take a break. "Stop working so much," they would say. "There's too many of us. We're starting to feel crowded, you know?" But Bodt can't stop. He's on a roll. Today he's already carved four pintails.

"You try and bring them to a certain point," he says. "But no two ducks will ever be the same. To the casual observer, maybe they'll look that way. But I can always tell them apart."

Bodt has been carving ducks since he was fourteen years old. Now, at almost forty, he still loves the craft. His main workshop is located in the back of a large tan barn in Churchville, Maryland, near the Upper Chesapeake Bay community of Havre de Grace. Inside, stacks of logs—split into blocks to dry for at least four years—line the walls. In another barn, he keeps his decoy lathe, a custom-built machine that rotates and saws blocks of wood into duck bodies. The barns border his family's Christmas tree farm and are slightly set back from the main house, where he has lived since 1968.

On most days, Bodt can be found in his workshop, a space that is divided into three rooms. The main room, which accommodates a band saw and belt sander, is where he usually carves his duck heads. The middle room is for varnishing. The far room is for painting and drying. Mallards, canvasbacks, black ducks, and pintails—some of his most popular requests—perch patiently on shelves awaiting shipment.

Bodt is a reserved, lean guy who sometimes wears a baseball cap with a purple cow on the front that moos out, "Whatever." When the machines are running, he'll put on earplugs even though by now, he says, he's grown used to the noise. He doesn't like to talk much about himself. He'd rather show you what he does. He'd rather have a spokeshave or a drawknife in his hands. Give him just thirty minutes and he'll turn a block of tupelo into a sleek, elegant



body; then he'll saw out a profile from some sugar pine and whittle it to life; and finally, he'll round out a neck, sand down a bill, and drive a nail through a head—attaching the two parts, head to body, seamlessly.

When Bodt was only twenty years old, Ducks Unlimited selected his blackhead decoy as the Maryland state bird. Since then, he has learned to carve more than sixteen species native to the Atlantic Flyway. His decoys have appeared in the Havre de Grace Decoy Festival, The Chestertown Wildlife Show, and the Upper Shore Decoy Show. In 1998, his antique canvasback drake was honored by the Maryland Ducks Unlimited. Through the years, he has displayed his work at the Upper Bay Museum and the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum, where he often volunteers to educate children about the craft. As a longtime hunter and conservationist, Bodt remains a strong supporter of organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and The Izaak Walton League, where he is a life member and active in the Harford County Chapter.

Bodt credits his father, who is also a League member, for sparking his interest in decoys. Bernie Bodt used

to buy gunning decoys from R. Madison Mitchell, one of the region's leading carvers, for hunting on the Sassafras River and Susquehanna Flats. In those days, most of the decoys were made for hunting, and Mitchell had perfected a style that was both simple and elegant. "My dad liked Mitchell's work and he also liked to collect antiques," says Bodt. "He has some ducks that are over a hundred years old with more than fifty coats of paint on them."

As Bryon grew up, so did his interest in waterfowl and hunting. As a teenage hobby, he began whittling duck heads. After high school, he attended Washington College in Chestertown, where he studied biology and spent most of his free time carving ducks. He was offered an apprenticeship with Jimmy Pierce, a student of Mitchell who helped found the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum. "Bryon got plenty of practice when he worked for me," recalls Pierce, who has been making decoys for more than fifty years. "And he got better with every duck he made."

After college and his apprenticeship, Bodt began developing his own style of decoys. In addition to adopting the flat paint and sleek plumage that distinguishes Havre de Grace style decoys, he had finally refined a head that was his own. Promoting his ducks at festivals and shows, he gradually

established a reputation and started a decoy business that became profitable enough to allow him to carve ducks full time. He even has his own Internet store, www.bodtdecoys.com. "Bryon does good work," adds Pierce. "You can tell because he's found his own style—it suits him well."

Over the years, Bodt's business has grown. He has expanded his creations to larger birds, such as blue herons, swans, geese, and sandhill cranes. He enjoys the challenge of painting hens because of their subtle blends of brown and gray. "Most of my regular customers are collectors," he says. "And sometimes they'll request birds I've never carved before." Often Bodt will try making a new bird just for the challenge, but he declines on occasion because of the time and cost involved in deciding on a design that can be reliably reproduced. "There are some birds that I don't make," he adds. "I haven't figured out how I want to do them yet. I can carve the body, but that's only half of it. I need to know exactly every step I'll take. Even before I pick up a paintbrush, I need to know how I'm going to paint it."

Using home-mixed paints based on Rustoleum and Japan color pigments, Bodt applies at least five coats of paint to every decoy. His father, who has a good eye for detail, often helps with the topcoat. Influenced by the old Havre de Grace carvers, Bodt paints a working-style decoy that is clean and simple. "When you know most of your birds will never be put in water, you've got to be particular," he says.

Although he doesn't consider himself an artist, Bodt admits that over the years the craft has become more demanding. "If the primary goal is to put a bird on a shelf, then it better look good," he explains. "In that sense, I guess you could say the work has shifted more into a kind of art."

Bodt and his father have been members of the League's Harford County Chapter since 1990. The chapter owns the Melvin G. Bosely Conservancy, a four hundred-acre wildlife and recreation area northeast of

Baltimore. The conservancy consists of forested uplands, marshes, and ponds. It offers recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, canoeing, hiking, and wildlife watching. Bodt is one of about a dozen chapter members who hunt waterfowl on the conservancy. He is especially fond of its Otter Point Creek, an Upper Chesapeake Bay habitat on the western shore of Harford County with plenty of open water and wetlands for ducks.

More than hunting, however, he spends a lot of time at the conservancy engaged in a waterfowl conservation program designed to cultivate and maintain nesting sites for mallards and wood ducks. He also volunteers with the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, which works with the Harford Chapter to survey the conservancy's resources and address coastal, estuarine, and resource protection issues. "We do a good deal of monitoring," says Bodt. "We're pretty active with the program, and we're making progress with our wood ducks."

Bodt also participates in the chapter's Clean Our Marsh program—a necessary though unpleasant task considering that highways, residential development, and industrial activities surround most of the marshes. "Our county is going through comprehensive rezoning and development," he says. "It's kind of scary because we're right at the bottom of it, and we get all



the trash and debris that washes down."

As a hunter, he has also witnessed the daunting decline in waterfowl populations over the last few years. Canvasbacks—the Upper Chesapeake's most celebrated bird—are in such danger that they were off-limits to hunters this season. The depletion of wild celery and the drainage of marshes have been devastating for these diving, fast-flying ducks. "The biggest problem continues to be habitat destruction," Bodt says. "For waterfowl, it's happening both on their breeding and wintering grounds. They have no place to stay and they have nothing to eat."

Bodt believes that duck hunters have a certain responsibility to protect diminishing waterfowl populations. "As hunters, we have to be accountable and cautious," he notes, remembering the Upper Chesapeake's glory days during the 1980s.



“This used to be the best place on the Eastern seaboard to hunt the Canada goose. Then look what happened. We overharvested and the breeding population got too low. Then we couldn’t hunt Canada goose for a few years.”

It’s been said that the Upper Chesapeake has the richest tradition of bird carving in the country. In fact, Havre de Grace is often referred to as “The Decoy Capital of The World” because such a large concentration of decoy carvers live within its zip code. Making ducks here is as fundamental as it is deep-seated. Many do it because their grandfathers and fathers did it. Most do it because they love it. “I know all the carvers here,” Bodt says. “We’ll exchange ideas and share our work. It’s a friendly competitiveness, I guess, but we all get along.”

In May, Bodt displayed his decoys at the Annual Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival. This marked the 22nd year of the festival, and, with hundreds of carvers showing their work, Bodt’s competition was as keen as ever. “It’s a big show,” he says, “something that everyone looks forward to.” A few of his decoys are on permanent display at the

Havre de Grace Museum—a two-story building located on the banks of the Susquehanna Flats. Through exhibits and hunting memorabilia, the museum demonstrates the evolution of decoys and features the work of some of the regions most prominent carvers. “My decoys are on display on the sink box boat,” says Bodt, adding that it’s okay with him that they’re not labeled as his. “That doesn’t bother me. The focus of the museum, as it should be, is on the masters.”

Ask Bodt how long it takes him to make the average duck decoy, and he’ll probably tell you he can’t say. Every duck is different, and when you work for yourself, you can work as fast or as slow as you want. Wood duck drakes, the most colorful ducks, can take weeks because of their bright hues and detail. He likes to paint them in the summer, when he has plenty of time.

As for today, he’s nearly finished connecting the pintails. They look almost real. He doesn’t want to stop working, but he’s learned that if he misses lunch, it’ll throw off dinner.

“That’s enough for today,” he says. Today he’s made four pintails. Tomorrow he’ll paint them.

—Mark Fitzgerald is a freelance writer from Arlington, Virginia.