

The Canvasback

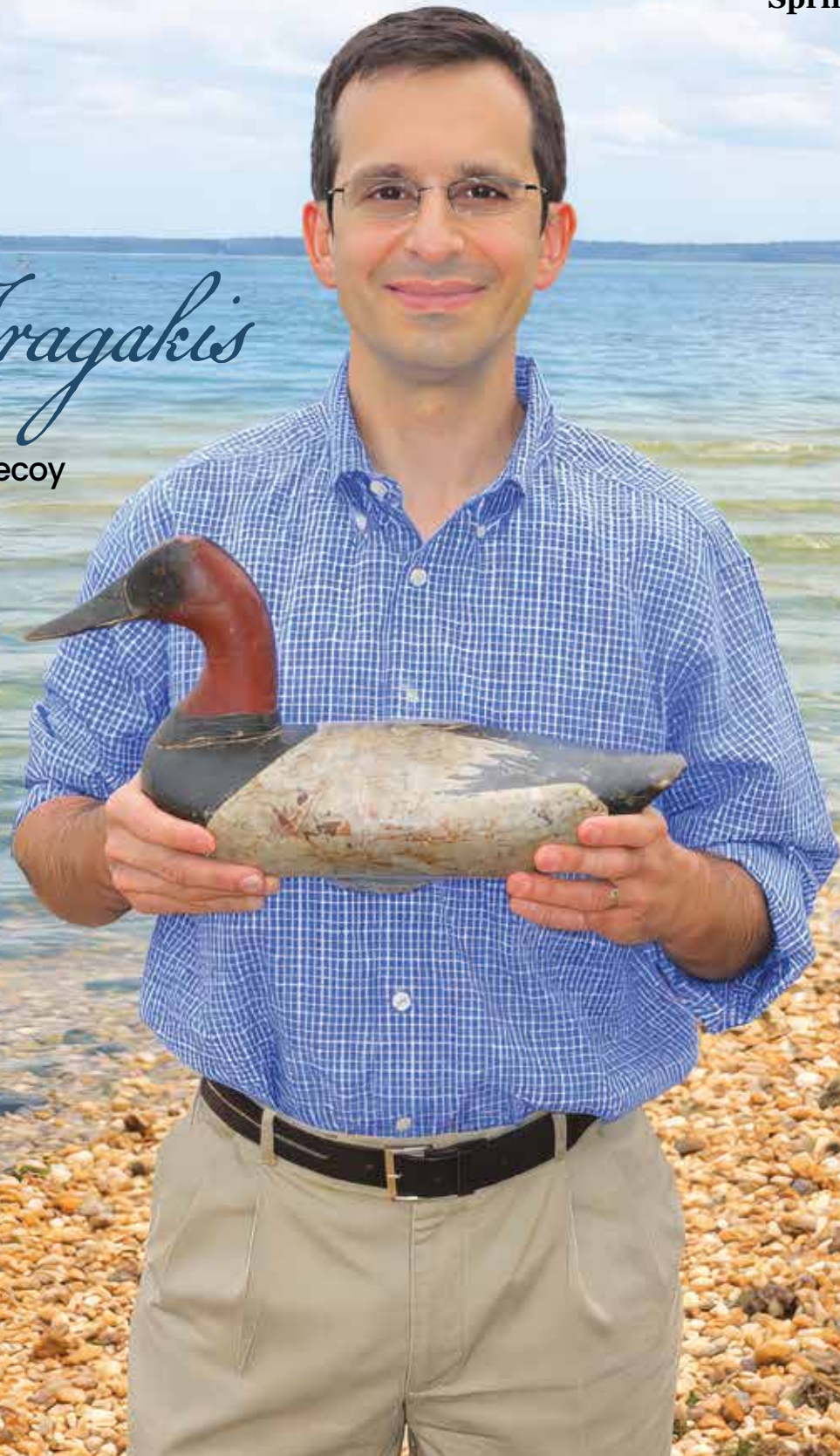
HAVRE DE GRACE DECOY MUSEUM

Vol. 36 No. 2

Spring 2026

Chad Tragakis

Honorary Chairman
of the 44th Annual Decoy
& Wildlife Art Festival





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can•vas•back

(kan'ves bak'), n.,pl. -backs, (esp. collectively) — back.

1. a north american wild duck, the male of which has a whitish back and a reddish-brown head and neck.
2. a style of decoy made famous by carvers of the Susquehanna Flats region.
3. a quarterly publication of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.

THE MUSEUM WAS INCORPORATED IN 1981 AS A 501(C)(3) TAX-EXEMPT ORGANIZATION TO COLLECT, DOCUMENT, PRESERVE, AND INTERPRET WATERFOWL DECOYS AS A UNIQUE FORM OF FOLK ART.

FUNDED IN PART BY



The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is supported in part by the Maryland State Arts Council (msac.org)



Contents

Features

- 3** 2026 Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival Information
- 5** What We Know & What We Don't
C. John Sullivan Jr.
- 8** Chesapeake of the West - *Chad Tragakis*
- 17** Chad Tragakis, Honorary Chairman of the 2026 Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival - *Mike Tarquini*
- 32** Canvasback Naturalist - Mallards
John E. Hughes, Jr.
- 37** Shots from the Wild - Mallards
- 43** The Jim & Diane Cook Collection

Departments

- 4** From the President
- 30** Museum Members

ON THE COVER

Chad Tragakis standing on the shores of the Potomac River's Mason Neck with a Jim Holly canvasback used at the High Point Club.

44TH ANNUAL

Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival

May 2 & 3, 2026

STAR Centre
700 Congress Avenue
Havre de Grace, Maryland 21078

Saturday, May 2
9:00 am - 5:00 pm

Sunday, May 3
9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Honorary Chairman
Chad Tragakis



WWW.DECOYMUSEUM.COM

For more information contact the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum • 215 Giles Street • Havre de Grace, MD 21078
410.939.3739 • information@decoymuseum.com • OPEN YEAR-ROUND

2026

FESTIVAL Information

Friday, May 1

Exhibitor Set-up

12:00 PM - 3:00 PM • STAR Centre

Carvers Reception

6:00 PM - 8:30 PM • Decoy Museum

Saturday, May 2

44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival Exhibition

9:00 AM - 5:00 PM • STAR Centre

Marine Exhibition

9:00 AM - 5:00 PM • STAR Centre

Decorative Carving Registration & Competition

STAR Centre (Small Gym)

Registration 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Judging 11:00 AM - 3:00 PM

Gunning Decoy Registration & Competition

STAR Centre (Small Gym)

Registration 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Judging 11:00 AM - 3:00 PM

J. Evans McKinney Old Decoy Competition

STAR Centre (Small Gym)

Registration 10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Judging 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM

Sunday, May 3

44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival Exhibition

9:00 AM - 3:00 PM • STAR Centre

Marine Exhibition

9:00 AM - 3:00 PM • STAR Centre

Museum Spring Raffle Drawing

2:00 PM • STAR Centre



A note about the Honorary Chairman . . .

Every so often, a scholarly figure emerges and embraces the teachings of the past, researches the how and whys of those teachings, and positions this information for future generations to understand, appreciate and enjoy. Chad Tragakis is fascinated by the history of waterfowling and decoy making in the Upper Chesapeake Bay and has made it his mission to preserve and share that history with others through his scholarship, leadership, and generosity. The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is honored to recognize Chad Tragakis as its Honorary Chairman of the 44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival.

Food & Beverages will be available during the weekend through our show partner, the Susquehanna Flats Chapter of Delta Waterfowl. Please visit our website www.decoymuseum.com for Festival information and updates to this schedule as we draw nearer to the event.



215 Giles Street
Havre de Grace, MD 21078
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www.decoymuseum.com

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From the President...

With winter behind us, all of us are engaged in all sorts of projects in order to move the needle forward in fulfillment of our critical success factors. At the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum we are in the midst of making final arrangements for our 44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival, establishing a permanent Holly Family exhibit, and moving our proposed museum expansion project forward. New temporary exhibits include the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association's "Half the Sky" hens, Delmarva Decoy Collectors Association's Oliver "Tuts" Lawson creations, New Jersey's Decoy Collectors Association's Bob Seabrook Shorebirds Collection, and a tribute to Honorary Chairman Chad Tragakis.



Our museum is well along in its trajectory of transitioning from a local museum to one that is super-regional. We continue to treasure our rich Upper Chesapeake Bay heritage while we celebrate the legacies of our geographical neighbors. Our intent is to make our museum more inclusive and appealing to a broader audience. While our aspirations are well founded, they require an elevated level of volunteer and financial support.

We are always open and willing to accept new volunteers with diverse backgrounds, skills and talents to assist us in our journey. Sustaining growth comes at a cost. As we broaden our mission, expand our facilities, strengthen staffing and raise our profile within our adjacent geographies, we recognize that we must take on additional financial responsibilities. To that end, we must embrace the challenge of raising additional funds through grants, gifts and foundations that support efforts such as ours. Historically, our Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival (May) in partnership with Delta Waterfowl and the spring and fall raffles have served as our major fundraising events. In December 2025, the museum established an annual fundraising banquet that raised funds exclusively for museum operations. Partnering with Ducks Unlimited, we hosted a sporting clays shoot in October in honor of long-time supporter Ed Henry. Guyette and Deeter has partnered with the museum to enable us to host a tailgate event at the Country School during the week of the Easton Waterfowl Festival in November. Despite all these efforts, we continue to depend on the support of those who share our desire to preserve the cultural heritage of waterfowling and decoy making.

Within this magazine, there is an envelope that can be used to support the growth initiatives at the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum. We understand that everyone has limits as to what they can do to support organizations such as ours, but we are most appreciative of your consideration to do what you can to support our efforts to preserve our rich cultural heritage. *Our history is worth preserving!*

What We Know and What We Don't:

the Known and the Unknown

C. John Sullivan Jr





Holly wing duck bearing C. N. Barnard branding.



Holly wing duck with bottom board.



Holly wing duck with R. Madison Mitchell signature.

Over 30 years ago at a popular local auction in Timonium, Maryland, a group of five flat-bottom redhead drakes were sold. A dealer/picker from the area picked up the lot for a very cheap price. The dealer knew that they were decent decoys, but he had no concept of their rarity or importance to the decoy-collecting community. The morning after the auction, he drove to Havre de Grace and paid a visit at the home of R. Madison Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell recognized the decoys as wingducks and stated that he had made the decoys for a sinkbox rig; then, with his engraving tool, he signed the bottom of each of the five with his name, the year 1930, and "Havre de Grace, Maryland." Mitchell claimed that the decoys were made just prior to the sinkbox being outlawed and apparently had never been used. Some of the decoys had their heads turned approximately 20% to the right, and the others faced straight ahead. The decoys are painted as drake redheads, their thin bodies exhibit a tail that rises up from the flat back and narrows toward the end of the body, and the heads are attached directly to the breast with no raised shelf. The decoys were unused and apparently had been stored away, since the Havre de Grace style paint on them appeared near mint. Within a day or two after Mitchell's signing, word of them spread through the local antique decoy-collecting community, and three were resold. The original buyer kept what he determined to be the best two. The three that were sold continued to move among the decoy-collecting network. One of the decoys signed by Mitchell and still wearing the 1930 year sold in a Guyette and Deeter auction for a considerable amount of money. One or two of these decoys had Mr. Mitchell's signature and date sanded from the underside, which was then repainted. Depending on the collector's preference, having the Mitchell signature on the underside of the decoy simply adds to the mystery of this group of decoys.

Following the distribution of the three, some speculated that various carvers other than Mitchell might be the creator of these wonderful decoys. Some thought they saw the work of Benjamin Dye, but the raised, slightly curved tail and the head resting directly on the body dispelled those thoughts. Several collectors who examined them felt strongly that they were the work of the Holly family.

On November 10, 2022, I found myself back in Easton for the annual Waterfowl Festival. I set up my artifacts display in the high school cafeteria and then took a walk through the buy, sell, and swap area. Being drawn to the area of items for sale is something that only dedicated collectors can understand. Don't I have enough stuff already? What force is drawing me into this area? I casually walk by the hundreds of items available for sale, and instantly I stop and pick up one of the items being offered. It takes but seconds, and the deal is struck and I carry yet another decoy back to my display. How did so many others not recognize my newly acquired gem? This decoy presents itself in a form and paint slightly different from those five wingducks that Mitchell signed some 30 years ago. It wears the addition of a one-inch-thick bottom board, allowing it to change life from a wingduck to a floating decoy. Perhaps this novel form allowed me to become the new owner. This decoy, like a few of the original group, has the head turned to the right at approximately a 20% angle.

The decoy is painted as a drake redhead in a sophisticated style, with great detailed and intricate feathering. Once at home, I compare this bird to others in my collection. I consider my Holly redheads and retrieve one to make a comparison. The head appears to match up with the heads on the Holly birds gunned over by George Bird Grinnell in North Carolina. Those decoys are dated to the 1880-1890 range. After feeling confident that Holly is the carver, my attention is drawn to the mystery of the original paint, and I quickly recall the original paint on the carvings of Charles Nelson Barnard. Only a very few Barnard drakes appear in original paint. I take a few decoys off of their shelves and set them alongside the Holly, and there is that detailed paint pattern of Barnard. Mystery solved? Not by any means. The reason for the bottom board attachment is obvious, that is, to take it off of the wing of a sinkbox and place it in the water. But why the paint? Years ago, when Henry A. Fleckenstein and I would discuss various decoys that we weren't 100% sure of, we would call them "Committee Birds," meaning that several carvers had collaborated on them. Is my newest discovery one of these decoys?

The seller of this decoy advised me that it had come from a collection in Chicago. The bottom board was obviously attached by a decoy maker; it fits the flat bottom perfectly and is attached with inletted screws. The flat lead ballast weight and ring and staple are certainly original to the bottom board. Stamped into the bottom board are the initials CWJ to identify the decoy's owner. In January 2026, a Havre de Grace carver who had worked closely with Charlie Joiner thought the heads resembled the work of Joiner. The CWJ stamp certainly mimics Joiner's brand.

This wonderful gunning decoy tells us some of its history, the "known knows," but it is the unknowns that keep us interested and searching for history. We will never know all of the history, but we can allow these wonderful artifacts to take us on journeys with them and speculate as to the stories they could tell.

I was extremely fortunate to have found the first of these flat-bottom birds in 2022, but to have been tipped off to more of them in the fall of 2025 seems just too good to believe. I received a call in November of 2025 from a decoy friend who had discovered another eight of these wonderful decoys. They were found in a collection in Nebraska. The long-distance transaction took place quickly, and the group of eight joined my single bird. Although one of the recent group presents in Madison Mitchell paint and wears a Mitchell head, this simply adds to the mystery of these decoys. Were these unique decoys created by just one carver or by several artists working together? I well remember watching Captain Harry Jobes working with Clarence "Titbird" Bauer and Capt. Harry's three sons on a large order of mallard decoys. The group passed the decoys around from one to another, each completing his assigned task to finish the decoy. It is quite possible that this occurred with a much earlier group of skilled artisans. Whatever group created these decoys, all collectors agree that the end result is perfection. The joy of viewing them together as a small rig is delightful to behold.



Holly wing duck pair.



Wing duck profiles.

“Chesapeake of the West”

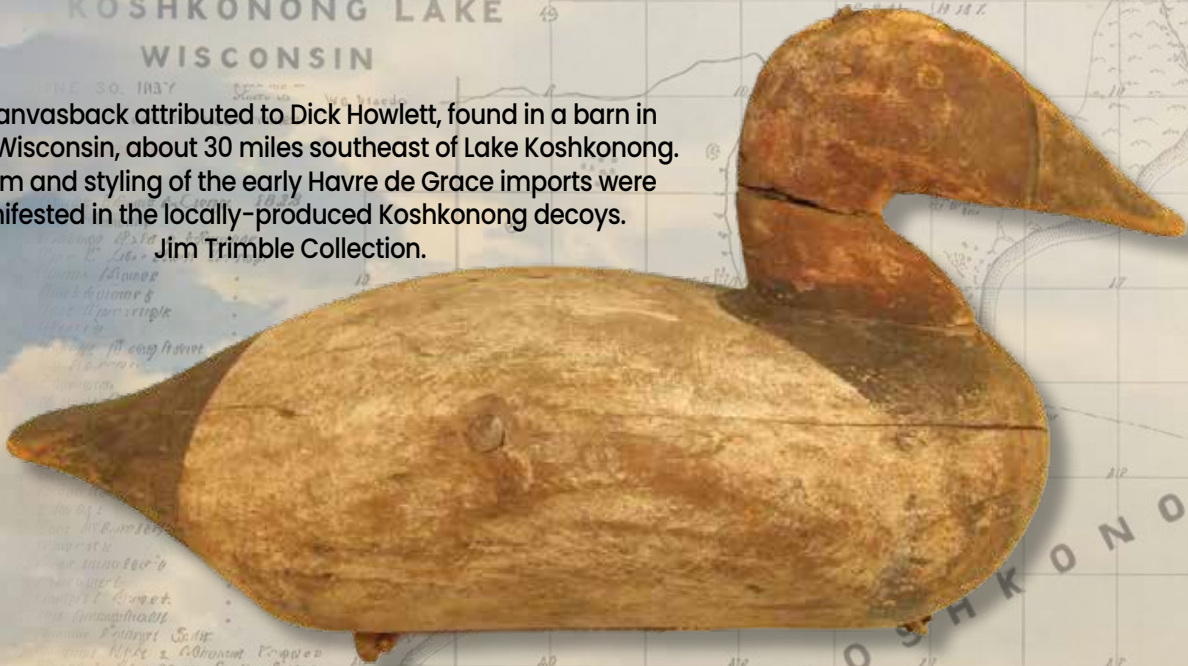
The Susquehanna Flats – Lake Koshkonong Decoy Connection Revisited

By Chad Tragakis

*Early print of a Lake Koshkonong hunter
shooting mallards over decoys, published in
Chicago in 1902.*

ARCHEOLOGICAL CHART
KOSHKONONG LAKE
WISCONSIN

Early canvasback attributed to Dick Howlett, found in a barn in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, about 30 miles southeast of Lake Koshkonong. The form and styling of the early Havre de Grace imports were manifested in the locally-produced Koshkonong decoys. Jim Trimble Collection.



A large canvasback with more pronounced, angular carving to the body. The nail in the top of the head is covered with a wooden plug, a typical characteristic of local decoys. The bird exhibits an iron keel weight, iron staple and swivel line-tie ring. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.

“Why son, I can remember 40 years ago when I used to go to Koshkonong, it was the best place for duck in the whole United States, except Chesapeake Bay. We never brought down anything but canvasback duck. They were there by the thousands.”

Omaha sports writer Sandy Griswold, in a letter to Frank Sinclair, sports editor of the *Janesville Daily Gazette* in 1924.

When the massive glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age, they left present day Wisconsin with some incredible natural treasures – among them, the Rock River valley and Lake Koshkonong. With a shallow basin, ranging between four and twelve feet deep, the lake was once host to vast beds of wild rice and acres of lush, wild celery, attracting annual migrations of canvasbacks, redheads and other ducks. The entire region was long a favorite hunting grounds of the Native Americans of the Potawatomi tribe, whose name for the area Gishkzhegonang (meaning “the place with catfish”) was translated into English as Koshkonong. The Potawatomi’s name for the lake itself was Éndayang-zagegen, meaning “the lake we live on.”

In 1837, Lucien Bonaparte Caswell, an early settler, congressman and founder of the Citizens’ State Bank of Fort Atkinson, described the lake this way: “At this season wild rice literally covered the entire surface. It looked like a vast meadow. We could see nothing in it for us, but from what we could learn it was everything to the Indians. From far and near, they depended largely on the rice they gathered for their winter food; and the ducks (no one can tell or half

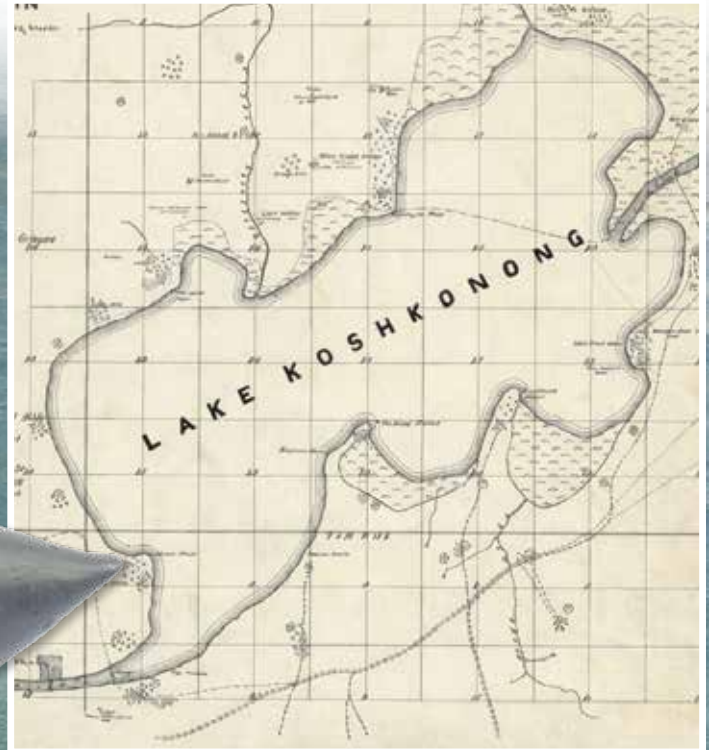
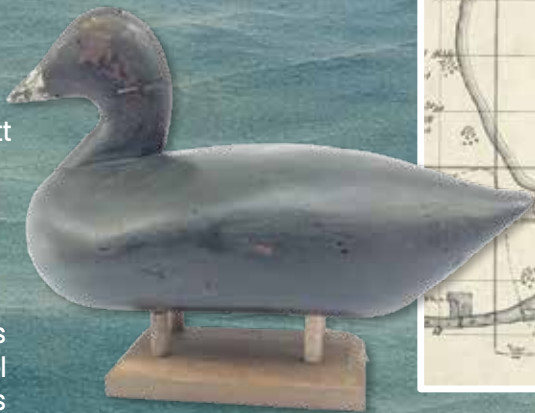
describe the varieties) came in millions and millions to feed upon the great field of rice of which they seemed so fond. They would light down all over the vast rice fields and feed on the unlimited quantity till they were fat and most delicious food. It was only a question of ammunition in the number one would kill at a shooting. When a gun was fired, there followed every time a sight to behold. The noise of the gun would stir them up, and they would rise out of this field of rice in such quantities that the roar was like distant thunder. The atmosphere overhead would be filled till the sun at times would be almost darkened. No tongue or pen can describe the number or quantity.”

Construction of the Indianford Dam about four miles downstream, beginning in 1846, increased the surface water to a total of nearly 11,000 acres, making Koshkonong one of the largest lakes in Wisconsin. Scientist, author and founder of the Wisconsin Natural History Association, Increase Allen Lapham, who visited Koshkonong in July 1850, wrote: “A few miles above Fulton, the river expands into a broad and shallow lake, known by its Indian name of Koshkonong. There is a rapid current, extending about six hundred feet into the lake. On the usual channel for boats the water is from four to twelve feet deep. Wild rice was growing abundantly over almost its entire surface, giving it more the appearance of a meadow than a lake. Fish and mollusks also abound in its water, finding plenty of food in the warm mud beneath, and among the roots and stems of the grass and rushes.”



Sleek canvasback with a tear-drop shaped body and boat-like styling. Like most local decoys, the head features tack eyes, but this example displays a more pronounced bulge under the jaw. It shows the possible influence of early Holly family decoys. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.

This early coot probably started life as a John “Daddy” Holly or Dick Howlett diving decoy. At the very least, it shows tremendous influence of the imported Maryland decoys. It is branded “B” on the top of the back, features tack eyes and evidence of an iron keel weight. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.



Map of Lake Koshkonong in 1907.

Because of the seemingly endless flocks of canvasback ducks the lake attracted each season, Koshkonong was dubbed the “Chesapeake of the West” and the “Chesapeake of the Mississippi Valley” by local hunters and visiting “sports.” The incredible bounty also attracted a number of market hunters who ably supplied a growing nation’s increased appetite for game birds.

There are accounts of members of the Bingham family, perhaps the region’s most famous waterfowling clan, whose take ended up in the market stalls of Chicago and even as far east as New York City. Many of the sport hunters were wealthy easterners who travelled out by rail, bringing with them their own guns and accoutrements, including their own decoys. Given that they were hunting canvasbacks, it’s not at all surprising that their initial decoys of choice would be canvasbacks from the Upper Chesapeake Bay.

As early as the 1850s, the Susquehanna Flats was firmly established as one of America’s premiere waterfowling destinations. In the decades that followed, the effectiveness, affordability and adaptability of the sturdy, quality decoys being produced there by John “Daddy” Holly, Dick Howlett, John Graham, Ben Dye, the Barnes family and many others became equally famous. The nation’s sporting elite, including well-known authors, artists and wealthy industrialists, purchased countless rigs of Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys, mainly from Havre de Grace, and brought them to hunting camps as far north as New England and as far south as the Carolinas.

While we know Susquehanna Flats decoys were used on Lake Koshkonong in the mid-19th century, few documented examples from this early period have ever been found there. And yet, hundreds of early decoys clearly – and closely resembling Flats birds – but distinctly different – have survived, and have become eagerly sought after by a growing number of Wisconsin collectors.

In the September/October 2007 issue of Decoy Magazine, collector and historian Bob Lehmkuhl (1938-2009) presented a vivid and comprehensive overview of Lake Koshkonong, its waterfowling heritage and the many wonderful but mysterious decoys that have been found in the area. Bob wondered if the decoys that surfaced in and around Koshkonong were purchased from commercial makers in Maryland and shipped out in bulk, or if they were made locally, with designs inspired by the early Chesapeake imports.

In studying the many different examples Lehmkuhl and others collected, dating from the 1860s to the 1890s and ranging in style from finely carved to crudely constructed, most do show a clear resemblance to Susquehanna Flats birds. But, they are unlike the work of any documented Flats maker. And many of them, with “V” bottoms, sloped backs, square tails or other distinctive features, are also different enough in lines, form, style and construction to indicate that they are Wisconsin-made decoys, though emulating the early Flats lures that were initially shipped out to the region by rail. The paint schemes on many Koshkonong decoys are also extremely similar to the simple, stylized patterns used



A group of hunters relax in front of a Lake Koshkonong clubhouse after a good day on the water. Originally published in *The Northwestern Sportsman* magazine, 1905.



Bold and sculptural canvasback from the “Shannon-Tallman” rig, possibly made by Charles F. Shannon for the Tallman family of Janesville, Wisconsin. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.



Early photo of the Lake Koshkonong shoreline. For years, the lake attracted seemingly endless flocks of canvasbacks each season, earning it the nickname “Chesapeake of the West.”

on early Flats canvasbacks, and the iron keel weights and rigging encountered, while clearly different, are also somewhat similar.

Just as it wasn't surprising that early eastern hunters would import canvasback decoys from the Susquehanna Flats, it makes sense that as more and larger rigs were needed, local guides, gunners and craftsmen would base the new decoys they made on these same birds. With regard to their overall form, dimensions, materials and construction, paint patterns and rigging, Susquehanna Flats style decoys were relatively easy for local Koshkonong makers to copy and produce on a large scale.

A big question remains – why haven't more early, attributable Chesapeake Bay birds been found near Lake Koshkonong? To date, true Maryland decoys found in

Wisconsin have been few and far between, and most of those that have surfaced are from a later, circa 1890-1920 period. It's important to consider that relative to the huge rigs that would later be in service on Lake Koshkonong, there probably weren't that many Flats decoys brought in during those initial early years; maybe a handful of rigs containing a few hundred decoys each. And, it's also likely that the visiting “sports” who took great pride in their rigs – and went to the trouble and expense of shipping them in – would have made sure they were shipped back out to the gunning resort or camp they would be travelling to next.

Some of these circa 1850s-1860s decoys that were left behind – cast adrift during a hunt, forgotten, given away or stored locally for later use – could simply have been



Reminiscent of an Upper Chesapeake Bay decoy, this canvasback is branded “PS BLIVEN” for the rig of Peleg Saunders Bliven. Originally from Rhode Island, Bliven owned a large farm in Milton, Wisconsin, just below Lake Koshkonong. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.



View from Hoard's Hotel on Lake Koshkonong, from an old postcard.

lost to rot, splitting and other damage that comes from decades of hard use. But beyond this, there are a number of stories circulating among Wisconsin collectors, which Koshkonong collector and historian Marty Sands shared with me, that may help further explain their absence today.

Beginning in the late 1890s, Lake Koshkonong experienced a number of changes that would alter its ecology forever. Repairs to the nearby Indianford dam in 1895 drew down the lake's normal water levels by 18 inches. When the levels later rose, the higher water reduced light penetration, increased turbidity (water cloudiness), and promoted erosion on the lake bottom, severely degrading the wild rice and celery.

Additionally, the introduction of carp into Koshkonong not only crowded out native fish species from their spawning beds, but because carp feed by rooting along the bottom and stirring up sediment, the lake's aquatic vegetation was significantly reduced. Severe drought in 1901 left the remaining vegetation in the lake critically underdeveloped for several seasons. Finally, pollution from the pulp and paper mills located upstream (a major industry in the region), other industrial development and expanding settlement led to further decreases in the lake's water quality. The result of all of this was that the once mighty rafts of canvasbacks and other divers that flocked to the lake each season soon dwindled.

Koshkonong remained a haven for waterfowl, particularly marsh ducks, and duck hunting continued, but not nearly on the grand scale witnessed in the preceding decades. Huge rigs of decoys were no longer needed and so they sat, strewn

carelessly or stacked carefully in club sheds and area barns. There are stories passed down to collectors today that with the advent of plastic decoys in the 1950s, many Wisconsin clubs simply burned the bulk of their wooden decoy rigs – including the clubs on Lake Koshkonong. Some of the surviving early Susquehanna Flats decoys could certainly have been among those ill-fated rigs. For today's collectors, the mental image of hundreds or even thousands of classic old decoys stacked like cordwood in lines 20 or 30 feet long and set ablaze is heart-wrenching.

There was little appreciation for Koshkonong decoys at the time among local collectors, but by the 1960s and early 1970s, as national interest in collectible antique decoys was reaching new heights – and as prices were reaching new levels – many hunters, collectors and antique dealers in Wisconsin quickly realized there was an active and growing market for their old wooden birds back east. Over time they realized that certain decoys, now recognized as Holly's, Howletts and Grahams, commanded top prices while others garnered little interest. Around this same time, many Koshkonong decoys were also sold to Nebraska-based Cabela's and other mid-western sporting goods retailers, for both store decoration and resale. It's possible that some of the early Flats decoys that had been shipped in to Koshkonong some 100 years earlier were among them.

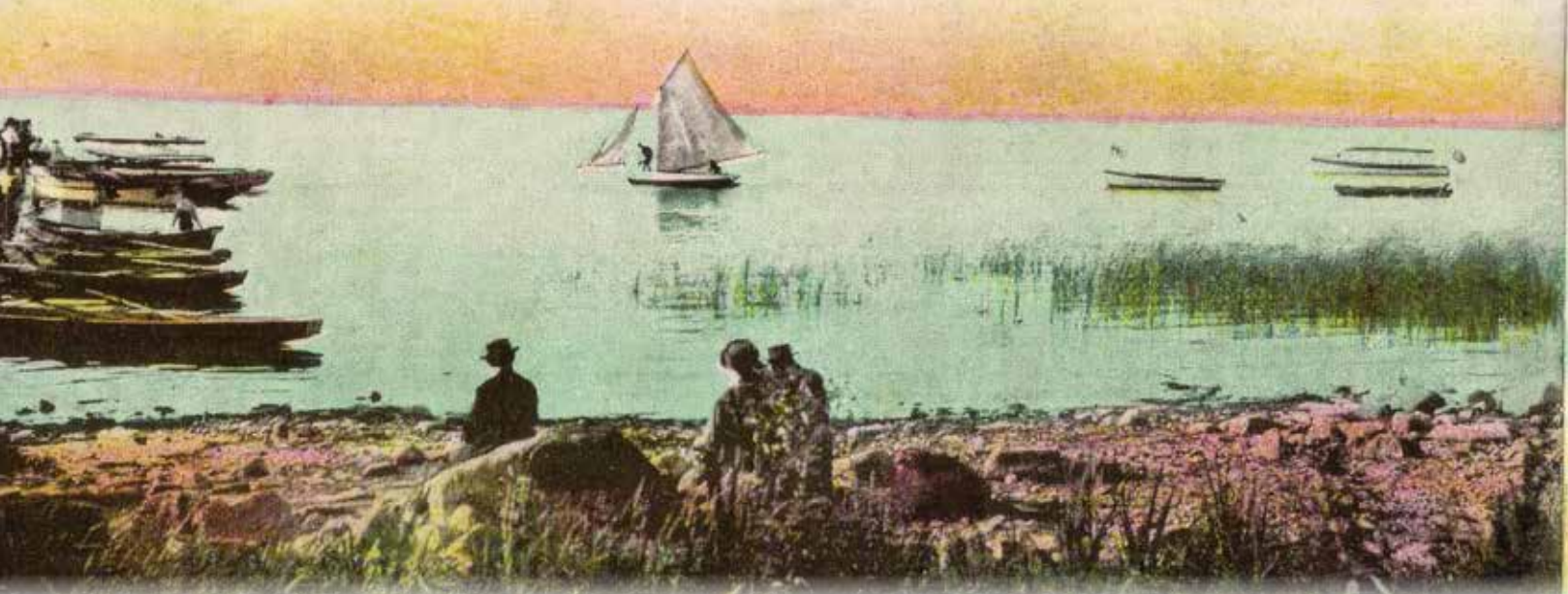
Fast forward to late summer 2015, when I received a call from friend and fellow collector Jim Trimble, who had just come across a most unusual find. It was an early Upper Chesapeake Bay canvasback showing significant wear, a



Early aerial photo of Lake Koshkonong.



Early canvasback from the Bliven rig. This example, similar in size, construction and paint pattern to Susquehanna Flats birds, features an iron keel weight attached with a single spike in the front, a common characteristic of local decoys. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.



Early view of boats on Lake Koshkonong, from an old post card.

cracked neck and full of embedded old shot - but with a great look - that he had purchased online from someone in Wisconsin who didn't know about or collect decoys. The old derelict had been found in a barn in Elkhorn, about 30 miles southeast of Koshkonong.

Jim wondered if his old decoy, which he suspected was a circa 1860s-1870s Dick Howlett, might provide an important clue to Lemkuhl's theory. Remembering that I had written a story on Howlett in the January/February 2012 issue of Decoy Magazine, Jim sent pictures of his Badger State discovery and asked me what I thought. The bird did indeed appear to be a Dick Howlett, exhibiting what may be the pioneer maker's earliest style. Many Howlett

decoys are nearly identical to those of John "Daddy" Holly, whose work influenced him and with whom he may even have apprenticed. But some, including the example Jim had just acquired, feature distinctly different heads - with a meatier, compressed look and a more pronounced bulge under the lower jaw.

We may never know who first brought Chesapeake Bay decoys out west, or precisely when, but when I look at the ancient Howlett can Jim found, I can clearly see what those early Koshkonong hunters and decoy-makers must also have seen, and how its form and styling were manifested in their own versions of Susquehanna Flats birds. Having seen or experienced how well those first



Early canvasback showing a significant influence of the John "Daddy" Holly and Dick Howlett decoys used in the region. It features fine head carving and a slight neck shelf, tack eyes and evidence of a single spike iron keel weight. Bill and Marty Sands Collection.



Returning from a morning of duck shooting on Lake Koshkonong, originally published in *The Northwestern Sportsman* magazine, 1905.

Chesapeake imports worked, for local craftsmen tasked with producing additional decoys, they were the perfect and obvious template. Specifically, one can see how local makers translated the overall dimensions, body and head styles, construction methods, paint patterns and rigging into the new birds they made for additional and expanded rigs. These features are all clearly visible in the sturdy, sculptural and historically fascinating Koshkonong decoys.

In addition to the Howlett, at least one early John Graham from a Koshkonong rig is also known, indicating that birds from both the Harford and Cecil County sides of the Susquehanna Flats were brought west. Elsewhere in Wisconsin, Upper Bay decoys, including groups of circa 1890 Holly family birds, have been found in Fox Lake and near the Milwaukee marshes. There may well have been more used in other parts of the state still waiting to be discovered. For those interested in the history of Chesapeake Bay decoys, examples used in Wisconsin are especially notable since they likely represent the farthest west that Flats birds traveled during waterfowling's golden age [see: *Chesapeake Decoys Fly West*].

The interest in Lake Koshkonong decoys and the foundation of scholarship laid by Bob Lehmkuhl is being continued today by a much broader group, notably, brothers Marty and Bill Sands. While many questions remain, this new generation of scholar-collectors is working to uncover additional leads and connect old dots in new ways. I sure wish Bob was still around to see the Howlett and share his own thoughts. In a way, he is still with us – and like every collector and historian who leaves his mark on our community through their research, his presence will always be felt and his contributions always appreciated.

Sleek and stylish Jim Holly pintail from a rig used at the Ottawa Shooting Club on the south shore of Ohio's Sandusky Bay. Many early Havre de Grace puddle duck decoys were used at the club. Chad & Christy Tragakis Collection.



Special thanks to the late Bob Lehmkuhl, Jim Trimble, Marty Sands, Bill Sands, Dan Yundt, Gene Davis and Bill Zeman. An earlier version of this article was previously published in *Decoy Magazine*.

Chesapeake Decoys Fly West

While the early Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys used on Lake Koshkonong and elsewhere in Wisconsin likely represent the farthest west that they traveled during waterfowling's "golden age," many Flats decoys have been found in the Great Lakes region, where they were shipped by rail or brought in by eastern "sports." These include a number of early circa 1860s-1870s John Graham canvasbacks, which were gunned at different points on Lake Erie in Ohio, and which continue to surface in that region even today. Early Jim Holly redheads and bluebills have been found in Michigan's Upper Peninsula near Marquette, where they were gunned off the southern shores of Lake Superior.

Several Havre de Grace puddle duck decoys were used at the Ottawa Shooting Club on the south shore of Ohio's Sandusky Bay, near its confluence with Muddy Creek. These include a small rig of circa 1890 Jim Holly pintails, some of which were later repainted as black ducks. The backs and sides of the bodies of the pintails in this rig were lightly hammered with a stamping tool to give them texture and the subtle impression of feathering and wing patterns (a technique that Ben Schmidt is said to have pioneered and popularized among Michigan and other Midwest decoy makers). In addition to the Hollies, several early mallards by Bob McGaw were part of the club's marsh duck rig, most of which wear the F.W. KREBS brand of longtime member and steel industry executive Frederick Walter Krebs (1889-1975).

Also made in Havre de Grace and used in the same general area were several circa 1920s-1930s Jim Currier canvasbacks. These cans were gunned near Lake Erie's Brest Bay in Lower Michigan and surfaced in neighboring Ohio. Even into the 1950s and 60s, Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys were being shipped to and used on the Toussaint River, Sandusky Bay, Lake Erie and Lake Michigan, including marsh ducks and divers by Rock Hall's Jesse Urie, Paul Gibson and other commercial makers from Havre de Grace.

Farther west, we know early eastern sports brought decoys with them into Minnesota, though no Chesapeake Bay decoys seem to have surfaced there. When looking at the work of Gopher State carvers such as Joseph Marr, Ole Gunderson, Jim Dalziel and others, however, the influence of early Chesapeake Bay decoys that may have been brought in and used there certainly seems possible.

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2026 Decoy &
Wildlife Art Festival
Honorary Chairman

**Chad
Tragakis**

*Chad and Drew Hawkins at a 2025 PDCA
club meeting.*

Sharing History and Supporting a
Community and Hobby He Loves

By Mike Tarquini

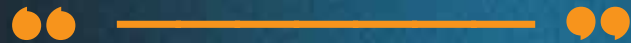


At an early ECDC gathering in St. Michaels with Jim Trimble, Schuyler Ritter, and Chris Worch.



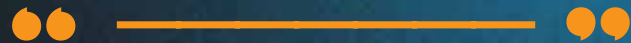
How do you describe Chad Tragakis' influence on the waterfowl world in a few words? Chad is known for his outstanding leadership of the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association and his amazing inclusion of all the other decoy clubs in all of his enjoyable planned activities. Is he better known and respected for his exhaustive research and writing on all things waterfowl? One must also mention his collection of carefully curated decoys, which he shares in his writings and in exhibits everywhere. If this is a quiz, I guess the only answer in a few words would have to be... "D. All of the above!"

Henry Stansbury



We send our congratulations to Chad on being named Honorary Chairman of the 2026 Havre de Grace Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival! It's such a well-deserved honor. We don't know of anyone more dedicated to sharing their love of collecting and educating others about this art form. All the best!

Tom & Bonnie East



Chad, I was thrilled to learn you have been selected to serve as the Honorary Chairman of the 2026 Havre De Grace Decoy Festival. Your enthusiasm to collect, learn about and share your knowledge of decoys is only surpassed by your kindness and compassion for others. I can't think of a better person than you to represent all those who have a passion to collect decoys, based upon the selfless contributions you have made to our community. Thank you my friend, for all you have done, continue to do and surely will do in the future.

John Collier

The idea for the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum was developed by two businessmen and a local decoy carver. The museum was established with a mission to collect, document, preserve, and interpret waterfowl decoys as a unique form of folk art that is a distinctive element in the cultural landscape of the lower Susquehanna River and the Upper Chesapeake Bay. The museum engages and educates visitors with exceptional exhibits that describe the centuries-old history of waterfowling as well as the interplay among this region, its people, the environment, and the folk art of decoy making. The last sentence of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum's mission statement reads:

“...the Museum will preserve the cultural traditions, encourage comprehensive understanding of the history of decoy folk art, and transmit this rich heritage to future generations.”

Every so often, a scholarly figure emerges and embraces the teachings of the past, researches the how and whys of those teachings, and positions this information for future generations to understand, appreciate and enjoy. Chad Tragakis is fascinated by the history of waterfowling and decoy making in the Upper Chesapeake Bay and has made it his mission to preserve and share that history with others through his scholarship, leadership, and generosity. The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is honored to recognize Chad Tragakis as its Honorary Chairman of the 44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival.

Charles “Chad” Tragakis was born on October 8, 1971 in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas as the youngest of three children (older sister Barbara and older brother Jim) to Chris Tragakis, a career Army officer and Vietnam War veteran and Charlotte Dyer Tragakis, a homemaker and manager of a small family realty business. As his last name suggests, he is of Greek ancestry.

Chad's early years were typical for an Army brat as his dad moved throughout the United States and on unaccompanied tours overseas during his military service. He lived in Louisiana, Virginia, and Pennsylvania and attended a multitude of elementary and middle schools.



In 1997, Chad was asked to share a small exhibit at the 30th anniversary Upper Shore Decoy Show.

Growing up, he spent more time in northern Virginia than anywhere else as his dad worked several assignments at the Pentagon in the 1970s and 80s, and so has always considered that area to be his home. He graduated from Robert E. Lee High School in Springfield, Virginia.

Chad earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology and Anthropology from Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, and a master's degree in communications from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. In 1995, Chad married his college sweetheart, Christy Sanderson. They have raised two grown children – a son Chip who works at George Washington's Mount Vernon and daughter Katie who is attending James Madison University.

Professionally, Chad has spent his career working in strategic communications, which encompasses public affairs, public relations, media and marketing. In essence, Chad's career has focused on telling stories on behalf of the companies and organizations for which he has worked. Perhaps this background is the reason why that aspect of waterfowl decoys—learning about and sharing the stories behind them—is so appealing to him.

First Decoy

Chad didn't come to decoys from a family tradition of duck hunting. Instead, it was a chance encounter one summer many years ago. In July of 1989, Chad was on summer vacation with his family on Cape Cod and walked into a small antiques shop that had several old decoys on display. He spotted a well-used scoter drake sitting proudly on a shelf. He didn't know anything about decoys at the time, but something about it spoke to him. Chad loved the form and the look and he suspected that there was history – and a great story – somewhere deep in its wooden soul. At the very least, Chad thought it would look great on the bookshelf in his bedroom, and might even add an air of sporting sophistication. When he saw that the ticket price was only \$25 (and that they were having a sale that day to boot), well, that sealed the deal.

When Chad got back home to Virginia, he found some books on decoys at his local public library and started reading everything he could get



Of all of the fine people I have had the good fortune to know in the decoy collecting community, none is more universally liked and respected than Chad Tragakis. And with good reason. He is a decoy collector, scholar and frequent Decoy Magazine contributor. Chad also continues to be an outstanding president of the PDCA, the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association. Under his leadership the club has grown dramatically. He has vigorously pursued outreach through PDCA's support of institutions such as the Havre de Grace Museum with financial contributions and exhibits. Through the annual PDCA awards, he has ensured that individuals who have shared their knowledge and made newcomers to decoy collecting feel welcome receive the public recognition they deserve. I don't know anyone who embodies those qualities...passion, generosity and commitment to the decoy collecting community...more than Chad himself. I join his many friends and admirers in applauding the museum's well-deserved recognition of his contributions to our shared fascination with decoys.

Barry Serafin



I've known Chad Tragakis for 30+ years. I met Chad when I was a middle-aged collector/dealer, and Chad was an enthusiastic young collector. At every decoy event, Chad was involved in the formation, promotion, and execution of all the pertinent activities. I quickly came to admire his selfless, untiring leadership in every aspect of the decoy community. Chad's strong business background, combined with his fresh approach to the continuing scholarship of Upper Bay decoy history, has cast a positive light upon the entire decoy arena. The educational weight associated with the numerous articles Chad has both authored and co-authored for Decoy Magazine and The Canvasback is enormous. He has acknowledged and embraced his position as a valued, primary contributor of valid decoy research. Not limiting his contributions to just the printed word, he tirelessly volunteers his time and efforts to regional organizations and clubs. Chad has single-handedly orchestrated and produced the wildly popular Potomac Decoy Collectors Association's Facebook decoy competitions – a virtual decoy show and competition that attracts hundreds of participants and viewers each month. It has been my great personal pleasure to have observed Chad Tragakis' transition from an excited young collector, to a valued spokesperson, initiator, educator, author, and historian..... in short, the GLUE that keeps all of us together, heading in the right direction.

Dick McIntyre



I think Chad Tragakis would make a fine centennial update for Joel Barber as America's leading decoy historian and writer. And a fine fella to boot!

E. J. "Pete" Peterson



Chad receives the inaugural Outstanding Contributions Award from the Upper Bay Decoy Collectors Club.



What a marvelous choice for Honorary Chairman the Museum has made! One of the most knowledgeable and articulate spokesmen our genre has ever known! Chad Tragakis defies a simple description as he is a club president, board of director member, spokesman, lecturer, show organizer, researcher, descriptive wordsmith, a wealth of knowledge but most importantly, a friend to all. Most of us know him as the author of many well researched and written articles on decoys, their makers, the sports who used them and the locations where they were employed. N. C. Wyeth and Norman Rockwell could tell a story with line and paint. Chad can do the same with his descriptions taking us to a simple time of wooden decoys and luring fowl. His words bring decoys and history alive. I know I owe him a debt of gratitude for his writing and his friendship. Making our decoys more valuable in our eyes as we learn their history through Chad's words.

Rich Smoker



I first met Chad 30 years ago, and over that time we enjoyed the camaraderie of attending many decoy shows together, countless club meetings, dozens of wonderful visits, and getting to know each other's family. He's now the caretaker for many special pieces I collected, but much more than the fun we had buying, trading and acquiring, we shared a bond over our passion for the history behind the decoys. Chad's interest in Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River decoys and waterfowling echoed mine, and it was a great pleasure collaborating with him on research and stories. He has continued to preserve and celebrate the history through his writing, the club's annual show, special museum exhibits, and his strong support for the broader decoy community. For more than 40 years, I enjoyed collecting decoys and along the way, I met some of the very best people I've had the pleasure to know. At the end of the day, it's the great people—Chad especially among them—that make this hobby so special. Chad, Clo and I send you our very best wishes and hearty congratulations!

Jim Trimble

his hands on – Joel Barber, Bill Mackey, Adele Earnest, George Ross Starr. He was so excited to learn that the nearby Chesapeake Bay region claimed one of America's oldest and richest waterfowling traditions and that more decoys were produced here than anywhere else – practically his own backyard was the decoy capital of the world. It wasn't long before Chad focused his attention on the decoys and waterfowling history of the Chesapeake Bay. And the rest, as they say, is history.

During college and in the years immediately after, Chad continued to learn, reading more books on the subject, talking to a few decoy carvers he had met, and seeking out dealers and collectors wherever he could find them. During this time, he continued to add a few very inexpensive pieces to his growing collection. He soon discovered that there was a massive decoy collecting community out there and that it was a very friendly and welcoming place for a budding new collector like himself. He met a group of collectors and carvers from northern Virginia and suburban Maryland who were just getting ready to form a new club and eagerly became part of that effort. Chad admits, "I was like a sponge – just soaking up every nugget of knowledge and piece of information that I could."

Chad has now been collecting, studying and celebrating waterfowl decoys for more than 35 years focusing primarily on the Chesapeake Bay region. As a contributing editor for Decoy Magazine and a contributing writer for The Canvasback, the official quarterly publication of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum, Chad has researched, written and published more than 100 articles on decoys, decoy making and waterfowling history. He contributed the introductions to "Waterfowling on the Susquehanna Flats – Decoys, Decoy Makers and Duck Hunters of the Upper Chesapeake Bay" and "Decoy Brands: An Identification Guide," and has consulted on numerous other published works. He strives to document those who made and used waterfowl decoys, but also, to capture moments in time – celebrating the people, places and events that shaped them – before they are lost forever.

His research and articles have explored the lives and work of dozens of decoy makers from waterfowling's "golden age," including the Holly



With Oliver Lawson at an ECDC gathering in St. Michaels.

family, Dick Howlett, William Heverin, Taylor Boyd, Lum Fletcher, John Glenn and the Rock Hall School, Ed Phillips, Joseph Coudon, Charlie Joiner, and Elmer Crowell. He's written about historic gunning clubs and sporting yachts, market hunters and wealthy "sports," decoys by unknown makers, Chesapeake Bay decoys used in other parts of the country, historic methods of waterfowling, high-heads, wing ducks and john ducks, Potomac River duck hunting and decoy making, decoys from Dorchester and Talbot Counties, and shared thought-provoking essays on collecting, understanding, appreciating and evaluating decoys.

Showing equal respect and admiration for the Harford and Cecil County schools of decoy making, Chad is a life member of both the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum and the Upper Bay Museum in North East, Maryland. He serves as a volunteer advisor to both institutions and is a board member and regular guest curator for the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum. He also supports the Ward Foundation in Salisbury, Maryland, serving on its board of directors, and the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland and has frequently provided information to and loaned decoys and artifacts from his collection for exhibition at these institutions.

PDCA

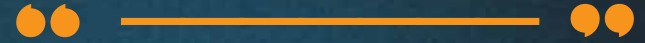
In 1997, when a group of Virginia, Maryland and D.C. area collectors led by Tom East was forming the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association (PDCA), Chad was thrilled and excited to become one of the club's founding members. Though much younger than most of the others attending that first meeting, the group quickly sensed Chad's enthusiasm and saw how passionate and serious he was about decoys. Chad offered to start a club newsletter, "The Potomac Flyer", and served as its first editor and publisher. He served in that role for the next few years until transitioning that duty to fellow club member Jim Trimble.

The older guys appreciated Chad's willingness to support and lead any and every club activity – from organizing the monthly meetings, to the annual club Christmas parties, to coordinating joint-events with museums and other groups, to major scholarship projects like the decoy brands research effort that the club undertook. The PDCA didn't have an official vice president position at the time, but Chad was essentially serving in that role, supporting founding president Tom East with managing most aspects of the club and its activities. When Tom decided he was ready to step down from that role in 2008, he nominated Chad to succeed him and the club enthusiastically elected him president.



Not content merely to collect and trade decoys, Chad Tragakis has elevated the hobby with his prodigious research and accessible writing, shedding new light on the lives of decoy carvers and the history of waterfowling. His extensive body of work provides valuable context, deepening our understanding of the creation and use of this distinctive folk art form, the American waterfowl decoy. In addition, Chad has lent treasures from his collection for museum exhibitions and provided his expertise, bringing knowledge from the collector community to a wider audience. For the extent and quality of his writing on this subject, Chad has few peers. There is no one more appropriate to be named Honorary Chairman for 2026.

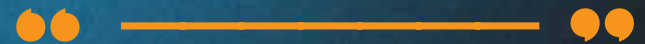
Pete Leshner



Thank you very much to the Havre De Grace Decoy Museum for recognizing Chad Tragakis for the tremendous contributions he has made to the history of decoy collecting and the advancement of our hobby. He has been a great ambassador and historian for waterfowl collectors everywhere. We are all very grateful for his important contributions. His endeavors are extremely important because as time goes by the oral and firsthand history passed on to us will be lost and it is great to see these important memories being preserved. Waterfowl artifacts are becoming more and more recognized as wonderful pieces of American Folk art and history.

Chad has also made outstanding contributions to the organizations which support and promote the collecting of decoys and waterfowling memorabilia. He has done this out of love for the hobby and we are all very grateful! Congratulations Chad and keep up the great work! I look forward to your next accomplishments.

Vance Strausburg



Chad Tragakis is a unique and hard-working individual. He represents our hobby well. One could not come up with a better individual to honor. He has led his collector's club flawlessly and tirelessly. The Hockey Hall of Fame elects players for their prowess on the ice...and non-players that have contributed admirably to the game itself. They are elected to the Hall in the "Builders" category. Chad is a collector of decoys, not a decoy carver, but he deserves election to any, and all Decoy Halls of Fame as a builder. Congrats Mr. President on this honor!

Lou Nolan

Those who collect in areas other than decoys are probably aware that decoy collecting is different. Other segments of collectibles do not hold a candle to the passion that decoys enjoy. Decoy collectors benefit from hundreds of dedicated books, trade publications (*The Canvasback*, *Decoy Magazine*), museums, and probably a hundred decoys shows annually. Collectors gather at auctions and shows, where they learn and celebrate this collecting genre together. I would not hesitate to say that over the last six or seven decades, decoys have remained the most popular collectible segment of any collectible, with a growing base of passionate collectors. Why is this you might ask? It is because of the welcoming environment, the ability to socialize and learn – all because of people like Chad Tragakis. Chad is always welcoming and encouraging to new collectors. Whether it is a young father at a show, nervous about their kid touching an expensive decoy on someone's table, or a middle-aged brand-new decoy enthusiast, Chad welcomes them to any event, puts their worries to rest, and makes them feel comfortable and part of our community.

Chad is volunteer, a presenter, a thinker, a highly accomplished writer, and a friend that is always willing to share information. Chad spends countless hours organizing shows and contests, writing articles, and working with museums so that we as collectors, old, young, new or seasoned, can have a positive experience that will keep us engaged.

Jon Deeter

I've known Chad since he first started collecting decoys and he has always been a great friend. From the very beginning, he was always extremely enthusiastic about the history of each bird and eager to learn all he could from anyone who could teach him. He got started when some of the great collectors were still active, guys like Dave Fannon and Vance Strausburg, and he listened and learned intently. Over the years, Chad has produced many well-written articles about decoys and their history, sharing new insights and information that was not available back in the early days. And I know he has many more great years still ahead of him. The decision by the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum to give this prestigious recognition to Chad is a very well-deserved acknowledgement of his contributions to the decoy world. And it's living proof that the student has outshone most of his teachers. Go get 'em Chad!

Bill Cordrey

Between your writing and articles, decoy club leadership, and support for the museums, you are getting more people interested in decoys and keeping the history alive. Thank you Chad and congratulations!

Jim Pierce



With Kevin Peel, installing the landmark John "Daddy" Holly exhibit.

Chad's focus for the club has always been to keep things fun and informal. He has strived to be as inclusive as possible, opening up PDCA meetings to anyone who wants to attend, encouraging people to bring guests and friends (and their children and grandchildren), and expanding to include a lot of joint meetings with other clubs and groups. The PDCA has kept its annual show, the Annapolis Decoy Show, completely free and always maintains an aspect of public education through the club's special displays and free appraisals and identifications.

Over the years, Chad has introduced and led a number of projects and initiatives to help promote the hobby, support the decoy community, and advance decoy scholarship through the PDCA.

In 2003, he collaborated with the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum to launch a series of PDCA-curated guest exhibits, providing an insightful and valuable supplement to the museum's permanent collection. The special exhibits he's curated have featured historic branded decoys, high-heads, wing ducks, Potomac River decoys, a series of species-specific displays including mallards, ruddy ducks, teal, redheads, buffleheads, wood ducks, black ducks and coot, the largest-ever exhibit on the work of John "Daddy" Holly leading to a permanent installation at the museum, and a first-of-its-kind exhibit on hen decoys. Not only has this resulted in more than a dozen landmark exhibits, but it provided the blueprint for how the museum has curated other guest exhibits and partnered with other collectors clubs and organizations.

In 2004, Chad organized PDCA's first fundraisers for and charitable contributions to Chesapeake Bay area decoy museums and foundations, vital contributions that total more than \$35,000 to date.

In 2007, Chad drafted a code of ethics to establish common standards and to help foster a spirit of fairness, integrity, respect and scholarship among club and decoy community members.

In 2012, he helped bring PDCA into the digital age, launching the club's first website, followed a few years later by one of the first decoy club Facebook pages.



PDCA leaders Jim Van Ness, David Farrow and Chad receive their new club sign from Paul Shertz.

In 2016, Chad launched the annual Annapolis Decoy Show, bringing a show back to that area for the first time in decades.

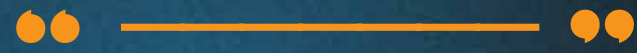
To recognize and celebrate those who go above and beyond for the decoy collecting community, Chad worked with the PDCA to establish the Ralph Campbell Memorial Award in 2009. Similarly, to honor those who are working hard to keep the traditions of decoy-making alive, he helped establish the Ray Whetzel Memorial Award in 2020.

In 2019, Chad volunteered to coordinate a series of guest speakers at the annual East Coast Decoy Collectors (ECDC) gatherings in St. Michaels, which have become a popular part of the weekend and an important platform for decoy and waterfowling history, scholarship, education and celebration.

During Covid, Chad developed a virtual version of the PDCA's popular monthly decoy display contests on their Facebook page. This provided members not only with a way to stay connected, but a new platform to share, celebrate and learn about their decoys and those of others in the club and broader collecting community.

Chad is a longtime member and serves on the board of directors for the East Coast Decoy Collectors association, and is a member of the Upper Bay Decoy Collectors Club, the Delmarva Decoy Collectors Association, the Delaware Valley Decoy Collectors Club, and is a life member of the North American Decoy Collectors Association.

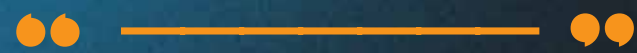
He currently serves as chairman of the annual Annapolis Decoy Show and as chairman of the J. Evans McKinney Old Decoy Contest held in conjunction with the annual Havre de Grace Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival. He is a longtime member and supporter of numerous conservation organizations including Ducks Unlimited, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Audubon Society, and Potomac Conservancy.



Chad has been a tremendous friend to the Upper Bay Museum. By scheduling PDCA meetings at our museum, Chad brings in decoy-loving visitors that might not otherwise have made the trip. He always promotes our events and fundraisers, which we appreciate because his network is so much larger than ours. He is supportive of all decoy-related museums, giving not just financial donations but also answering historical questions, assisting with identifications, and giving informal appraisals. He always has an encouraging message, which really helps to keep us volunteers motivated! Chad is always generous with his vast knowledge, whether in person or online, or through his articles in decoy magazines. You learn something new every time you talk to Chad.

In our opinion, Chad, along with a small handful of other individuals, has done more to educate people about decoys in recent years than any other person. We are honored to share our congratulations!

Rick & Lori Bouchelle and Jack Manning



A well-deserved congratulations to Chad from the saltier end of the Bay! For all of his contributions, the Festival could not have a more fitting Honorary Chairman. Over the decades, it has always been a pleasure to see Chad's friendly face at the decoy shows. While the friendly face has hardly seemed to age, it's been impressive and inspiring to see him continue to step up as a leader in the Chesapeake Bay decoy community. Thank you for all your efforts, from club events, to museum exhibitions, and insightfully researched articles.

Mark, Ian, and Colin McNair

Naming the still-young veteran Chad Tragakis Honorary Chair of the 2026 Havre de Grace Decoy Festival is an enormously well-earned honor, one recognizing his long-standing, central role in both decoy scholarship, (especially via the indispensable “Decoy Magazine”) and management of our beloved hobby. As us old timers slowly shuffle off the stage, it’s a huge encouragement to know that Chad will be so ably keeping the hobby strong!

Chris Nelson

I like Chad’s writing better than anyone else in the decoy world. I love his command of language and his thoughtful understanding and appreciation of decoys. When I see one of his stories, I always want to read it two or three times. He writes with great depth and you really want to think about what he says. I send my sincere congratulations!

Bobby Richardson

I have known Chad for more than 25 years. He has demonstrated an unusual combination of intelligence, drive, thoroughness, and a desire to grow our decoy collecting group. Chad’s article series in “Decoy Magazine” gives a historical perspective on early decoy makers. His establishment and management of the Facebook Potomac Decoy Group attracts new collectors and provides a daily outlet for active hobbyists. The monthly club newsletter “The Potomac Flyer” that he started is the most thorough and, in my view, the best in the business. Chad’s selection as honorary chairman of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum could not be more deserved. Well done, Chad!

Russ Goldberger

Chad’s numerous leadership accomplishments have included him among those who have done the most to advance decoy collecting in the Mid-Atlantic States.

Lloyd Sanders

In addition to all the exceptional things Chad does with the PDCA, he has been a tremendous benefit to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum. When I started volunteering with the museum, I had little knowledge of decoys or hunting. Chad was very patient and kind in helping me along to become a more useful volunteer. Working together for many years, we have become steadfast friends. I truly appreciate all he does to preserve the waterfowling heritage.

Ginny Sanders



PDCA leaders including Bruce Eppard and John Henry present a check to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum for the new “Daddy” Holly exhibit case.



With Capt. Roger Urie on an early visit to his Rock Hall workshop.



With Bobby Richardson at the East Coast Decoy Collectors annual gathering in St. Michaels.

Mentors and Role Models

As Chad shares: “I was very fortunate that when I started to get serious about decoys, Dave Fannon, Henry Stansbury, C. John Sullivan Jr., Jim Trimble and Bill Cordrey were some of the first people I met. And there were so many others – Evans McKinney, Allen Purner, Sam Dyke, Barry Serafin, Chris Nelson, Vance Strausburg, Larry Myers, Tom East, Ralph Campbell, and Ray Whetzel. Not only did they become wonderful friends and mentors, each sharing great advice that helped shape my collection, but more than that, they encouraged me to uncover the stories behind the decoys and document them for future generations of collectors.”

That spirit and sense of mentorship is very important to Chad and he strives to live that every day with the new generation of collectors coming behind him. Chad believes that, “we all need to do that and think that way if we are going to preserve the history, sustain this incredible hobby and grow our wonderful community.”

In addition to the amazing mentors and role models that Chad has had, he says, “I’m really grateful that I came into decoys when I was still able to get to know and learn from some of the early and pioneer collectors



With Henry Stansbury and C. John Sullivan Jr. at the 2023 Easton Waterfowl Festival Artifacts Exhibit.

including J. Evans McKinney, Sam Dyke, Joe French, Allen Purner, Dr. Harry Walsh, Bobby Richardson, Bill Purnell, Dr. Mort Kramer, Harold Buckwalter, Paul Casson and others.” He goes on to say: “For those interested in Chesapeake Bay decoys, we are so fortunate that dedicated scholars like Evans, Bobby Richardson, Dr. Walsh, C. John Sullivan Jr., Henry Fleckenstein, Henry Stansbury, Jim Trimble and others have documented the history.” Chad’s hope as a fellow student of decoys and writer has always been to build on and help expand their work and keep that tradition of scholarship and celebration going – and encouraging others to do the same.

Collecting Focus

Decoys from the Susquehanna Flats make up the largest part of Chad’s collection, but he’s been adding representative pieces from other regions of the Chesapeake Bay as well. As he shares, “I love the sleek, sculptural look of Jim Holly’s decoys, but there’s also something irresistible about the folksy creations from Dorchester and Talbot Counties. Potomac River decoys have a special local connection for me. And who can argue with the sheer beauty and sculptural presence of decoys by Lem and Steve Ward?”

All that said, Chad is particularly fascinated by the decoys of the Holly family and their history. “John ‘Daddy’ Holly and his sons were a true decoy-making dynasty,” he reflects, “and when you look at the family and the decoys they produced through a cultural lens, you really see the story of decoys and waterfowling in America and in some respects, you can even see the evolution of our country playing out – from the rural, agricultural nineteenth century to a 20th century industrial powerhouse. And that legacy, the traditions that they passed down, lives on today.”

Some collectors focus exclusively on form, others mainly on condition. To Chad, it really comes down to a combination of things, beginning with the story, the history. He likes to evaluate and approach a decoy

Chad has truly become a giant in this hobby we share and love and a “go to” for his deep decoy knowledge. His tireless drive to make true friends, never-ending research and sharing with the community is something to admire. I have known Chad for a few decades and he has always been a good friend and many times has helped me with his vast knowledge. Making him the 2026 Honorary Chairman is an excellent choice and will give many more folks that don’t know him yet the opportunity to meet and expand their enjoyment of our hobby. We could use more folks like Chad in the hobby and I feel lucky to call Chad a friend.

Gary Campbell

As collectors, we consider ourselves caretakers of the past. Chad Tragakis’ dedication and passion for decoys and decoy history will preserve its place in the future. We know the decoy world is in very good hands with the next generation of caretakers. Congratulations Chad!

Kim and Ronnie Newcomb

Chad is the kind of person that, when you think back, how long have I known this man? The answer would be, “forever,” or so it seems. You meet a very knowledgeable collector at multiple shows and realize, this is the guy I should listen to. Always honest and if he doesn’t have the answer, he’ll get it for you. The knowledge he possesses is invaluable and he’s always willing to share it or just have a friendly conversation about what’s happening in the decoy world or with shows. He is a driving force and is always willing to lend a hand with shows. Chad is just this kind of person and being selected for the honor of being the 2026 chairman of the Havre De Grace show speaks volumes of his talents: A world of knowledge, friendly, approachable, writer-extraordinary, the decoy person you want in your corner forever. Congratulations Chad on this well-deserved Honor!

Roe “Duc-Man” Terry

I was excited to learn that Chad Tragakis was named by the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum as Honorary Chairman of the 2026 Decoy Festival. The museum hit a “home run” here and I congratulate them and Mr. Tragakis. For many years Chad has been a leader in doing exemplary research on decoys and their makers and providing a comprehensive analysis of his findings to those of us who find these old wooden birds fascinating. He has shared his knowledge both in the literature and on a personal basis with many who seek him out knowing that he is always most gracious and willing to help. Congratulations Chad. I look forward to your tenure as Honorary Chairman and the benefit it will bring to our cherished hobby.

Dr. Lloyd Newberry

Chad has been instrumental in promoting the history of Chesapeake Bay decoys. I met Chad in the early years of the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association. As many of us got older, he took over the leadership and greatly advanced the club. He made the monthly meetings more exciting and informative, and the club's annual decoy show has been successful because of Chad. His research into Chesapeake Bay waterfowling, resulting in countless articles in Decoy Magazine, has been very special for me. Chad is one of the top leaders in the decoy collecting community and I send my congratulations on his chairmanship!

Doily E. Fulcher

By naming him the Honorary Chairman of its 2026 Decoy Festival, the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is further highlighting the outstanding contributions of Chad Tragakis to the development of waterfowl decoy collecting over the past three decades. With his passion, warmth, and constant energy, Chad has grown its popularity and expanded the appreciation of decoy collecting as serious inquiry into not only regional art and craft, but the historical and cultural context of hunting for much of U.S. history. His range of expertise is astounding, although always delivered in a modest, inclusive sort of way. From the earliest days of the PDCA, Chad was an active volunteer and leader and energized the group with new ideas for growth and educational activities. He also embraced scholarship early on, not only through Decoy Magazine and The Canvasback, but through growing opportunities presented by the internet. He makes friends easily throughout the collecting community, and generously uses that talent to highlight the interests and activities of a wide range of collectors and carvers. Perhaps most important of all, while recognizing the thrill of the collecting chase and the excitement the often astronomical prices that many antique decoys command, Chad is firmly committed to emphasizing the personal benefits of collecting decoys, the periodic coming together to share our common interests and renew friendships. As Chad has often said, it's really about the people.

Larry Myers

I congratulate Chad on receiving the honor of being appointed Honorary Chairman of the 2026 Decoy Festival. I knew about Chad and his dedication and work in the decoy world long before I got to meet and work with him personally. He is an outstanding leader for the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association and has greatly grown the organization along with the Annapolis Decoy Show. His dedication and abilities are demonstrated in the operation of both the club and the show. One needs only to sit in on an East Coast Decoy Collectors Association annual board of directors meeting to see how much his leadership is respected and what he has to offer the decoy world. As a decoy carver and collector, I appreciate what he has done to spread the word of our decoy history. He is an outstanding leader, and I am honored to know him.

Clarence Fennimore



With Dave Fannon, Chris Nelson and Larry Myers at a club meeting in the late 1990s.



With Evans McKinney at a Havre de Grace Decoy Festival in the mid-1990s.



Talking ducks at the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum with Jimmy Pierce.



At a Guyette & Deeter auction preview with Barry Serafin.



With Jim and Clo Trimble volunteering at the 2008 Evans McKinney Old Decoy Contest.



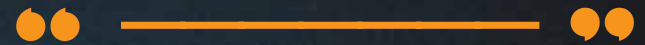
Visiting with PDCA founding president Tom East.

from a variety of perspectives. Certainly form and condition are important factors, but the story of where and when a decoy was made, where and how it was used and by whom, for him, these are what bring a wooden bird to life. “And as just the latest in a long line of collectors who came before me and those who I know will come after,” he says, “I’m interested in understanding the history of our hobby and the provenance of the decoys in my collection.” Chad tries to record and document everything he can in the hopes that it will help keep the stories alive. “We’re all caretakers for the decoys in our collections,” he adds, “but we’re also caretakers of the history behind them.”

Chad received some great advice early on including having a direction and developing a theme for one’s collection, buying the best pieces you can that fit that theme, even if that means only buying one or two a year, and being patient in building your collection over time. Probably the best advice was to buy decoys that speak to you, decoys you are going to love. Chad maintains: “Whether you collect antique working decoys or contemporary carvings, you should love every bird on your shelf.”

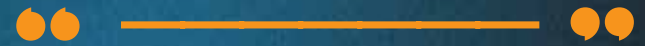
When asked, one thing Chad encourages new collectors to do is, “to learn as much as they can about the decoys in their collection, and then to document everything they learn. Decoys represent a unique fusion of art, nature, history and Americana and it really enhances the joy of owning them when you learn to appreciate them from more than just one perspective.”

Chad tells new collectors: “It’s important to read as much as you can, especially books about the regions and makers that interest you.” He recommends that all collectors subscribe to Decoy Magazine as it serves as “the journal of the hobby and represents the pulse of the decoy collecting community.” Old auction catalogs provide a wealth of information, and Chad feels every collector should study them carefully as they are another wonderful resource. But more than anything, Chad says, “one needs to get out and talk to fellow collectors, join your local collecting club, enjoy all the social aspects of our incredible community, which is made up of so many wonderful people. Everyone should try to attend as many of the shows, auctions and tailgate events as they can.”



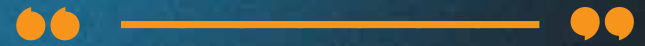
As regular attendees of the November auction in Easton, I had known Chad for some years; but I really got to know him as a result of being invited by Chris and Vivian Worch to participate in a new annual decoy show being held in southern Maryland. The Potomac Decoy Collectors Association was hoping to grow this fledgling show, but in spite of great efforts over many years it never really took off. At the end of the show in 2015, Chad had all of us gather together and then gave one of his famous Chad Tragakis pep talks. He admitted things had not been a success; but shared that that part of the state deserved to have a first-rate decoy show and he recalled that some years before there had been an annual show in Annapolis. He asked how many of us would participate if he found a suitable venue in Annapolis and made the arrangements for a show there the following year. We all said that we would. On his own then, Chad set about locating and contracting with the Annapolis Elks Club. Then he began to recruit vendors, museums, and collectors from the PDCA and from all the other organized clubs in Maryland and Virginia. Because of Chad, the PDCA’s annual Annapolis show celebrated its tenth year this June and has become an important addition to the decoy show circuit. Now participants come from Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia and far beyond to participate in all the joyful aspects of our hobby. Thank you, Chad.

Darrell Hagar



We are extremely happy to learn that Chad Tragakis has been named the 2026 honorary chairman of the Havre de Grace Decoy Festival. Chad is one of the most kind, honest, and approachable people in the sport and we are happy to know him as a personal friend. The decoy collecting community is a better place with his company and efforts, and we wish him nothing but the best during his tenure as honorary chairman.

Josh and Zeb Barfield



Chad embodies the necessary dedication that is critical to carrying on the cultural heritage of waterfowling and decoy making history for future generations to enjoy. His numerous contributions over his many years in our hobby has resulted in scholarly contributions that are second to none. His strong leadership has served as a gold standard at the club level and throughout the entire collecting community. He is well deserving of being named Honorary Chairman of the 44th Annual Decoy & Wildlife Festival. Congratulations!

Pat Vincenti



Nearly 30 years ago, Chad Tragakis submitted an article to us on Will Heverin for publication in Decoy Magazine. At the time, he was a fairly new decoy enthusiast, having just begun seriously

collecting a couple of years earlier. We could have never guessed at the time that it would just be the first of dozens and dozens of well-researched articles that he would continue to submit over the last three decades.

Not only have Chad's contributions been an integral part of our editorial accomplishments, he is one of the more gifted writers we've had the pleasure to work with. When we published Mike Daley's book on Susquehanna Flats decoys, we recommended that Chad write the Introduction, and it is one of the more succinct and thoughtful essays on the essence of the history of decoys and waterfowling on the Upper Chesapeake Bay.

Chad was one of the original members of the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association in 1997. Eventually, he became the club's president, and his leadership has made it one of the more successful and dynamic decoy collecting clubs throughout the country. After the group's very first meeting, he developed a monthly newsletter, one of the first and finest of any decoy collecting organization.

When he realized that their monthly meetings in northern Virginia were minimizing attendance because of the incessant traffic, he decided to make them a movable feast, by holding them in areas that were more accessible to a greater audience. After holding a few in Annapolis, he decided it would be a good location for an annual show. During Covid, since the monthly meetings were canceled, he organized virtual monthly competitions on Facebook, allowing collectors to continue to participate and socialize during the pandemic, and they continue today.

Chad is also an avid and knowledgeable decoy collector, with an emphasis on Chesapeake Bay area decoys, particularly those from the Susquehanna Flats. One of his earliest mentors, Dave Fannon, once told him that some decoys have good form while others have good paint, and when you can find one that possess both traits, buy it. Over the years, he has carefully pursued choice examples and assembled a collection that any Upper Bay collector would be proud to showcase.

But best of all, Chad is one of the nicest people we've ever met, and an unending cheerleader for the hobby. It's been said that, at times, it can be better to give than to receive. It's no doubt that Chad has taken great personal pleasure in providing all of the above gifts to the decoy collecting community. We are so pleased that the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum is now acknowledging his many contributions by making him the Honorary Chairman of their 44th annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival.

Joe Engers

I have collected decoys and the history associated with them for many years. Along the way, I developed some wonderful relationships with many of the early Chesapeake Bay collectors and dealers. They shared with me great stories and some special decoys. I still talk and visit with several members of that



Sharing a laugh with Bill Cordrey.



With Dave Fannon at ECDC in St. Michaels.

"The Best Group of People"

Chad shares that "one of the best parts of our hobby is that the people are so friendly, so open and welcoming and so willing to share their knowledge and experience." He goes on to say that "through decoys, I've met people from all over the country and from every walk of life, truly wonderful people, passionate about the decoys and their history, and all so willing to share their collections and invite fellow collectors into their homes." Chad proclaims that this is very special and, in many ways, unique to the decoy community, and he thinks collectors should take advantage of and be a part of that.

Often noting that the decoy collecting community is the best group of people anywhere, Chad shares that, "the guys I get to see at our club meetings and at shows are incredible and they've become some of my closest friends. I've been so fortunate to make life-long friends through decoys. Some I may only get to see once or twice a year at certain shows and auctions, but the bond is there and we can pick right back up wherever we left off." And he loves the fact that decoy collecting provides a reason for people with different beliefs and from different backgrounds to come together in fun and fellowship with genuine compassion, warmth and friendship. As Chad reflects, "when times are tough and as our fellow decoy friends are going through hardship or loss, we are there to lend a hand and offer our prayers and hugs to one another."

Other Interests

In addition to decoys, Chad's interests include travel and history, trying new restaurants and foods, learning about and enjoying beer, wine and bourbon, and rooting for the Washington Nationals, Caps and Commanders. He's also a longtime songwriter and musician, playing drums and singing with a semi-professional blues and rock band. "I've always loved music," Chad says, "and I'm lucky to play with a great group of fellow musicians." His band plays about a dozen shows a year at small venues across northern Virginia. He also loves fishing and golf when he can fit them in, he practiced Tae Kwon Do seriously for about 10 years, and has enjoyed sporting clays, something he hopes to do more of in the future.

Chad is frequently consulted by fellow collectors, leading dealers, decoy auction firms, museums, and institutions for his thoughts and insights on decoys and their history. He was also asked to share his experience and advice to the organizers of several regional decoy collecting clubs as they were being formed. Chad has been asked to



With wife Christy, son Chip and daughter Katie on a recent family trip to Death Valley National Park in California.



Aside from decoys, Chad is a lifelong musician, shown here performing with his band at a brewery in Virginia.

serve as a judge for both antique and contemporary decoy contests and was especially honored to judge the Holly Family memorial decoy contest alongside C. John Sullivan Jr. in 2000, the inaugural Rock Hall decoy contest alongside Ronnie Newcomb and Joe Engers in 2022, and for several years, the contemporary antique category at the Havre de Grace Decoy Festival with Kevin Peel and Bill Waibel. With the Ward Foundation and PDCA, Chad also helped to revive the annual Sam Dyke Memorial Old Decoy Contest.

Chad's contributions to the decoy collecting community were recognized in 2012 with the PDCA's Ralph Campbell Memorial Award, and in 2021 as the inaugural recipient of the Upper Bay Decoy Collectors Club's Outstanding Contributions to Decoy Collecting Award. In 2015, he was profiled as an ambassador for the decoy community by Decoy Magazine and he was featured in *Antique Trader* magazine in 2022.

As a result of his vast contributions and accomplishments within waterfowling history preservation and celebration, as well as his decoy making and collecting knowledge, Chad Tragakis is most qualified to serve as the Honorary Chairman of the 44th Annual Havre de Grace Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival. He first started volunteering for the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum in 1996, so this recognition, coming exactly 30 years later, seems especially fitting. The Havre de Grace Decoy Museum congratulates Chad and is very proud to bestow this honor upon him.

early group. Over the years, some new collectors/historians have joined in. I make a serious attempt to carry on these relationships as I did years ago with Bill Purnell, Bobby Richardson, and my dear friend, the late Henry A. Fleckenstein, Jr. We held decoy roundtables back then, and I continue that tradition to this day.

One of the younger members of the present day roundtables is Chad Tragakis. Chad is not just a key component of these groups but the organizer of such events. Chad is a dedicated collector and a waterfowling historian of the highest order. When Chad and I have questions about an unusual or rarely seen decoy brand, he will take on the task and do his utmost to ferret out the origin of that decoy and its brand. Chad's articles on historic decoys, gunning clubs, and decoy makers are well written and thoroughly researched. To date, he has authored a total of 120 pieces for Decoy Magazine and another 50-plus features or short pieces for the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum's magazine, *The Canvasback*.

Chad's introduction to decoy collecting was accidental. On a family vacation to Cape Cod in 1989, Chad stepped into an antique shop and spotted several old decoys. He purchased his favorite, a scoter, to return home with him. His thoughts at that moment were that somewhere hidden in the "wooden soul" of that old bird was a great story to be discovered. Additionally, he thought that placing that wooden bird on his bedroom shelf might add an air of "sporting sophistication" to his room. Following the planting of that seed, Chad became fascinated with the fact that a regular person could purchase an object that might reside in a museum. These pieces of Americana represent something special to Chad and all fellow collectors: folk art, sculpture, history, nature, and the outdoors.

After the publication of an article in Decoy Magazine by Chad on decoy maker William Heverin, the thoughtfulness and documentation of that article led me to approach Chad at a decoy gathering. I walked up to Chad and complimented him on that piece and encouraged him to keep on digging, researching, and educating the decoy community. Chad took my words to heart, and my few compliments cemented our relationship.

More than the articles that Chad has shared with the decoy community, he has shared himself. His enthusiasm for this hobby is contagious. Chad's organization of the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association is one of his gifts to all of us. He organizes club meetings at various locations that allow us to view collections of others, thereby sharing ideas for display. Chad promotes decoy contests and encourages all in attendance to participate. These contests provide an opportunity to compare carvings by various makers and to look at carving styles and painting techniques. On a personal note, when Chad calls me with a question about a specific decoy in my collection, I find myself refreshing my memory of where I obtained that bird and the story associated with it. Chad encourages new collectors; he advises them, guides them, and helps them avoid making mistakes on their collecting journeys. In addition, Chad engages mature collectors, asking them for advice, and more than anything, he inspires us to continue doing what we do. Chad is best described as inspirational. If I can point to one person who keeps us engaged in this wonderful avocation, it is Chad Tragakis.

C. John Sullivan Jr.



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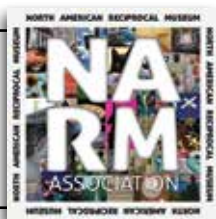
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By renewing your membership, you will continue to enjoy these valuable benefits:

- A membership card • Free Admission to the museum all year
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New for members in 2026 is the 2026 Membership decal and a 10% discount when renting the Carvers' Gallery (upstairs).



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Mallards

Too often Overlooked!

“Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted”

Aldous Huxley, Writer



By John E Hughes Jr.
Photos: Scott Moody

CANVASBACK NATURALIST

Each edition will feature a natural history topic relating to the mission of the museum. The author, **John E. Hughes Jr.** is a retired science teacher from the John Carroll School (1972-2015). His subject areas included Chesapeake Bay Studies, Ecology (freshwater and marine) and Environmental Science. As a naturalist, John helped to develop natural history programs for a myriad of environmental organizations and schools. As a field educator and canoe guide, he led trips throughout the Eastern United States (especially the Southeast), Central America and the Caribbean. He presently serves as a member of the Museum's Board.

Mallard duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Drake: Greenhead, Green-headed duck, Hen: Susie.

Length: 26 inches, average 24.7 inches. Hen slightly smaller by an inch +/-

Wing: Drake: 11.4 inches. Hen: 10.6 inches Wingspan: 32-38 inches

Bill length: 2.15 inches

Weight: Drake: 2.75 lbs. Hen: 2.44 lbs.

I guess it is true as to so many things in life's experiences that to be taken for granted is an unfortunate but common outcome. However, with that said I truly believe that this is a vice that we should work hard to avoid. The common and everyday should be rewarded with the same level of awe and respect that is given to the uncommon and rare. Our goal should be to interact with all things on a level "playing field". Considering my studying of waterfowl in the Chesapeake Bay area, I feel the mallard duck is an example of a bird which is too often overlooked and taken for granted. Its specialness has been rendered lackluster due to its commonality.

The mallard duck is the most abundant and well known duck. They are found throughout most of the world and use a wide variety of habitats for their survival. The mallard's range can be found in some of the wildest places on the planet with few human observers, to urban parks and ponds with thousands of human witnesses. They are one of the most adaptable of all waterfowl, widely studied, and readily identifiable by most human watchers. "As such, they are the standard for learning all dabbling ducks." (The Crossley ID Guide - Waterfowl. Richard Crossley. 2017.) There are many subspecies and hybrids associated with the common or northern mallard duck (*platyrhynchos*).

Mallards are the classic example of a dabbling duck, upending itself to feed in shallow water areas. They have a more central positioning of their feet on their overall body, enabling them to be erect walkers on land even if the walk occurs with a waddle. As puddle ducks go, they are large with a big bill, possess broad wings, and ride high in the water with their tail above the surface level. Mallards are strong flyers and vault directly out of the water with their powerful wings. Flight, though, appears somewhat slow when compared to other ducks and landing occurs with their feet outstretched and head down. Mallards fly in small to large groups in V formation or lines. Female mallards are noted for their loud quacking (descending quacks), while males tend to be less vocal overall. Mallards are omnivorous but in general their diet is more prone to plant material. They are also noted for feeding in grain fields. Mallards are the most heavily hunted waterfowl and a truly favorite bird to bag.

Description

Drake: The drake mallard is easily identified by its beautiful emerald-green head. It has a white neck ring, chestnut/burgundy breast, light gray back and flanks, black undertail and upper tail coverts, white outer tail, and looped (upward curved) black central tail feathers. The male bill is yellow, feet are orange



to bright orange, and the eye is black. Immature or eclipse plumage drakes resemble females and appear quite drab.

Hen: The hen mallard has a light brown head and neck with a dark eyeline. Its body is mottled brown (dusky) and the tail is whitish. The female bill is orange, the eye is dark, and the feet are orange.

Both sexes have a colorful violet/blue speculum with white leading and trailing edges. In flight, mallards reveal white wing linings. Sexual color morphism occurs to aid in female camouflage during nesting. The bright bold presentation statement of the male enhances courtship success.

Range and Habitat

The mallard duck is ubiquitous throughout the Northern Hemisphere. It has been introduced in a variety of regions in the Southern Hemisphere including New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Indochina, and many portions of South America. In North America it is common in Canada and the United States and can also be found in areas of north and central Mexico. Its highest density in the United States is located in the Mississippi Flyway. Interestingly, until the turn of the 20th Century, mallards were not common in the east along the Atlantic Flyway. (Paul A. Johnsgard. *The North American Perching and Dabbling Ducks*. 2017.) In the last 100 + years, mallards have diffused eastward and established strong populations of both residential and migratory birds. Migration to wintering grounds is dependent

on food availability and open, ice-free water. All North American flyways experience the movement of mallards to some degree but the Mississippi River drainage system and Gulf coast are impacted the most. Northward migration for nesting may begin as early as mid-February or early March depending on geographic location and weather. As a result of climate warming, many birds are migrating up to two weeks early. Non-migratory birds may begin nesting activity as early as favorable conditions present themselves.

In general, mallards are associated with fresh to slightly brackish aquatic habitat. In the Chesapeake Bay region, mallards were found to be active in more saline waters as long as extensive agricultural areas were adjacent. (Johnsgard) Salt water and salt water marshes provided almost no usage by mallards.

Because of their adaptability, mallards can be found feeding or nesting in an almost unlimited variety of circumstances as long as water is present. Ponds, pools, reservoirs, lakes, inlets, shallow bays, islands, forest, swamps, marshes, rivers are just a partial list of possibilities for the duck's usage. Shallow water areas where the duck can dabble for SAVs, agricultural fields for stubble especially corn, forests with oak and other deciduous trees providing acorns, marshes where seeds and rootstocks can be consumed are just a few examples of their broad range opportunism. Nesting areas are diverse but a closeness to water with heavy emergent vegetation or shrubs on the shoreline, sometimes stumps, nesting boxes, or tree hollows, even urban





or suburban parks with sparse plant presence can and will be used. When thinking of mallard range and habitat, just reflect on broad possibilities as a result of their high adaptability.

Pair-bonding, Nesting, Clutch Size, Incubation, Fledging, Brood Parasitism, and Nesting Success

Like many other ducks, pair-bonding occurs in late fall or winter on a yearly basis. In regards to year round residential mallards, reforming of bonds between the same birds may be “more the rule than the exception.” (Johnsgard) Once females have built their nests and lost much of the committed drake’s attention, rape of females is extremely common. These rapes occur by unbonded males and even some bonded mates. (Johnsgard)

Nests are made of plant debris, leaves, grasses, etc. and lined with down and feathers. Nests are usually about 10-12 inches in overall diameter, 6-8 inches of inside diameter, and about 2-6 inches deep. (Crossley) Nests are usually built by the female in somewhat dense or heavy vegetation.

Clutch size averages about 9 eggs with the hen laying one egg a day. The eggs are ovate and vary in color from buffish grey to green. Incubation occurs over a period of 26-30 days. Renesting is common if the first clutch fails. Fledging happens over a 50-60 day period. The young are born ready for action and can swim just after birth. Hens will keep their brood “under her wing”

and into early adulthood. Brood parasitism is fairly common by pintails, shovelers, redheads, ruddies, gadwalls, and goldeneyes. In areas of high density mallard nesting, parasitism may result from other mallards. (Crossley)

Nesting success is usually around 40+ percent with an average recruitment below 50 percent. These considerations may vary greatly from year to year.

Predation by coyotes, foxes, raccoons, skunks, hawks, owls, and crows is common. Snakes, snapping turtles, and fish are also predaceous consumers of mallards, especially the young.

Diet

Mallards are generalized, opportunistic omnivores with up to 90+ percent of their food coming from plant material. Feeding in wetlands, they may consume a variety of plant parts from leaves to stems, to rootstocks. Examples of wetland cornucopia include but are not limited to wild rice, bulrushes, pondweeds, and smartweeds. Seeds are a favorite part of this type of plant consumption. Mallards will also feed on various SAVs by tipping and bringing part or all of the plant to the surface for consumption. Examples include bushy coontail, widgeon grass, and pond weeds. Grazing wet bottomland forest habitats, mallards consume acorns, especially those of oak trees. Since the late 1950s with extensive use of mechanized grain harvesting and its slight inefficiencies, mallards have greatly supplemented



their natural diets with grains such as millet, wheat, barley, sorghum, rice, soybeans, and peas. However, mallard “gold” is corn stubble. Several studies have revealed that mallards may consume as much as 7 ounces of grain per day. (Johnsgard)

Only about 10 percent of mallard’s diet is animal matter and most of that happens in the summer. These foods would include insects and their larvae, mollusks, crustaceans, and other invertebrates. Minnows are also consumed on occasion.

Mallards adapt to an availability of many different foods. This helps to explain the great success of their species and it is difficult to imagine them going hungry except under extreme circumstances.

Population Status

Mallards are the most abundant duck in North America. Although numbers may vary from year to year, this is usually associated with wet or dry circumstances in their breeding areas. 2025 population estimates of mallard numbers is at 6.6 million birds. This is a 1 percent drop from 2024 and 17 percent below the long term average. (Ducks Unlimited: Waterfowl Survey) Factors affecting population include habitat modification and loss (especially wetlands), climate change and warming, exposure to pesticides and other chemical contaminants, the release of game-reared mallards, and disease.

Mallard Encounters and Reflections

Obviously it isn’t waterfowl hunters that too often overlook the mallard duck, since it is the most commonly bagged of all waterfowl. The duck is fairly easy to decoy, call-in, and shoot. It is a heavy and tasty reward especially when prepared correctly. I’m sure most duck hunters are very pleased with their mallard encounters.

A person out for a walk along a river or wetland or strolling by an urban pond are in all likelihood, excited by spotting a mallard duck coming into land on the water or by swimming near them.. The thrill of their encounter will probably be reflected throughout their day and maybe into the evening as they check references to make sure that duck with the emerald- green head was indeed a mallard. Who knows where that duck’s interaction with an individual can lead?

Unfortunately, I have to admit that I am one of those individuals (and my close group of birding buddies) that may too often overlook the mallard duck. I don’t think that the commonality of sighting mallards has led to “contempt” toward the bird on our part but instead has contributed to a lack of the full appreciation and respect that the creature deserves. The awesome uniqueness of this individual species is lost by its adaptability and success. My friends and I know that this shouldn’t be the case, but it happens time and again. The mallard duck is more than a check on a bird list. True, it isn’t rare, accidental, or an

unusual sighting but it is a part of the day's "trophies". Sadly, it gets rapidly checked off the list and rarely discussed, as we search on for the new and exotic. It is important to realize that the mallard was once the new and exotic of past encounters in our youth and that the new and exotic of today may become the common of tomorrow. A case in point is the bald eagle which provided few and far between sightings when we were younger, maturing into naturalists during the 60s and 70s, only to have it become an extremely common spotted bird today. My birding buddy, Tom Trafton, jokingly considers bald eagles to be large crows with white heads and tails which he is tired of looking at.

It's an early January morning and the sun is just above the horizon, providing intense sunlight at a very obtuse angle as about 50 mallard ducks swim out of a marsh gut very near to our car. The drake mallards' heads seem to provide a glowing emerald-green light to the nearby brown cattails. One by one as the males exit the gut and the glow seems to intensify as my friends and I are speechless as to what is happening. The intensity of this moment seems overwhelming. Minutes later with a higher sun and more diffused sunlight, the glow is gone and we witness the same 50 green headed mallards, still just as beautiful but now they have just become a more regular type of sighting that leads to our check on the bird list.

It's a mid-April morning, on a beautiful "blue sky" day on the lower Gunpowder river marshes as I lead 8 canoes up and into the wetlands. In the lead canoe position, I turn left into a shallow gut rimmed by 3-square and some wild rice. As the last canoe makes the turn, a pair of mallards vault from the grasses with such force that all in the group are startled, even myself. How had I missed them? The kids are extremely impressed with the

bird's "jump" into flight and the exposure of their blue-violet speculums to the sky. The mallard was a new duck to many of the students, but common to some, and yet all were greatly excited by the event and reflected on it throughout the day. Later that evening around the campfire, the mallards would enter our critter list as a happening in the day's experiences.

It's a late November gray day near the Magothy River. My Chesapeake Bay class is visiting Dr. William Sladen's (world famous penguin and swan researcher) home and duck pond on the edge of the bay. Here we find tundra and trumpeter swans and a variety of puddle and diving ducks. Some are wild, some captive, and some are cripples recovering. Dr. Sladen asks me to capture a hen mallard to show the students close up. As I hold the bird, it eyeballs me as if to ask, what are you doing to me? I feel its excited heartbeat, witness its beautiful feather pattern, and feel it snip at me. This common mallard hen has brought such joy to me as I witnessed the expressions of excitement on my students' faces. Later that morning, I capture a trumpeter swan, but that's another story.

These 3 vignettes all occurred through interaction with mallard ducks, no different from the hundreds of thousands of mallards I have witnessed at other times. Were they special birds?

... not really!... yet. Experiencing a "specialness" in the common and a real thrill for it, enhances our days. Appreciation for what is here and now, whether it be common or rare, ultimately enables greater involvement in and attachment to our world and life in general. Too often overlooked by some, maybe many, takes nothing away from the mallard duck. I need to remember and practice this !

"One very important aspect of motivation is the willingness to stop and to look at things that no one else has bothered to look at. This simple process of focusing on things that are normally taken for granted is a powerful source of creativity."

Edward de Bono, Educator





Mallard Drake
Ralph Hockman

SHOTS

From the Wild

**Are you a photography enthusiast who loves snapping pictures of the local wildlife?
If so, submit your shots from the wild to wildlifephotography@decoymuseum.com.
Only high resolution photos will be accepted. (i.e. at least 2,500 pixels wide and 300dpi)**

Frisky Mallards
Earl Blansfield



Mallard Drake
Rob Bruch



Mallard Hens
Ralph Hockman

Flying Mallard Drake
Earl Blansfield



Mallard
Jerome Mitchell



Mallard Hen
Ralph Hockman



Mallard Ducklings
Rob Bruch



Mallard Drake
Earl Blansfield

Mallard Pair
Rob Bruch



Mallard Pair
Scott Kreiger



Mallard Drake
Scott Kreiger



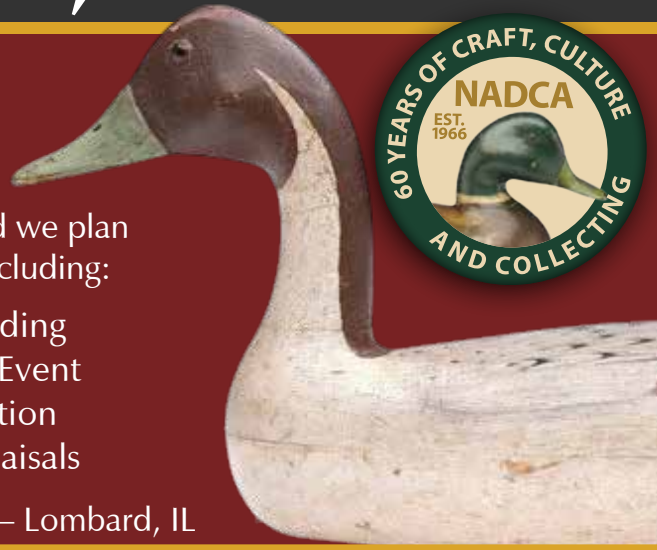
Bibbed Mallard
Pat Hockman



North American Vintage Decoy & Sporting Collectibles Show

April 21-25, 2026

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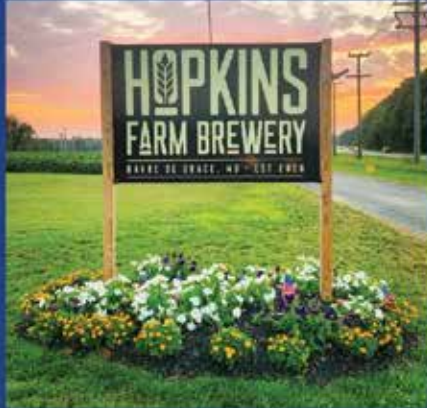
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The Jim & Diane Cook Collection

Thanks to our partner Guyette and Deeter, Inc, the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum was a proud host to a portion of the Jim & Diane Cook Collection from Fall 2025 to early Winter of 2026. This one-of-a-kind opportunity drew visitors from near and far to catch a glimpse of perhaps the finest collection of waterfowl and shorebird decoys ever assembled.

On January 24, 2026, Joe Tonelli, legendary collector and friend to Jim and Diane Cook treated approximately fifty attendees to a discussion about his journey to assemble this fine collection for the Cooks. Tonelli, who found many of the rare artifacts that comprise this collection, shared fascinating and entertaining stories about the 40 year project to assemble the best waterfowl and shorebird decoys from all around North America. The discussion was moderated by Jon Deeter. Joe was accompanied by his wife Donna Tonelli who also participated in the discussions.

This exhibit marked the last time that the Jim and Diane Cook Collection could be viewed by the public as a single exhibit. The Cook Collection will begin to be auctioned off at The North American Vintage Decoy & Sporting Collectibles Show April 24-25, 2026 in Lombard, IL.

The exhibit and presentation event was sponsored by Guyette and Deeter, Inc.



Joe Tonelli peers down to the few decoys he removed from the exhibit to choose his next topic.



Chad Tragakis and Henry Stansbury engage Joe and Donna Tonelli in discussion.



Joe Tonelli captivates the audience as Casey Foltz captures the discussion on video.



Jon Deeter greets guests.

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UPCOMING DECOY SHOW INFORMATION

April 9 - 11, 2026

East Coast Decoy Club Buy - Sell - Swap Event

St. Michaels Inn, St. Michaels, MD

Info: Kevin Peel (410) 937-2218

April 17 - 18, 2026

8th Annual Ocracoke Island Waterfowl Festival

Ocracoke School Gym, Ocracoke, NC

Info: Vince O'Neal (252) 921-0112

April 21 - 25, 2026

**North American Vintage Decoy
& Sporting Collectibles Show**

Westin Lombard, Lombard, IL

Info: Jeff Seregny (586) 530-6586

April 24 - 26, 2026

55th Ward World Carving Championship

Roland Powell Convention Center, Ocean City, MD

Info: Kristie Clattenburg at kclattenburg@wardfdn.org

May 2 & 3, 2026

43rd Annual Decoy & Wildlife Art Festival

STAR Centre, Havre de Grace, MD

Info: Mike Tarquini (410) 459-8487 • www.decoymuseum.com

June 7, 2026

Annapolis Decoy Show (sponsored by PDCA)

Annapolis Elks Lodge, Edgewater, MD

Info: Chad Tragakis (703) 593-3024

June 12 - 14, 2026

**New England Decoy Collectors & Carving
Association Decoy & Carving Show**

ShoreWay Acres Inn, Falmouth, MA

Info: Laurie McPhee (207) 273-0079

nedecoycollectorsandcarvers25@gmail.com

July 17 & 18, 2026

**57th Annual Clayton Decoy
& Sporting Collectibles Show**

Gordon Cerow Recreation Park Arena, Clayton, NY

Info: Thousand Island Museum (315) 686-5794

timuseum.org



2026

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