

Jerry Talton,

Core Sound Decoy Maker

A pair of divers afloat on Bogue Sound.
(Collection of Callie Turman)

By Chase Luker

We all know "that guy" - the one who seems to be good at everything or has one of everything, if not two. Some, we assume, get it through luck while others get it through hard work and intense dedication. The latter, in some cases, are the ones whose work we admire and

whose personalities we might call "Type A." Well, meet Jerry Talton. Talton, who is just shy of 40 years young, is a decoy maker, plain and simple. He lives and works within a stone's throw of hallowed waterways where America's sport gunners ventured to hunt the abundant flocks of wintering waterfowl on and around

North Carolina's Core Sound.

Any accomplished decoy collector, historian, or carver knows all too well about the beautiful decoys that were chopped out around Core Sound by the likes of Mitchell Fulcher, Ammie Paul, Eldon Willis, Elmer Salter, and Andrew Mason. Even today some of the world's best



An antique Eldon Willis/Dan Robinson bufflehead with a rare, antiqued bufflehead by Talton in the foreground.
(Collection of Callie Turman)



Talton (R) and fellow decoy maker Kent Hood with a day's take and a few decoys from one of many rigs they built together.

contemporary, life-like decoy carvers reside on the shores of Core Sound, such as Walter "Brother" Gaskill. Still, Talton is one of a few who makes a traditional, Core Sound style decoy using the customary methods practiced by his predecessors. His working decoys, like those of yesteryear, are simple, durable, and look like decoys. Yes, his decoys "look like decoys." True to North Carolina's form, he rarely puts eyes in his decoys, unless they're carved, and even less often, painted on.

On a hot July day, I took the time to visit the Core Sound area, and stopped by Talton's shop for a visit. His shop is just what anyone might envision when imagining a busy decoy maker, except Jerry has a day job, or two, as well. A cursory walk around his shop, though, and it's easy to see where he spends a good amount of time. Chips and chunks of wood are piled in the floor. Slabs and logs of juniper wait patiently in once-

neat stacks as he stands at his work table sketching a new pattern, which is most likely fated for his dumpster, thanks to his self-critical nature. An entire rig could be built with the wooden cast-offs in his trash can.

One of the patterns has the week's grocery list on it. Another has a

phone number scribbled on it. His hatchet is in a wooden box, along with his other four hatchets, and an assortment of rasps, files, knives, and gouges. It's the kind of place that any decoy carver could feel comfortable in, while others might feel claustrophobic and cautious. Country music,



Smoothie gadwall with good form and incredible paint.



Large, bold blackhead carved in Currituck-style. (Collection of Ken and Tena Roberts)



Cypress blackhead carved in style associated with Holly Family decoys used at Core Sound Clubs.



Hollow-carved blackhead, fresh from a hunting rig.



Another style of Talton's blackhead decoys.



Two of several animated geese carved for a hunting rig.



A few of Talton's hand-forged oyster knives built from salvaged boat parts.



Simple but strong Currituck-inspired widgeon, straight from a gunning



Core Sound-style redhead with gunning wear.
(Collection of Callie Turman)



Talton (L) with New Jersey carving legend J.P. Hand exchanging tips.

the kind with fiddles and steel guitars, plays in the background. A variety of decoys lining shelves, both from old Core Sound makers and those made by friends, are the only things that seem to be neatly arranged. Individual decoys are the only thing he can find without hesitation, except for his strop – and it's glued to his work table. The only tool with a cord on it is the band saw, and he uses one because the old-timers used them.

A visual inspection of Talton's decoys would allude to their North Carolina heritage. His innate ability to simplistically add personality and attitude to a decoy is what separates him from many North Carolina carvers and connects him with some of the most recognizable ones. Depending on the last great decoy he was able to see, his next decoy may be reminiscent of a James Best, Alvirah Wright, or Mitchell Fulcher. But above all else, it will still feature his



Petite Currituck-style ruddy duck.
(Collection of Ken and Tena Roberts)



Tiny canvas-over-wire swan.



Slightly larger than hand-sized, each of Talton's ruddy ducks are unique.



Teal demonstrating different influences from North Carolina's historic coastal waterfowling regions.

heavy hand. Talton's decoys all have a boldness about them, despite how refined they may appear.

His annual output is probably around 50 decoys, roughly half of which are destined for a collector's shelf, and the remainder made for a nearby gunning stand. Most of his decoys are made after someone has requested one, and it's tough for him to keep up. A "To-do" list is tacked to a wooden cabinet; it has several projects, including an oversized gadwall,

a rig of redheads, a brant for a gentleman in New Jersey, and a shoveler, which is one of the few species he's never made. The list is well under-way, and so is Talton, whittling on a wooden blank while sitting in an old rocker that's been in his family for three generations.

Most decoy makers can remember their first decoy and the inspiration behind it. Jerry's first decoy was a pintail, which he remembers looking more like the Loch Ness Monster

than a sprig. Carving decoys has only been an avocation of his for about 10 years, tracing back to the time when he gave one of his brothers a decoy as a Christmas gift in 2002.

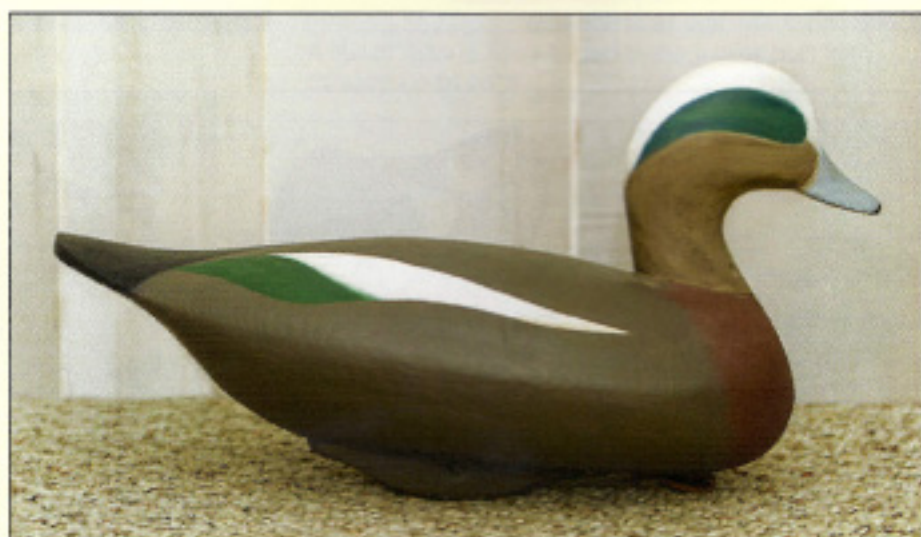
An avid surfer in his younger years, Talton built a skill set and a career on repairing and shaping surfboards, and so the decoy intrigued him. He remembers that decoy he gave as a gift rather simply – as a surfboard with a duck head on it. The quintessence of a talented artist, he



Cluster of teal and ruddy ducks hanging after a float in the White Oak River.



Hen wood duck showing great paint.



Scratch-painted widgeon. (Collection of Andy and Kate Pope)



Talton's take on a Delaware River-style black duck.

Alone, or with others in a basket, Talton's ruddy ducks are North Carolina classics.

attempted to make his own decoy, if only for the challenge and fun of it. The pintail he created shortly after that, along with a few other crude blocks that didn't seem to suit him.

As he refined his craft, other carvers urged him to create his own style, and he did, with a North Car-

olina flair that hasn't been seen in over half of a century. Some of the best decoys he's ever made, and some of the worst, can be found in cabinets and on shelves inside of his home. The decoys that he retained from his early years are gifts to his daughters. He cherishes the decora-

tive lifelike blue-winged teal he was carving when his wife warned him that he was going to be a father for the first time. Talton's early years, like most other carvers, was a period of experimentation in cork, balsa, and wood. He remembers painting as painful, but his talents were

sharpened through repetition and research.

October of 2008, though, was a turning point in Talton's carving career. His work was recognized and earned accolades in almost every traditional style competition he entered, but a visit to the Chesapeake Challenge allowed Talton to meet J. P. Hand. Hand's influence is visible in Talton's work ethic and style, as it relates to his decoy carving. Hand, too, is a traditional decoy maker from Cape May, New Jersey. His knowledge of decoy and hunting history motivated Talton, almost as much as his casual diligence, gumption, and pursuit of simple perfection. Occasional counsel and subsequent visits with Hand found Talton following suit in the same manner.

Jerry's decoys evolved tremendously from world class one-of-a-kinds to repetitive and identifiable styles. Shortcuts in Talton's decoys do not exist; and as an ode to his mentor's tutelage, most of Talton's decoys are hollowed, à la New Jersey's finest decoys. The insides of Talton's decoys are just as smooth and stunning as they are on the outside. Some are hollowed wafer-thin, but most are hollowed and smoothed just to reduce weight and resist splitting, both important factors in making a solid gunning decoy.

Other influences are visible, too, though. The fair lines of Talton's gunning decoys are reminiscent of the classic Core Sound decoy makers of bygone years. Thankfully, his decoys are branded deeply. They are decoys that insist that history be thankful for provenance. Still, his decoy heads are carved just as well as those by a Mitchell Fulcher or Andrew Mason.

Talton made his own carving knives, too. The bodies of his decoys often feature tool marks, but still appear finished. The decoys that are sanded smooth are works of art, though Talton would suggest otherwise, sheepishly. His painting technique, with heavy influence from another mentor, friend and talented traditional decoy maker, Pete Peterson, is as great as anyone else. Tiny minutiae found in his decoys, such as the perfect setting of the occasional glass eye, or the refinement in a detailed feather painting, can be attrib-



Talton's creativity and skill at work in these thoughtful gifts to friends.

uted to yet another mentor, Walter "Brother" Gaskill.

Yet, Talton adds his own touches to decoys. Super-fine bill carvings, dainty lines, and smooth but acute chins are ever-present. All combined, his working decoys tend to take on the persona of an unsuspecting muscle car with a deliberate and bold attitude, and racy, but simple paint. The rigging and hardware components of his decoys are as traditional as his hatchet and spoke shave. Simple lead pad ballast weights accompany a leather line-tie, usually fastened with a copper or bronze nail, or both, whatever he has available. Legendary Core Sound decoy maker Curt Salter, and another mentor to Talton, insists that every decoy that Jerry makes is better than the last.

Talton, though, tends to get carried away and creative when not making decoys. Though not a self-described folk artist, he has produced functional tools, furniture, and decorative pieces that would beg otherwise. He's made a pie safe for his mother, a mullet roe dryer for himself, and bells from discarded fire extinguishers from shipwrecks. These examples of his work are stylish and sturdy, and probably as good as one could hope to find; and all seem to be made with salvaged wood or other materials that may wash ashore.

He makes decorative birds, too, though most often as gifts and only when his mind has the notion to do so. Miniature penguins, petite and alert roosters, chip-carved whales, snowmen, and even oyster knives; all

with carved-in sass, are a small part of the assortment of things he may carve as gifts for holidays, newborns, and special occasions. But when Jerry isn't making something, he's collecting something. If he's carving, he's constantly taking breaks to answer his phone, to either discuss old decoys or to tell a customer that the decoy they requested is in the works. Sometimes, his children will parade through the shop, barefoot, and perfectly appropriate for a family that lives out in the country. His wife occasionally

checks on him, too, if only to tell him that his meal is getting cool.

Talton fails to fit the mold of a reclusive artist that some classic and contemporary decoy makers may fall into. He is a fixture at the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild and is instrumental in helping to develop their annual decoy show held on Harkers Island every December. It's not uncommon to find him donating a decoy or offering a carving demonstration at a conservation organization's fundraising banquet, either. And he has more students than secrets when it comes to decoy carving.

Some would even suggest that the revitalization in Core Sound style decoys is due to his charismatic ability to teach. There even seems to be a "Jerry Talton school" of young, twenty-something decoy makers, using time-honored methods and building decoys similar to his own. His attention to detail can't be taught but it can certainly be awe-inspiring. His decoys continue to evolve into timeless classics in form and finish. While he seems to never find complete satisfaction in his work, he loves the happiness that people exhibit when they collect his decoys. It's a contentment that he suggests may only be exceeded by the thought of a stand of his gunning decoys being discovered in a derelict boat or old barn 100 years from now. The thought of his decoys adrift on Core Sound waters bring him comfort, too. Either way, they seem to suit collectors and gunners alike for their simple beauty and time-tested form and function. □

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