



# of Canvas and Wire

by  
John Shtogren

Photos by Darin Strickland

“I For publishing don’t carve duck decoys, I engineer them,” said master decoy maker Heck Rice in his basement workshop in Hanover Court House, Virginia. It was kind of an odd comment coming from someone who sits on the board of the International Wildlife Carvers Association. But Rice follows in the footsteps of all the great Chesapeake carvers—the Cobbs, the Ward brothers of the early and mid-19th century and, more recently, Grayson Chesser and Jimmy Bowden. But he follows them off to one side on a path taken by all-but-anonymous decoy makers. Unlike those great carvers who proudly inscribed their initials on the bottom of

solid-block decoys, Rice creates working decoys of canvas and wire the way watermen of modest means have done for a century. With craftsmanship and artistry, he raises a humble design onto a par with the finest working decoys of today’s best carvers.

## Necessity and Invention

Around the turn of the last century, wildfowling was extraordinarily good along the Chesapeake Bay and down into Currituck Sound. Gunners fed their families ducks, geese and swans and took the excess (and there was plenty of it) to market. It was a job, a part of the watermen’s way of earning a living and putting food on the

table, and like any trade it required the right tools—a good gun, a sturdy skiff and rafts of decoys. The problem with making your own working decoys along the shore was that there seldom was enough of the right kind of wood to carve a spread of 200-300 decoys. The local scrub pine wouldn’t do and traditional wood like Atlantic white cedar was hard to come by. Besides, there was the weight factor. A full spread of solid-bodied decoys was so heavy it required a second boat to haul them miles out into open water to the shooting grounds.

The necessity for plentiful, lightweight and inexpensive decoys led to invention. Along the shore there was never a shortage of old canvas sails, discarded planks and wire that could be bent to shape. The three became the basic components of the canvas decoy. It is said that canvas decoy production was never higher than right after a major Atlantic storm that would rip away sails, wash planks ashore and knock down telephone lines. Many of the downed copper wire telephone lines didn’t stay on the ground long enough to be restrung by the phone company, but found a new life out in a waterman’s decoy spread.

## The Making of a Maker

Rice started waterfowl hunting as a teenager with his favorite uncle. For years they took several trips a season from Richmond over to the Eastern Shore and gunned out of historic waterfowl havens like Chincoteague and Wachapreague on the oceanside and Saxis and Onancock on the bayside. And then his uncle died, and since his father didn’t hunt, he quit. But as many find in later years, you may quit hunting waterfowl but something about it never goes away. Whether it’s the imprint of whistling wings in the dark, or red dawn over the marsh, or knowing that the birds circling your dekes have flown a thousand miles to join you—something about it sticks with you.

In 1983, when Rice was edging into his middle years, he decided, almost on

a whim, to take a class on waterfowl carving at a local community college. By the end of the class he was bit; he would get back into waterfowling by becoming a decoy maker. “But it seemed like everybody was starting to carve about then,” Rice reflected, “and I wanted a chance to be the best. Nobody I knew was seriously doing canvas decoys, so that’s the niche I chose.”

Since then Rice has never picked up a duck gun, but he has made more than 300 canvas decoys, belongs to Ducks Unlimited and supports numerous DU chapters by donating decoys for fundraisers. He also owns a boisterous Lab named Jack who has never tasted feathers and lives on a country property named Yellow-Dog Ridge. Rice, like more than a few DU members and decoy collectors, proves that you don’t have to be a hunter to love wildfowling.



A pair of Heck Rice mergansers

### Engineering and Manufacture

In his workshop Rice explained the basic six-step process for making a simple canvas decoy.

—A template for the particular bird is used to draw the outline of its base on a plank of cypress about an inch thick and its backbone on thinner stock. Both are cut out and assembled.

—Hoops of hardware-store clothesline wire are crossed over the backbone and attached to the edge of the base to form hoop ribs.

—Canvas is stretched over the ribs as tightly as possible and tacked to the bottom of the base.

—A primary coat of paint, when dried, stretches the canvas taut over the ribs and waterproofs the decoy.

—The decoy’s head is carved and attached to the body along with its keel.

—Finally, the decoy gets its eyes and paint to resemble and deceive its live cousins.

The final coat of paint that Rice applies may be as simple as a totally black coot, his favorite bird as noted on his license plates, to the intricate colors of a wood duck. He doesn’t just follow the same templates over and over. “I try to design

Redhead ready for paint



Carving a goose head



and construct one new decoy a month. My desire is to add style and elegance to these birds and promote Virginia and North Carolina’s traditional and historic decoys.”

### Recognition as the Best

Rice’s recognition by his peers attests to his success at adding style and elegance to traditional canvas decoy making. He has participated in International Wildlife Carvers Association contests, across the country. In these contests his canvas decoys are often judged in the same

working decoy category as fully carved solid bodies. Naturally, the carvers are at an advantage because they have more to work with, more opportunity to shape and finish the solid bodies that can’t be done with the canvas and wire design. Nevertheless his canvas decoys regularly win his category and more. His wood duck and cormorant decoys won Best in Show at the prestigious Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, showing more style and elegance than all the other entries in all categories, both working and decorative.



Heck Rice with best-in-show wood duck and cormorant

After 25 years of engineering canvas decoys, Rice is at the top of his game. Two years ago he was named a Master Carver by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ward Foundation. Rice is particularly proud of having his Best in Show wood duck and cormorant selected to be on display for a full year at the Ward Museum, a must-go destination for decoy lovers.

**More to Do**

A perfect wildfowling weekend, with or without hunting, would be a trip to Maryland's Eastern Shore in November. The Ward Museum is in Salisbury and well worth a half-day visit ([www.wardmuseum.com](http://www.wardmuseum.com)). Over in Easton, the annual Waterfowl Festival, is worth at least a day ([www.waterfowlfestival.org](http://www.waterfowlfestival.org)).

Over the winter you might try your hand at making a canvas decoy or two. It would be a perfect project to share with a son or daughter who will soon be heading for the duck marsh. Complete guidelines for making simple working canvas decoys can be found in Al Streetman's *10 Wire and Canvas Decoy Patterns for Carvers*. Think of how a youngster would feel when a flock of mallards turns and wheels toward your

regular spread with a few of your own traditional canvas decoys set out to one side. Who knows how long the young ones will continue to hunt in years to come, but that one perfect, glorious moment could make them wildfowlers forever.

Next spring the Rappahannock River Wild Fowl Show in Whitestone, Virginia ([www.rwfs.org](http://www.rwfs.org)) will draw wildfowlers from far and wide. Heck Rice will be one of the main speakers and would be happy to talk to you about your new canvas decoy. To find out more about Rice's decoys, you can contact him at [Yellowdogdecoys@myway.com](mailto:Yellowdogdecoys@myway.com).

\* Several of Mr. Rice's decoys will be on display at the Richmond Orvis store during their "Orvis Days" celebration from Saturday October 3rd through Sunday October 11th. Mr. Rice will be on site Saturday October the 3rd 10 am to 1 pm.

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