

Decoys  
and  
Decoy Collecting:  
An Introduction

# Decoy: definition (Webster)

- Lure
- Bait
- A person or thing who lures another into a dangerous situation.

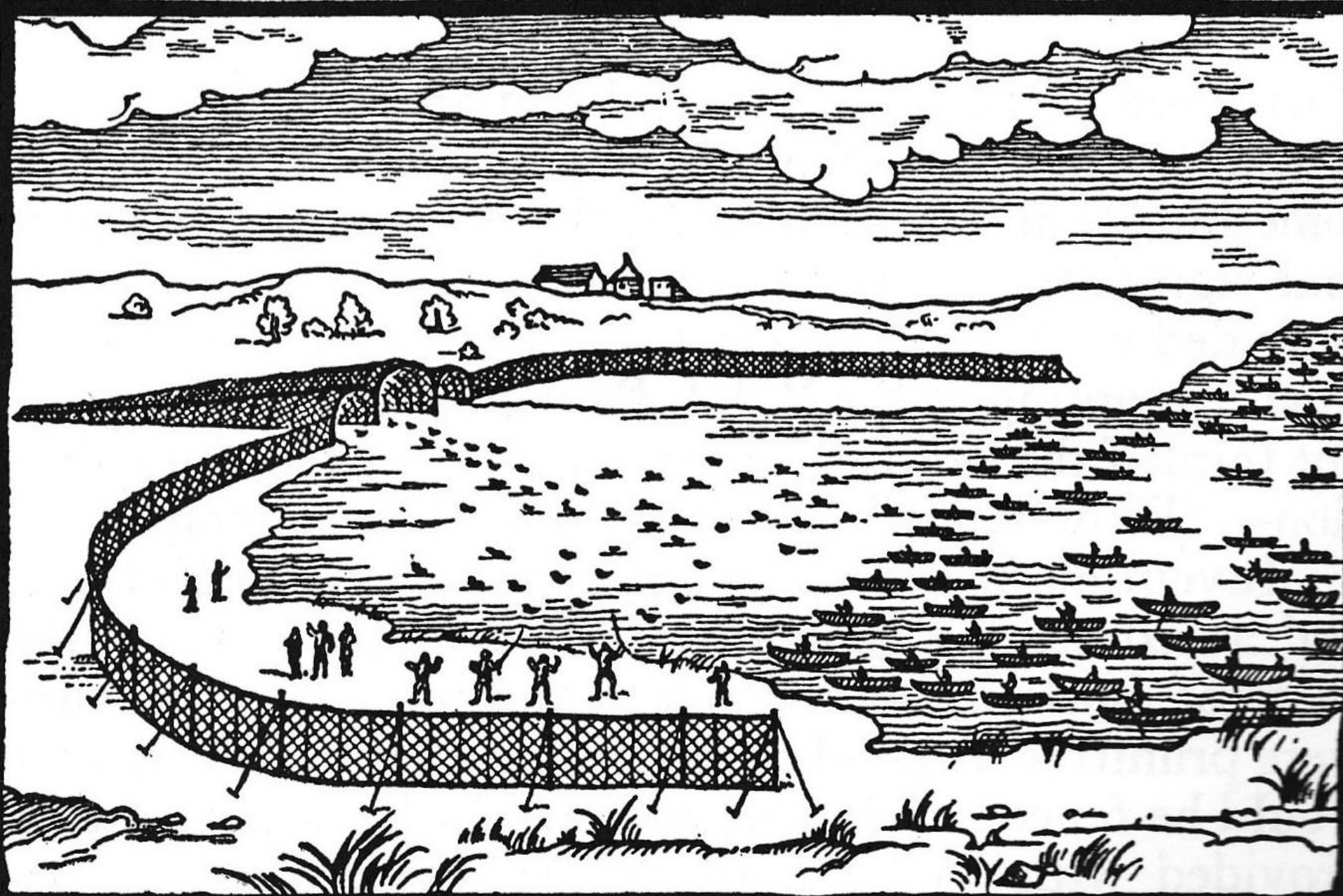
Preferred definition:

**Man-made representations** of wild birds intended to deceive wildfowl and lure them within range of hunters (from Shaw – Bird Decoys of North America).

Derivation of the word decoy:

One theory is that it is a contraction of the Dutch words *ende-kooi*, meaning duck cage.





Boats used to drive waterfowl into the cages.





Ducks enticed into the cage using live ducks, or a dog.

- Waterfowl were an important food source in many cultures.
- Hunting was depicted in various paintings and carvings, and described in early manuscripts.
- A wide variety of methods were used to capture them.

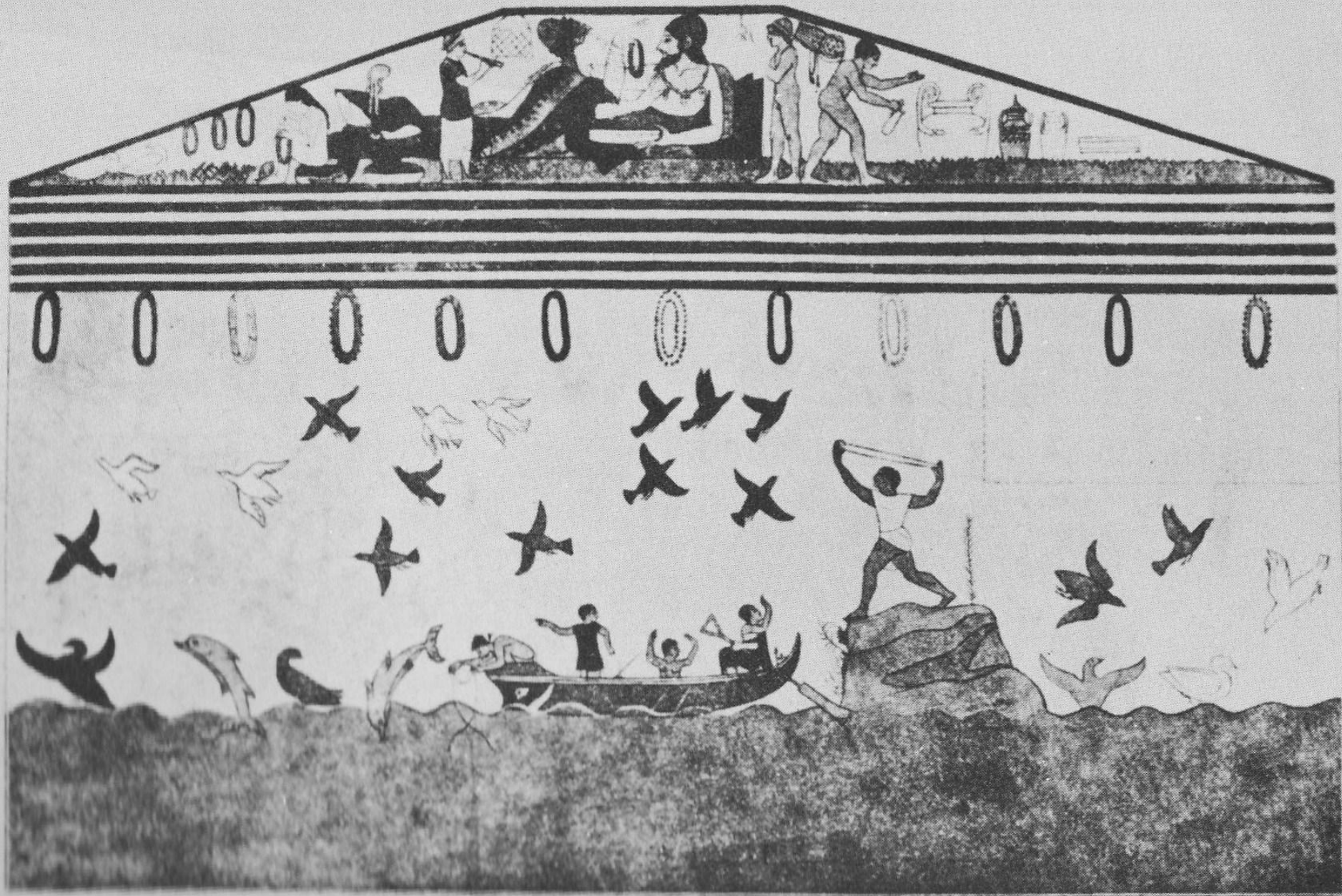




Egyptian  
fowling and  
fishing  
scenes.







Etruscan Tomb: fishing and fowling.



**India – hollow gourds  
used to conceal hunters.**



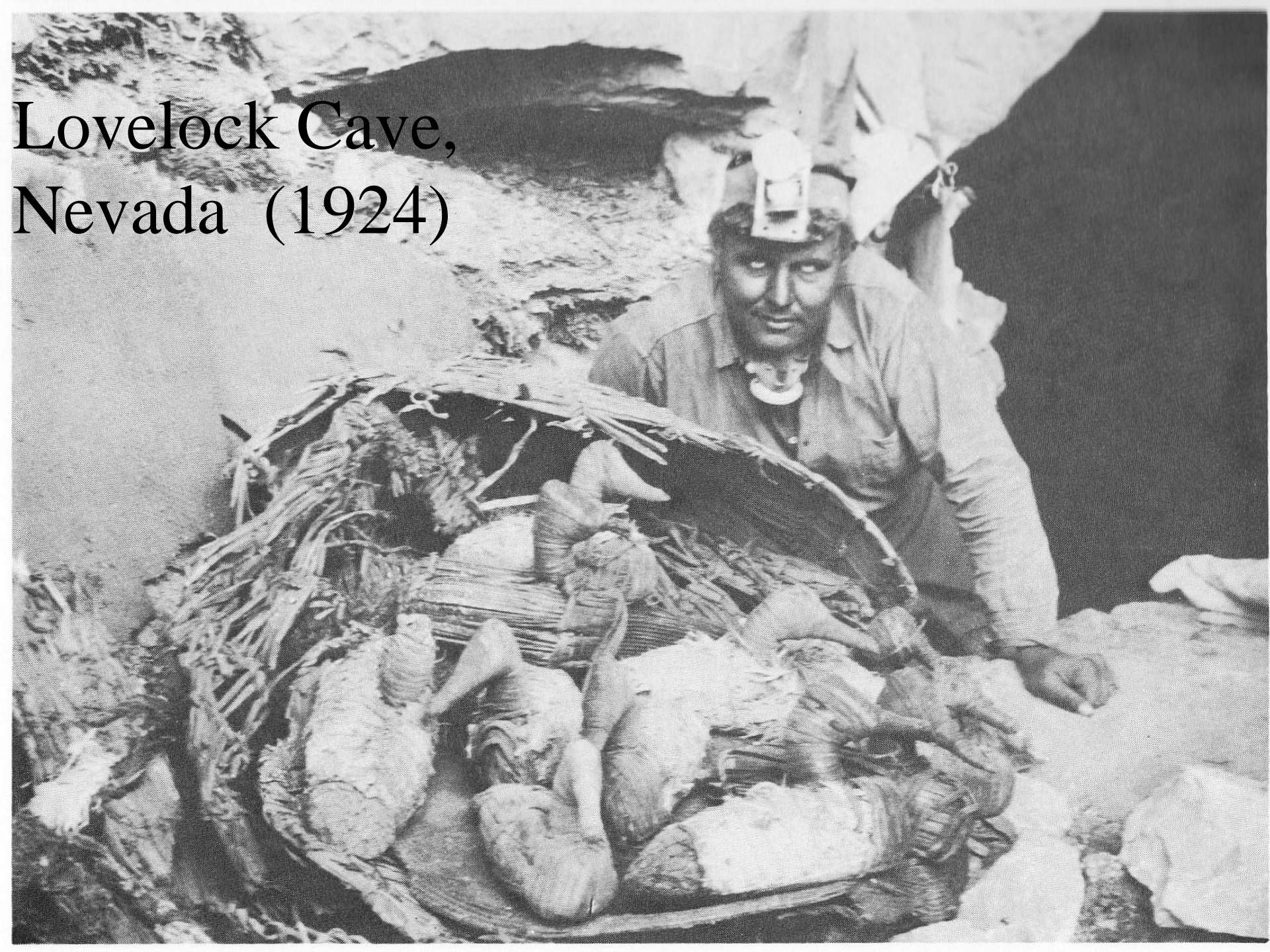


- None of the paintings or descriptions from other areas show the use of decoys (man-made representations) to lure or attract wildfowl.
- Decoys are a uniquely North American invention; initially developed by the native Americans.

- The earliest known American decoys date from about 1000 A.D., and were excavated in 1924 from Lovelock Cave, Nevada.
- Decoys were preserved by the dry climate.
- 2 kinds of decoys were found:
  - canvasbacks formed of bulrushes, with red and black pigment and feathers.
  - bulrush forms upon which skins and heads of wildfowl could be mounted.



# Lovelock Cave, Nevada (1924)





Drake canvasback from  
Lovelock Cave, NV.







Contemporary Paiute canvasback decoy –  
skin mounted over bulrush form.

Earliest written account of native American decoys is in a letter dated May 28, 1687, written by Baron Lahontan (1666-1715), Lord Lieutenant of the French Colony in Newfoundland.

- Hunting trip to marshes of northern Lake Champlain.
- Made “hutts” (blinds) from branches and leaves to contain 3 or 4 men.
- For decoys, “they have the skins of geese, bustards, and ducks, dry’d and stuff’d with hay”, made fast to a light plank, which floats around the hutt.

- European settlers were quick to adopt native American hunting and fishing techniques.
- At some point, they used the woodworking skills and tools brought from Europe to create more durable decoys.
- Exactly when and where this occurred is unknown, and likely it occurred a number of times in various locations.
- Based on written accounts, by the late 1700s, Americans in a number of locations were routinely using carved and painted decoys.



- Writing about decoys Shaw notes, “They emerged in response to the incredible abundance of wildfowl in early America and hunters’ desire to exploit wild birds as a commercial and recreational resource.”
- Demand for waterfowl, and decoys, increased dramatically in the mid 1800s.
- Market hunting began in earnest around 1840.
- Population increases raised demand, and transportation improvements allowing greater access to both the wildfowl and to the markets.

- Improvements in firearms increased hunting success – breechloaders in 1870s, followed by repeating shotguns (i.e., Model 97 Winchester pump and Model 11 Remington automatic).
- Commercial sale of waterfowl was outlawed in 1918, but recreational hunting continued to increase, continuing the demand for decoys.
- By 1950, wooden decoys had largely been replaced by mass produced decoys made from plastic or other synthetics.

- Decoys were produced both by local craftsman, who often utilized a regional carving and painting style, and by a number of commercial enterprises.
- Decoys representing more than 60 species of American waterfowl have been identified (Labrador duck and passenger pigeon are extinct, Eskimo curlew likely extinct), and are produced in 2 basic forms (floaters and stickups).
- Originally intended as tools, decoys are today recognized as a uniquely North American form of folk art - they are highly collectible.



# St. Lawrence River – Alexandria Bay

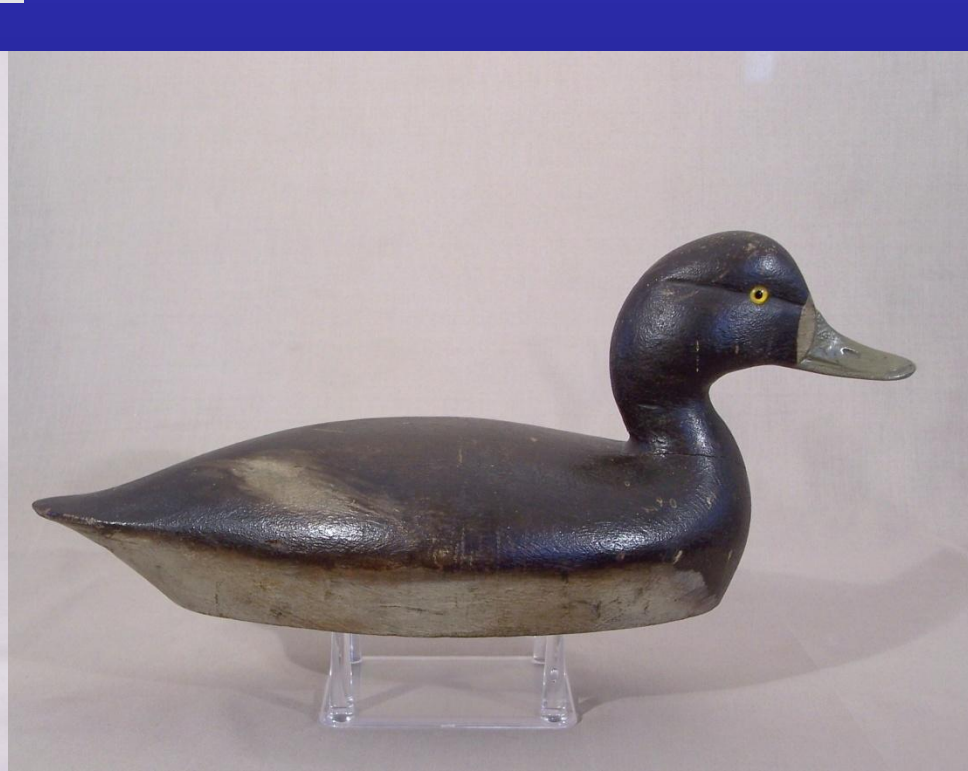
## Style Decoys (“typical” example):

- Flat bottom without keels.
- Solid bodies.
- Ballast weights attached directly to bottoms.
- Longneck or high-head decoys, and reverse feather painting, common in Alex Bay.

Chauncey Wheeler (1862-1937), Alexandria Bay

- best known of the SLR carvers
- dean Holland St. whittlers







Frank (Goldie) Coombs (1882-1958), Alexandria Bay

- very well known carver (2<sup>nd</sup> best)
- “developed” longneck style









Primarily known  
as a carver and  
painter of  
decoratives.

Roy A. Conklin Jr.  
(1909-1967)  
Alexandria Bay





Cyriel Heath (1901-1962), Alexandria Bay.  
Hollow bodies with attached bottom boards.







Frank Capron (1868-1933)  
Alexandria Bay



Augustus (Gus) Rogers  
(1892-1938), Alexandria Bay



Many of Rogers decoys are very similar to Wheeler's,  
and they have often been incorrectly identified.



Gus Rogers





Ray Rogers (1898-1969)  
Alexandria Bay







Samuel J. (Sam) Denny (1874-1953), Clayton.  
Very well known SLR carver (3<sup>rd</sup> best)



Sam Denny





James Stanley (1855-1927),  
Cape Vincent





James Stanley







Francis C. (Roy)  
Stanley (1886-1960)  
Cape Vincent





- The decoys I've shown are classic examples by **some** of the better known carvers, mostly in good to very good condition and original paint. Most collectors would agree with the IDs.
- Unfortunately, **most** decoys are not so readily identifiable, and ID is often somewhat subjective. Evaluating condition is even more subjective.
- Most decoy makers carved different styles and sizes over the years, sometimes due to special orders, and the various identifying marks or plugs are seldom consistent across the entire range of their work.

- Even more confusing are the decoys by unknown or lesser known carvers. Hand-made decoys have always been expensive, so many hunters made their own, often following the regional styles. Sometimes they had the patterns or help of a better known carver.
- Decoys carved by unknown or lesser known makers were sometimes painted or repainted by a better known carver (e.g., Frank Clark).
- Very few carvers signed the hunting decoys they carved , Ken Harris is the one local exception.
- Names or initials on the bottom were almost always the men who owned them.



Many carvers of hunting decoys also produced some decoratives, miniature carvings, paintings, or other types of folk art. These types of items are welcome additions to most decoy collections.



Sam Denny decorative mallards





# Roy Conklin decoratives







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Chauncey Wheeler decorative half-flyer: July 19-20, 2011 Guyette Auction; \$17,000+\$2,550+tax.



# Decoy Collecting: Advice, References, Information, Organizations

## First – Most Important:

Handle and examine decoys, read about them, ask questions; and then do it again.

Second: Collect what you like.

Third: Collect the best quality you can.

# Sources of decoys to handle:

1<sup>st</sup> personal collections

2<sup>nd</sup> shows and auctions (be cautious  
– may be errors or misrepresentations)

3<sup>rd</sup> museums (usually the decoys  
cannot be handled)



## Reference Books:

Decoys of the Thousand Islands by  
Jim Stewart and Larry Lunman.  
1992. (out of print)

Chance by Harold Riser. 2002.

Magazines: carver information and  
current events.

“Decoy Magazine” published by  
Joe Engers, Lewes DE  
[www.DecoyMag.com](http://www.DecoyMag.com)

“Hunting & Fishing Collectibles  
Magazine” published by Stan Van Etten,  
Lawsonville, NC  
[www.HFcollectibles.com](http://www.HFcollectibles.com)



# Auction Firms:

- Guyette & Schmidt & Deeter  
[www.guyetteandschmidt.com](http://www.guyetteandschmidt.com)
- Copley Fine Art Auctions  
[www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com)
- Decoys Unlimited, Inc.  
[www.decoysunlimitedinc.net](http://www.decoysunlimitedinc.net)
- Frank & Frank Sporting Collectibles  
[www.frankandfrankdecoys.com](http://www.frankandfrankdecoys.com)
- Blanchard's Auction Service  
[www.blanchardsauctionservice.com](http://www.blanchardsauctionservice.com)

# Local Events and Shows:

Clayton Decoy Show – 3<sup>rd</sup> weekend in  
July – benefit of the Thousand Islands  
Museum [www.timuseum.org](http://www.timuseum.org)



Thousand Island Decoy Collectors  
Association (TI Museum) – 1<sup>st</sup>  
Saturday in March – collecting  
info. on lesser known SLR carvers.





# Decoy Prices: what are they worth ???

- Collectors of old hunting decoys are a small group compared to collectors of stamps, coins, furniture, etc.
- Auction houses provide the best price guide, but their prices can and have varied widely.
- In general, decoy prices declined substantially since summer 2008, with the most notable declines in the mid range decoys.
- **Reality Check:** there are more decoys “worth” less than \$100, then decoys worth more.

- form or style – unusual positions, sizes, types
  - condition of the decoy and the paint - original paint is important; within reason, shot holes don't matter
  - maker and provenance
  - species
  - age
- 
- All of the factors listed above are subjective in nature or hard to prove (be a little skeptical).
  - In the end, decoys are only worth what someone else is willing to pay.



If you have more questions, what more information, or have information to share:

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