

{ Currituck }

Legendary Fowling Still

By Ron Peach

Waterfowling legend and history run deep along the east coast. Just inside the Outer Banks of North Carolina, with strong waterfowling traditions and history all its own, lies Currituck Sound. Stretching 35 miles north to south and three to eight miles wide, waterfowlers have been drawn to these fowl rich waters for more than two centuries, and many still journey to this legendary area where the Wright brothers made their first attempt to join birds in flight. At a time, long ago, more than 100 private duck clubs were on the waters of Back Bay and Currituck Sound alone, and the reputation of this area was well established even when only primitive roads allowed access.

Protected from the Atlantic Ocean by the Outer Banks, the dynamics of Currituck, an Algonquin word that means "the land of the wild goose," began to change after the late 1820s when the last historical inlet to the sound closed. Salinity levels began to lessen, and wild celery beds and marsh areas began to increase. As the celery beds and marsh habitat increased, so too did the redhead and canvas-back numbers.

As these changes were taking place, some of the local gunners took note and began carving their own decoys, designs that were unique to the North Carolina waters. The blocks were working decoys and didn't contain the detailed painting or carving that were common to other areas along the east coast. Well known carvers such as Lee Dudley, Ned Burgess and Bob Morse created hunting stools for the sound's waters. Best known of all, though, was Dudley who turned this craft into a living creating decoys not only for his own use, but for other area fowlers. Decoys from many of those carvers are today sought by collectors and are considered prime examples of American folk art.

Typically, a large spread of 200 duck and goose decoys was placed, and it usually included one or more swan decoys. These large white blocks were excellent attractors, they acted as confidence decoys, and they aided in pulling the area's tundra swans into the spread. Today, tundra swans are still considered a true trophy bird for those hunters who draw one of the nearly 5,000 tags. The Tar Heel state hosts approximately 70,000 wintering swans annually, many of those in the Currituck area.

While those carved decoys may have once been placed



Some 70,000 swans winter in the state.



around sink boxes, today's spreads are now placed around the more than 1,000 stake or pole blinds on the public waters. These blinds are licensed and non-transferrable and must be maintained in order to remain in possession by the licensee. Treasured by each individual on these historic waters, many of the blinds have been maintained and hunted for decades by the individuals, and each must be at least 500 yards



Carver's heritage on display (above left) and greater snows feeding.

from its nearest neighbor. Today, though divers are still common and the target of many hunters, green-winged teal and pintail are most common. There are good numbers of black ducks and mallards as well. Canada geese and greater snow geese add to the waterfowl diversity.

The ducks, geese and swans of Currituck have attracted many famous waterfowlers, including Babe Ruth, George

(Currituck)

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Guide's boats and decoys await the next day's clients.

Bird Grinnel and Jack Dempsey. But most notable of all in the area was the principal founding father of Ducks Unlimited, Joseph Knapp. Knapp purchased more than 3,000 acres on the sound's Mackay Island where he built a huge, three-story lodge. Here, he employed more than 30 people

year-round. He also built the still-standing first school on the island and paid the salaries and built homes for the teachers. All of this greatly increased the profile of the already famous Currituck Sound.

For those visiting Currituck today, longstanding local traditions are preserved and celebrated. In Historic Corolla Park, located near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse in the heart of Corolla, you'll find Whalehead, a restored 1920s hunt club turned present-day museum, the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education and the new Currituck Maritime Museum. These landmarks offer exhibits to interpret and tell the integral story of the region's waterways, wildlife history and hunting heritage. For more information about visiting these historical gems, call 252-435-2947 or explore visitcurrituck.com.

Currituck remains a sportsman's paradise today. Many have discovered it's not a fairy tale, but rather, the stuff of legend, with its miles of unspoiled natural habitat, waters, marshes and waterfowl.



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