

Chauncey Wheeler

References:

Decoy Collectors Guide. 1966-67 Annual. p. 31-36. Article by Frank Ashe and Harold Evans.
Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys. 1990. p. 90-93. Article by Walt Hallbauer and Sue Bauer.
Decoys of the Thousand Islands. 1992. Stewart and Lunman. p. 183-186.
Decoy Magazine. March/April 1998. p. 3-13. Article by Harold Riser.

Born: May 14, 1862 Died: March 2, 1937 (74 years old)
 May 14, 1880 - 18 years old; 1900 - 38 years old; 1920 - 58 years old

Lived almost his entire life at 23 Holland Street, Alexandria Bay. Carved a pair of miniature decoys at age 8. Continued to carve until 1 or 2 years before his death.

Known Carvings

Working Decoys:

black duck
mallard (1 drake known, 1 fake hen)
broadbill/bluebill
canvasback
redhead
goldeneye
brant
oldsquaw
shorebirds (plover - golden and black-bellied [?], yellowlegs[?])
Canada goose ? (mentioned in Coombs letter)
merganser ? (all pictured examples thought to be Gus Rogers)
wood duck ? (one early Wheeler/Rogers seen by T. Eckert)
bufflehead ? (none known)

Decoratives: full size and half size half-flyers (carvings with one wing, back of body flat), double-wing full-bodied flyers, half decoys, miniature decoys, decorative or mantel birds, and 2 fish carvings (life size northern pike and pumpkinseed).

black duck
mallard
broadbill/bluebill
canvasback
redhead
goldeneye
bufflehead
blue-winged teal
dove

Working Decoy Construction:

- Decoys made of cedar, pine, balsa, and possibly other woods.
- No cork bodied decoys known.
- Most (>75%) decoys have one piece bodies. Dowels commonly used to repair knots. Larger odd shaped pieces occasionally added to correct other wood flaws.
- No hollow decoys known.
- Laminated bodies used when necessary. Two piece horizontally laminated bodies most common. One 5-piece vertically laminated body known (classic decoy broadbill). Laminated pieces not always of same thickness (thinner bottom board goldeneyes). Sides pieces added to brant bodies to achieve roundness. Balsa bodies have dove-tail vertical lamination, but that was probably done at the mill when the balsa blocks were formed
- Except for some of the brant attributed to Wheeler, all floating decoys are flat bottomed. Keels known on "FCD" rig canvasbacks, but may have been added latter.
- Rounded and beveled sided examples known for most species.
- Raised neck base carved from the decoy body.
- Heads and necks carved as one complete piece (no two part heads or necks known).
- Most (>95%) have glass eyes. Some blind decoys known (without even a painted eye). Lunman claims tack eyes were used.
- Head heights and attitude variable (some black ducks have a head forward or swimming attitude), but nearly all face straight ahead. Beal rig brant and oldsquaw have angled head positions. One preening black duck known.
- Bottom plugs from holding devise variable. Commonly one or two holes on center line with square plugs. Some (earlier ? decoys) have no plugs evident (20%). A few have two plugs perpendicular to center line, similar to Rogers (<10%).
- Heads attached with screw from bottom. Screw hole covered with corks on most decoys (occasionally a wood dowel was used). Corks not always painted.

Working decoy carving and finish:

- Nearly all bodies sanded smooth. A few known with some tool marks still evident.
- Body carving rather uncommon. "Torn heart" carving on Beal rig brant, plus one black duck and one drake mallard. Wing outlines (not the full "torn heart") on some of the questionable brant. Gouges (elongated chips) on tail area of some (25%) black ducks, and one known black duck with gouges over entire body.
- Eye groove carved on all decoys except shorebirds, and Beal rig brant and oldsquaw.
- Except for shorebirds, bills separated from face by carved lines.
- Obvious V notch deeply carved at top of bill in all decoys, except again the shorebirds.
- Mandible cuts (line separating upper and lower bill) on 95% of decoys.
- Nostrils carved or pressed into bill on all known decoys.
- Additional grooves near end of bill on approximately 70% of decoys.
- No known original bills with nail carved at tip. However, nail is commonly painted on.
- Gouges or grooves under bills are rare (common on decoratives). Only known example is the mallard with "torn heart" body carving (V grooves in base of bill and top of throat).
- Gouge on bottom with recessed staple for line attachment on 50% of decoys.
- Many decoys weighted by Wheeler, most with a flat rectangular piece of lead. Approximately 25% have a thinner sheet of lead covering the bottom rear portion of the decoy.

Working Decoy Construction:

- Decoys made of cedar, pine, and possibly other woods.
- No cork bodied decoys known.
- All known decoys have one piece bodies. Dowels or other odd shaped pieces commonly used to correct wood flaws.
- No hollow decoys known.
- All known decoys are flat bottomed without keels.
- Rounded and beveled sided examples known for most species.
- Raised neck base carved from the decoy body.
- Heads and necks carved as one complete piece (no two part heads or necks known).
- All known decoys have glass eyes. A number of broadbills and goldeneyes have a distinctive pale yellow eye.
- Head heights and attitude variable, but carving quality less consistent than Wheeler. All known decoys have heads facing straight ahead.
- Two plugs from holding devise always present on bottom, and commonly on top. Plugs are perpendicular to center line, 2-3 inches apart. Some plugs appear to be small round dowels, but others are squarish pieces of wood similar to Wheeler.
- Heads attached with screw from bottom. Screw hole covered with corks on all known decoys. Corks usually not painted.

Working decoy carving and finish:

- All known bodies sanded smooth.
- Carving on decoy body rare. One goldeneye hen with parallel lines carved on tail area. Drake mallards have metal tail curls added to the tail area.
- Eye groove carved on most of the heads(>90%). Some styles with a less obvious concave area or depression around the eye. No eye groove or depression on the mergansers.
- Bills separated from face by carved lines, except for the mergansers. Original merganser bills delineated only by paint.
- Obvious V notch deeply carved at top of bill in all decoys, except the mergansers.
- Mandible cuts (line separating upper and lower bill) on all known decoys, except the mergansers.
- Nostrils carved or pressed into bill on all known decoys, except the mergansers (?).
- Additional grooves near end of bill on approximately 40% of decoys.
- No known original bills with nail carved at tip. However, nail is commonly painted on.
- No gouges or grooves under bills on any of the known decoys.
- Staples hammered directly into the bottom used to provide attachment for decoy anchor line. None of the known decoys have a gouged area with the staple recessed.
- Variety of decoy ballast weights used on Rogers decoys, including flat rectangular pieces and flat circular weights. No known Rogers decoys has the thinner sheet of lead covering the bottom rear portion of the decoy that was occasionally used by Wheeler.

Differences in Wheeler and Rogers Decoys:

Separating Chauncey Wheeler and Gus Rogers decoys from each other can be difficult. Their decoys share many similarities, and both carved decoys of differing styles and varying quality. On top of that we can always use the ever popular early/late, drunk/sober, special order, in a hurry, explanations to rationalize any particular identification. Matters are further complicated by the fact that many Rogers decoys were/are thought to be Wheelers, and Wheeler does have higher national name recognition (and this does affect value to some extent). Many people don't want to hear that their purchase, or the decoy they are trying to sell, is actually by the lesser known Gus Rogers, and therefore might be less valuable.

Although the best Rogers decoys are on a par with the better Wheelers, the overall quality of Rogers carving is not as good (my opinion). Rogers decoys often lack the smooth flowing lines and pleasing proportions that Wheeler decoys more typically show. This is especially evident in the head carving, and a number of Rogers heads could be labeled as crude or clunky. The bill carving on many Rogers decoys is moved further forward, giving the appearance of a bill that is too short and a face that is too long. Rogers decoys are also typically flatter and wider where the back flows in the tail (rump area). Wheeler decoys are typically more rounded in the rump area, when viewed both front to back and side to side. Paint patterns on both makers decoys are similar, and both show many variations. The only real difference that I have been able to observe is in the combing styles commonly used on drake divers. Wheeler decoys have elongated combed loops running front to back. Rogers combing style shows much shorter crescents or U-shaped marks.

(T. Eckert, March 4, 2001)