



Jode Hillman, a passionate waterfowler and talented woodworker, combines these interests in the making of his decoys.

Jode Hillman

A talented woodworker with a passion for waterfowling

BY ALLEN E. LINKCHORST

In the world of sports, there exist a few individuals who are considered "a natural" in their field. These select few have the intuitive ability to pick up a bat or a ball and seemingly overnight turn into stars. In the world of contemporary decoy carving, Jode Hillman may indeed be one of those few.

HILLMAN WAS BORN on April 12, 1972 in Woodbury, New Jersey, one of three children, to Edwin and Catherine Hillman. When he was a small child his family moved to Deptford, where he was raised. After high school, he attended Rowan University, graduating with a degree in history. In 1997 he married Lois McCann and together they are raising two children.

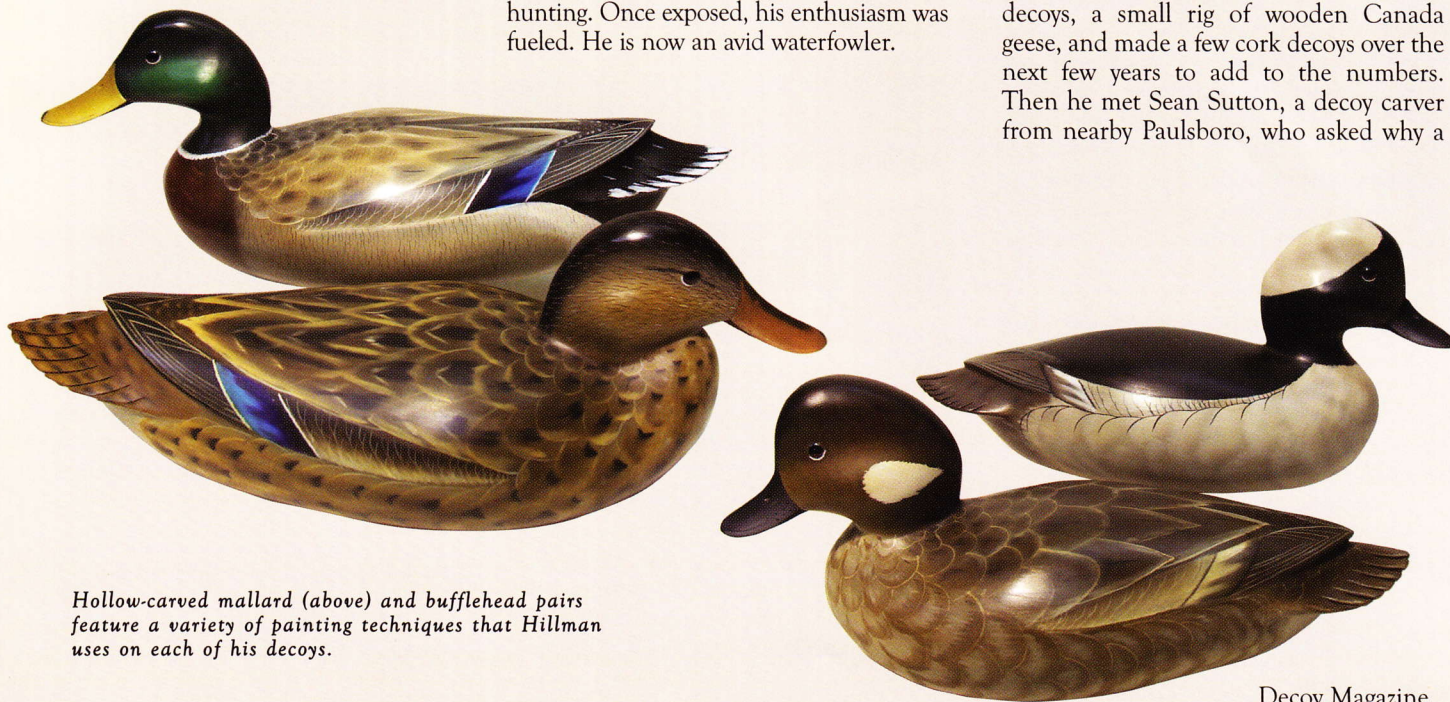
A talented woodworker, Hillman earns his living as a cabinetmaker. Woodworking may even be in his genes, as he is the fourth

generation to practice the craft; his great-grandfather's tools of the trade are among his most prized possessions. But he may indeed be the first in his family with a passion for waterfowling, a tradition he no doubt will inspire in generations of Hillmans to follow.

Hillman's father, an avid crabber, had long enjoyed fishing, but was never a hunter, so Jode's introduction to the sport came through contact with his uncles and neighborhood friends. At first, he concentrated on rabbits and deer, until his uncle, Girard Cantagallo, introduced him to duck hunting. Once exposed, his enthusiasm was fueled. He is now an avid waterfowler.

To get him started, his uncle gave him some plastic decoys, and for a few seasons Hillman gunned out of a canoe over this rig. But after a few mishaps, he decided he needed a more seaworthy duck boat, and lacking funds to buy a proper one, decided to build it. Using his woodworking skills, he modified the plans for a Barnegat Bay sneak boat and produced a bigger, wider, more stable craft. And he quickly became dissatisfied with his plastic lures, so he next turned his attention to making a rig of decoys.

So in 1999, Hillman carved his first decoys, a small rig of wooden Canada geese, and made a few cork decoys over the next few years to add to the numbers. Then he met Sean Sutton, a decoy carver from nearby Paulsboro, who asked why a



Hollow-carved mallard (above) and bufflehead pairs feature a variety of painting techniques that Hillman uses on each of his decoys.



All of Hillman's decoys are hollow-carved in the Delaware River style with incised raised-wing and tail carving (L-R): shoveler, green-winged teal and black duck pairs.

cabinetmaker would spend his efforts making cork decoys. He proceeded to give Hillman the basic lessons in decoy carving, and in short order Jode found a way to match his woodworking talents with his passion for the sport. Practically overnight this relative newcomer became a star.

Hillman's busy shop soon became a hangout for a handful of decoy makers, who would meet weekly to carve decoys and share advice. And according to Jode, George Strunk, a noted contemporary decoy maker from Glendora, gave him some of the best, suggesting he learn as much as he could about old Delaware River decoys - to see what he liked in the way of form and paint - and use those impressions to create his own original interpretation of what a good decoy should look like.

Taking that advice, Jode handled and examined as many old river birds as possible, and draws inspiration from the old

master carvers of the region, such as John English and Jess Heisler. He's most impressed with Heisler's decoys, as the early works of that fellow cabinetmaker are noted for their sharp, crisp, precise cuts, a trait he tries to emulate in his own work. His taste in painting is much bolder, and he admires the artistic skills of John Dawson, Lloyd Johnson, the Ward brothers, Bill Cranmer and Bob White.

In his desire to continually improve, Hillman entered his first decoy competition in 2002, which exposed him to the work of even more carvers. He welcomes the challenges of competitive carving, as he believes it brings forth an individual's best effort. Apparently the judges agree, as

he's already amassed a respectful amount of awards and ribbons.

In constructing his decoys, Hillman uses three basic power tools - band saw, sander and drill press - however he prefers hand tools for their precise cuts and control. The use of hand tools also reduces the amount of sanding necessary to prepare the decoy for painting.

Presently, all of Hillman's decoys are life-sized and hollow-carved, made of kiln-dried Maine white cedar and constructed so the body seam, sealed with quality waterproof glue, floats above the water



Sleeping wood duck pair with finely detailed head carving and excellent paint patterns. One of Hillman's actual woodduck patterns is silhouetted above.

line. All have nicely carved tails and raised primaries in the traditional Delaware River style. The finely carved heads, detailed with upper and lower mandibles, are attached to a raised neck shelf with glue and a brass screw driven into them from beneath the top portion of the two-piece body. The bills have carved nails and nostrils. All have quality glass eyes that accurately match the species. As a final touch, they are branded "J. Hillman."

After the decoys are completely carved and sanded, they are ready for painting. Each is given two coats of spar varnish - each coat allowed to dry completely - to seal the wood. Next they receive two coats of oil-based primer, usually gray, and he finishes them in oils using a variety of techniques: wet-on-wet blending, dry brushing and dabbing. He does not use a comb, instead preferring to paint in the vermiculation. All of the decoys are full-feathered with painted speculums, usually detailed with three bars.

As a professional woodworker, Hillman possessed many of the skills required to carve decoys, but painting them initially proved a challenge. He was mainly self-taught, often taking long hours of practice and sheer determination to master this skill. Interestingly enough, it is this acquired expertise that is now considered the most attractive and distinctive feature of his decoys. And it has become his favorite part of the process.

Each season, Hillman hunts over a dozen or so of his own decoys, which greatly contributes to his joys of duck hunting. He frequents the nearby creeks and cranberry bogs, and travels to other gunning locales throughout the state. Watching wild ducks, he claims, is an inspiration for future carvings. He also enjoys watching his decoys lure them within range; after all, ducks are the true judges of how a decoy looks on the water. As a tribute to his accomplishments, the 2006 New Jersey Waterfowl Stamp will feature one of his wood duck decoys. He is honored with this acknowledgement and proud to be associated with this program, which directly benefits waterfowl in New Jersey.

It's not often one gets the opportunity to combine three of life's passions into one activity, but this is exactly what Hillman puts into each and every decoy he makes - his passion for woodworking, his passion for duck hunting and his passion for waterfowl history - and the finished product is a testament to his love of them all. Jode Hillman is already considered part of the next generation of great Delaware River carvers. For such a young carver to have earned that accolade so quickly, it's apparent it just came to him naturally.



Upright hollow-carved Canada goose with incised raised wing and tail carving.



Hillman uses his own decoys in the creeks and cranberry bogs near his home.



2006 New Jersey duck stamp by Roger Cruwys, features one of Hillman's wood ducks.
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