



“Ducky”

By Jode Hillman

A quiet backwater eddy swirled around the bend of the coffee-colored stream; leaves, branches, and other debris drifted and settled in the lazy current. Reflections of towering trees danced in the afternoon sun. Then the silence was shattered. The roar and splash were deafening, thirty-seven cedars all collapsing to the ground in unison. The farmer looked on with glee as he saw the first-fruits of what he hoped would be a very profitable venture for him and his family. The land had been bought at a reasonable sum, as the sandy, acidic soil was not very good for most crops. He had heard though, that cranberries would grow well here. There was a market for them, too, as sailors were now using them in their rations to ward off scurvy and other seagoing ailments. He was clearing an ancient cedar bog a few miles inland from the New Jersey coast. The trees, all large and straight, had to be clear-cut because they grew so tall and close together that cutting a single tree would merely leave it still standing, supported by its brethren. In the last fading light of dusk the lumberjack, wet, muddy, and tired, gave the farmer the agreed upon price for his trees and set about to saw and market the wood.

Most of the cedar was beautiful, typical of lumber from such regal old trees. A shipwright from a nearby coastal village heard of this and bought a large amount from the lumberjack. He used it to build sloops, schooners, coasters, and occasionally a little pumpkinseed shaped gunning skiff that was becoming popular in the area. It was just such a skiff that a gentleman was coming to pick up later that day. The man, Ben Reed, who was to be the skiff's new owner, was a stout and somewhat grizzled bayman. He made his living off the waters surrounding his family's

home. It was the same water his father and grandfather had lived off as well. He raked clams, hauled nets for fish, and led “sports” out for hunting excursions in the fall and winter. It was for just such hunting trips that the skiff was to be used for. The “sports” you see, disliked getting so muddy and wet sitting on the old bushel baskets Ben had out in his favorite duck spots. Ben figured with the new skiff he would have as many takers as needed to keep him busy once gunning time rolled around.

Ben and the shipwright exchanged small talk as they drug the skiff out of the shop and down the bank to the creek. “Nice wood she’s got in her,” said Ben. “Yes sir, she a good one all right,” the builder quipped back. Ben wondered aloud if there were any nice scraps lying about that he might help dispose of. “Sure,” the old builder replied. “Gotssa few punky pieces up front o’ the shop there. Not good fer much, but yer welcome to a few.” Ben knew the dank wood wouldn’t be very good, but he saw a few of the boards had a foot or so at the ends that was pretty solid. “Could probably get a bird or two outta some of them,” he thought. So he loaded an armful of the sweet smelling wood into the little boat. He rowed into the salt air, bound for home and family.

It was later that summer before Ben got a chance to look the wood over closer. The birds would be here soon, and he needed a few new blocks to add to his rig. Disappoint-edly, he looked at the stock. It had dried out, and a good bit of it was still unusable; but there were a few boards that had useable wood in them. “I can make me a duck out of this,” Ben thought, “maybe a little whistler.” And so he decided to make a small goldeneye

drake out of the salvaged wood. He could get a new load of wood to make the rest of his rig, but for now he would see what could be done with the wood at hand.

When Ben finally began to work the wood, it curled away effortlessly as his drawknife shaped the bird cleanly. He cleared away the soft wood and began to shape the decoy. The body began to take on a smooth, flowing look, a bit wide at the hips, a rounded v-shaped bottom, deep below the rump. Then the head began to take shape. Working with his rasp and gouge, a pert, somewhat inquisitive face began to emerge from the rough wood. For eyes he used brass tacks salvaged from an old sea chest.

As the light from his old oil lamp faded, his youngest daughter, Eliza, crawled over and peered up at the bird on the kitchen table. "Ducky, dadda, Ducky," she softly babbled over and over. "It's not the first bird she's ever seen," Ben thought. "I guess for some reason she just really likes it," he said to his wife. Late into the night Ben worked as he painted the last details onto the bird. In the morning, when the paint was dry, Ben scraped it away from "Ducky's" eyes. He stared back through deep brown sea-aged brass. It was as if the little bird had just magically been born.

Ducky, as Ben fondly thought of him, spent the rest of that summer in an old feed sack. Newly finished blocks piled atop him as they were completed. Slowly, however, the air began to change, and the breezes stiffened out of the northwest. It was a telltale sign. Soon the birds began arriving, in scattered groups at first, then in flocks num-

bering in the thousands. Gunning season had finally come.

Ducky's first hunt was a good one. Ben set him out, along with the forty or so other birds in his rig. The long sloping point he and his hunters were on jutted into the bay and was heavily trafficked by all kinds of fowl. As they sat in the predawn darkness, wings whistled and sliced the air. First light saw birds pitching to the blocks left and right with nary a quack from Ben. The "Sports" he was guiding fired again and again. Occasionally, a bird would drop.

Sandy, Ben's faithful retriever, would bring them to hand perfectly. On more than one occasion Ben had to reprimand his charges. Nothing made him madder than someone shooting over his dog, trying to hit a swimming bird. "How desperate they are," he thought. "More birds will come; just be patient," he admonished them. As the sun rose higher, more ducks were laid low. Blacks, mallards, green teal, whistlers, baldpates, and even a lone brant fell to the guns. Through it all Ducky did his duty, coyly luring his own to their demise.

Soon, word spread of Ben's prowess and his great rig. All that season and for many more Ben was quite busy. Plentiful birds and lots of good marsh made for hot gunning. As Ben acquired stature and respect, Ducky acquired much lead and wear. On more than one occasion a wealthy businessman or lawyer would try to buy him. The answer though was always the same, a polite but firm, "No."

Sadly, as the years passed, the great number of ducks

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began to diminish. The well-to-do gunners started to head farther south to the still teeming Chesapeake area and Tidewater of Virginia. The eelgrass and wild celery, too, began to fade, and with it so did Ben. His children had grown and moved inland. Yet, occasionally, alone, he would still take out his old rig. He loved to watch the ducks cartwheel and spin as they would pitch in around Ducky at full speed. Rarely did he even shoot. It wasn't that he was soft, but he had just seen enough dead birds in his time. On the wing they thrilled him, like when he was young. Sometimes he would still bring one down, his accuracy uncanny for a man of his age. It was mostly for Tar though, Sandy's great-grand pup; for Ben knew how much that dog loved his job. One evening, after just such a day, Ben closed his eyes and fell asleep for the last time.

Years later in his inland backyard, Ben's grandson, Lem, now 14, was rummaging through the cluttered shed. When he picked up an old dusty gunny sack, out fell some battered wood birds. Among them was Ducky. He was worn and faded, yet still peered quizzically at Lem. A boy who loved the woods and water, Lem asked his mom if he could use Grandpa's old birds. "Sure," she said, "that's what they were meant for; but be careful." The next day after school Lem hurried home and finished his chores. It was cloudy outside, and a storm would soon be there. Lem, though, wanted desperately to try out his new find. A man like his grandfather, he knew today would be good. Lem had no boat, nor even a dog, yet with his trusty Model 12 Winchester he did the job.

He went to the only place he could, a creek not far from his home. Using a long branch, he set his birds in the current, with Ducky at the lead.

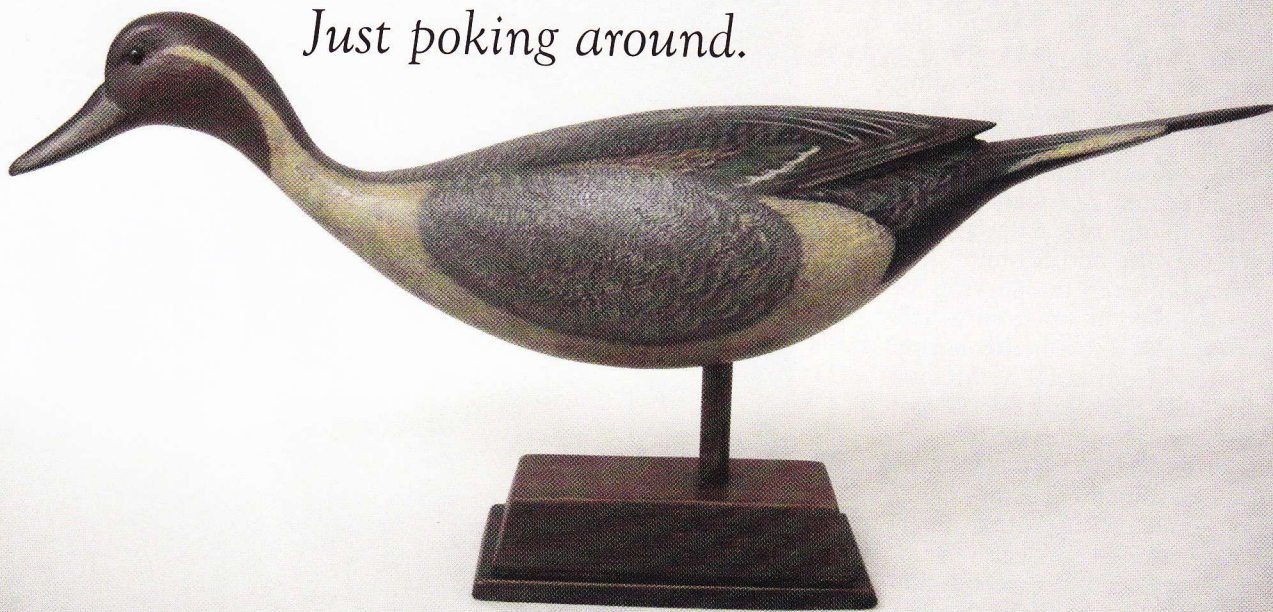
He waited and waited; yet no ducks would show. The wind picked up and gusted through the trees as the storm drew closer. Ducky bobbed and swirled as he had for so many years before. Then, just before sunset, came a new arrival. A lone drake mallard dropped through the trees with the rain. Lem raised his gun and a single report folded the red-legged bird cleanly. With strange accuracy the drake landed fully on the lead block. Ducky's worn old hemp line could not take the shock and parted neatly. Intently focused on retrieving the dead mallard, Lem never saw Ducky float gingerly away.

The rain pounded all that night and into the next day. Ducky careened recklessly downstream. For days he was aimlessly adrift. Later, as the high water slowly abated, Ducky came to rest in an old familiar place, a quiet backwater stream. An abandoned cranberry bog was nearby which was slowly being reclaimed by straight tall cedars. As the skies cleared, the breeze blew softly. Ripe seeds from the nearby cedars floated in the wind. Some landed close to where old Ben's little bird lay. They had found a good place to rest, and so had Ducky. □

(Editor's note: Readers wishing to contact the author of this story may do so via email at: jodehillman@verizon.net)

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