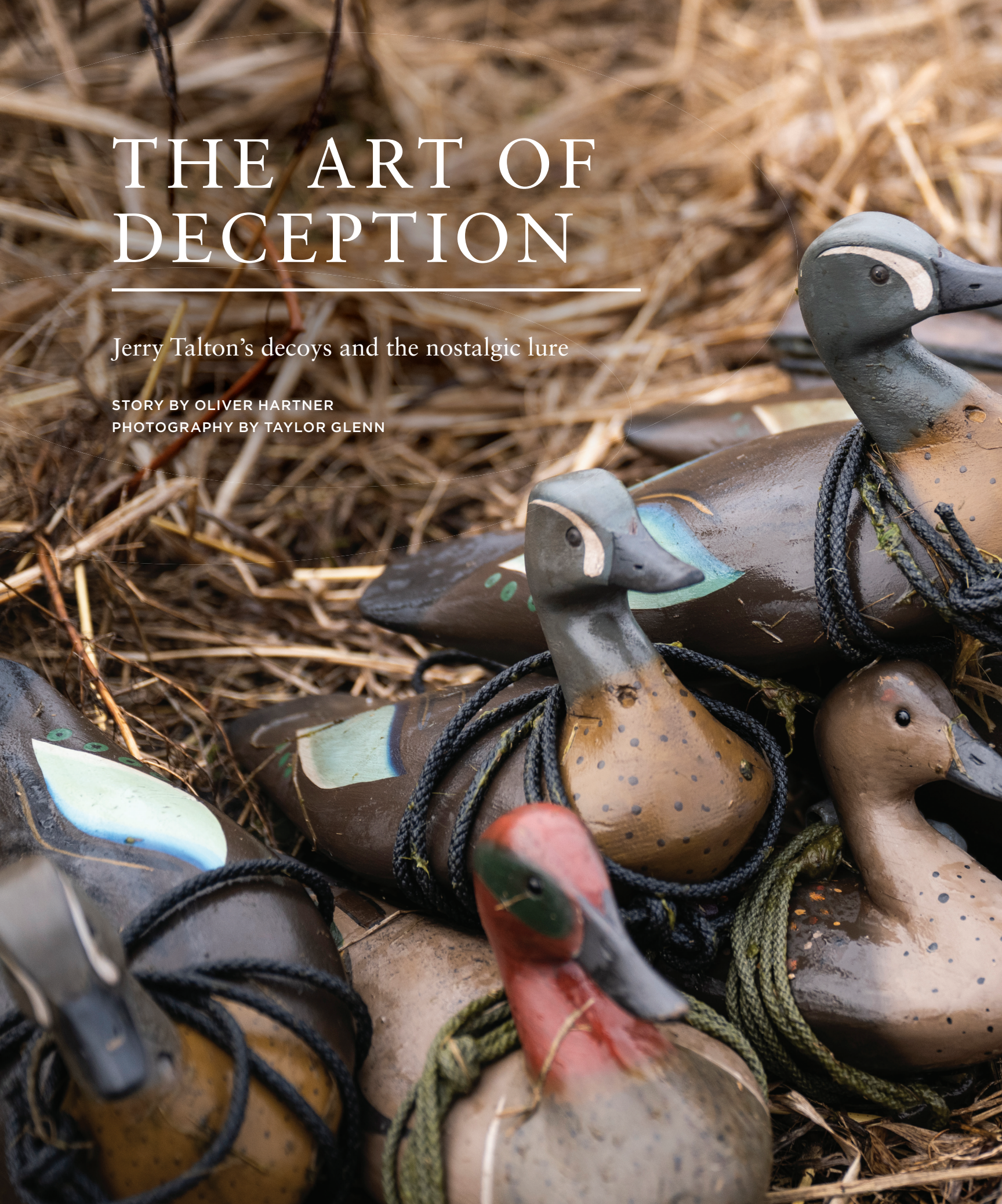


THE ART OF DECEPTION

Jerry Talton's decoys and the nostalgic lure

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Notwithstanding the dangers of overexposure, social media deserves some praise for having launched a ripening renaissance for sporting life. These platforms promote women and people of color who enjoy hunting and angling, inspiring interest from a broader spectrum of society and ultimately benefiting conservation. And for those already engaged in sporting traditions, anecdotal evidence from across the internet—along with a significant market response—suggests a penchant for nostalgia among a younger cohort. Collar bells and double guns and serviceable pieces of antique kit, whether inherited or acquired, have returned to the field. This trending ideology, this movement, emphasizes *how* game is gathered rather than *how much*, and it extends beyond the upland space and into waterfowling. While technical fabrics dyed in digitized camo patterns still hold sway, many waterfowlers now prefer wool and waxed cotton to achieve a patinaed aesthetic while outfitting themselves against the elements. These same old souls likely shoot bismuth from Belgian Browning Auto-5s and boxlock side-by-sides; the most eccentric among them hunt ducks over wooden decoys.

Jerry Talton lives and works immersed in one of the most storied waterfowl cultures along the Atlantic Flyway—Carteret County, North Carolina. They call this region the “Core Sound,” where ocean surf breaks against a chain of uninhabited barrier islands, pooling in the bays between sea and shore. At



ART ON A STRING

Carved and cast by the same hands, these decoys are both effective and nostalgic.





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the threshold of Talton's shop, the scent of his labor hangs in the air as a delightful mélange of tube-oil paints and fresh-cut cedar. Boxes of shotgun cartridges and nails rest on shelves near rolls of paracord, and his waders hang on a far wall beneath a collection of finished and unfinished duck decoys. He stands at his worktop table surrounded by inspiration and the tools of his craft, holding a hatchet in his calloused hand while striking a roughed decoy pattern. Flakes of wood fall to the floor with each blow of its blade, revealing the silhouette of a duck's body. He works off the hatchet edges with a series of simple hand tools for hours at a time before carving the final cuts with his Case Stockman. He sculpts all other parts of the decoy in like manner and fuses them together before sanding the assemblage smooth and burning his brand into the bottom. "I strive to make my decoys by the same means available to every waterman living in Core Sound," Talton explains. Though he cuts his patterns with a band saw, he proceeds unplugged after that, preferring to hollow, carve, and paint his decoys by hand in the time-honored folk style—just as duckmen from this area did over a century ago. And it is the rich sporting heritage of this region, and Talton's deep appreciation for it, that inspires his artistry.

20 years ago, Talton came to decoy carving via surfing. He rode atop the waves on his handmade wooden surfboards and never gave much thought to duck decoys until buying one for his younger brother as a Christmas gift. "I had that decoy for a couple weeks and convinced myself it was a surfboard with a head on it, and I wanted to make one," he says. Talton



BLADE TO BRAND

The sharp steel of Talton's tools carves his experience and brand into each fine detail of every finished decoy.





sought instruction from a local decoy expert, Don Walston, who refused to train him until he read *Carteret Waterfowl Heritage* by Jack Dudley. Its content consumed Talton, compelling him to abandon surfboard making—an art in which he had invested a decade of his life—to take up decoy carving in the Core Sound modus. “I love history—always have. And I became completely absorbed by this book. It had more words than photography, but I can remember looking at the few photos in it and thinking, *I just want to get my hands on one of these*. And the local focus gave it that much more meaning for me. I haven’t touched a surfboard since making my first decoy.” He sought further instruction from Gail Gerring who supplied him with basic patterns and encouraged him to establish his own interpretation of the Core Sound style from them. At her urging, he joined the local Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild for further inspiration. Talton credits these mentors and several others in the development of his current iteration of the Core Sound style, which restricts him to using tools and materials available during the late-19th and early-20th Centuries, when Carteret County residents relied upon seamanship and waterfowl for their livelihood.

Core Sound decoys in general, but especially Talton’s, appear simple in both form and color. However, this simplicity belies the amount of effort and detail applied in their creation, reinforcing their intended purpose as a ruse. Talton, in fact,



THE WORK OF PLAY

A loaded spread is shuttled in, and then the game begins for the hunters and the dogs.





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belabors every feature of every decoy—from the wood he selects to the final brush strokes of its paint scheme. “I prefer Atlantic white cedar when I can get it because it would have been plentiful and commonly used around the Core Sound region a century ago. But unfortunately, most of it has been harvested. So, I use mostly Northern white cedar, which is the closest species I can reliably source. In any case, the wood must be durable, rot-resistant, malleable, and buoyant.” For some commissioned pieces, he manipulates his paint palette and tooling to produce a weathered look comparable to century-old samples of the Core Sound style. Any one of Talton’s decoys—complete with rigging—works as well on the water as it does on display, and when waterfowl season arrives, he

piles pieces from his personal collection into a decoy sled and deploys them for their intended purpose in faraway wetlands or near his home with Dare to Hyde Outdoor Adventures.

Talton and his friends Chase Luker and Colin Oxnard wade through knee-deep water to the center of a flooded crop field before first light. They toss Talton’s decoys in a spread intended to lure ducks into a kill zone, then return to a wooded break that spanned the impoundment end to end, concealing themselves and Oxnard’s golden retriever, Rev, beneath its cover. Talton unsheathes a 20-gauge boxlock and loads both barrels with cartridges before snapping it shut and cradling it against his body. As dawn approaches, he utters his appreciation for the overcast in a whispered voice, believing its shroud offers an

advantage against a duck's keen vision. And he likes the wind. But he wishes it was colder. He wants the kind of cold that punctures clothes and flesh, boring into the bone like a driven nail—the kind of cold that pushes waterfowl. Shooting time arrives, and with the aid of competent calling, ducks circle above the decoys, working their way down into shotgun range. Talton orients his double gun to the ready as he eyes a cupped-winged mallard descending into their spread, then shoulders it and squeezes the trigger in one graceful motion. The drake splashes lifelessly into the water and Rev retrieves their prize, repeating the process until Talton, Luker, and Oxnard end the hunt with a mixed bag of gadwall, mallard, wood duck, and widgeon between them. They collect the decoys and add them to the sled, stacked alongside the ducks they felled.

After shedding his waders and stowing their kit, Talton lowers the tailgate of his camper-covered truck and produces a table, hot plate, and cast-iron skillet for preparing the ducks. They hiss and pop as the hot metal meets their fatty skin, and Talton tops them with a simple blend of seasonings, turning them over and over until they cook into a palatable breakfast. “The best duck hunts aren't necessarily when you limit,” says Talton. “It's when you put out your decoys while watching a pretty sunrise then making a couple great shots. Just enough to make an amazing meal for you and yours. Wooden decoys are an everlasting monument to moments like this one,” he says. And perhaps moments like this morning rival or exceed the highest achievable accolades for Talton's work; when a wild animal coaxed down from the heavens believes that blocks of wood floating atop the water are creatures of its kind.

While a plastic decoy works just as well and often includes more detail, most waterfowlers don't think enough of one to have it on display in their home. This reality begs to reason that we assign value to human labor, either consciously or subconsciously, and whether it sees water or not, a wooden duck decoy carved by hand qualifies as something precious to us. Unlike molded resin, they possess a part of the maker's soul along with the life of the tree from which they came. Yet as functional folk art, they also serve a purpose, and Talton's work reminds us of this duality. Some may balk at the idea of putting his decoys over water given the labor involved in their fabrication. But Talton promotes their use, saying, “There's already enough plastic floating around the wetlands. And I make my decoys to last several lifetimes. So, they'll stand up to the use. They're probably not practical for situations where you need a lot of decoys, but in cases where you need a couple dozen or less, they do as well now as they did a century ago.”

Having just one of Talton's decoys among a spread would be better than none—instead of having it collect cobwebs and dust during the off-season alongside the plastic ones, it can be displayed indoors for starting conversations as it acquires character from every hunt. And collecting one at a time would be a good start to replacing a set of plastic decoys, along with having a tangible connection to the heritage and culture involved in this art form. 🦆



PERSPECTIVE

A successful hunt brings fellowship for the soul and food for the table, and it makes for happy dogs.