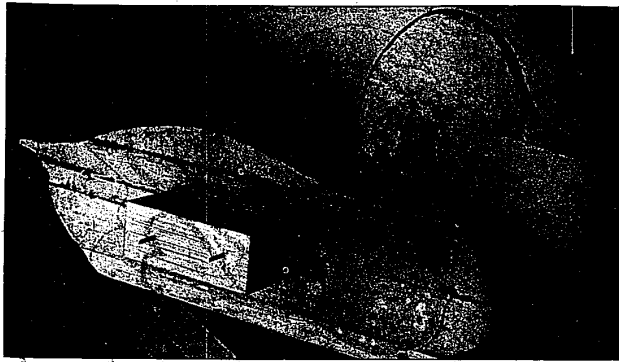


# Functional craft becomes a carver's art form



Following Bruce Burk's book on decoy carving, Prescott made this first project, which he now considers a mediocre start.

Placement of the eye is crucial, Prescott said. When it's wrong, it ruins the decoy.

Story by CORINNE ABATT  
Photos by DICK KELLEY

Whenever Kingswood School headmaster William Prescott has some free time with nothing to do (not often), he can usually be found in his wood working studio.

A decoy carver who insists the word "amateur" be attached to this description, Prescott, a longtime duck hunter, has found making decoys a captivating hobby. It's just the kind of change he needs to balance his demanding daily schedule.

He's presently teaching his first class for beginning decoy carvers in the Cranbrook PM series and was over-scheduled before the course was under way two weeks ago.

His interest developed when his wife gave him a book for his birthday about five years ago, Bruce Burk's "Game Bird Carving."

"I followed what Burk said to do and it worked. It's a great relaxing hobby."

PRESCOTT IS STARTING his students out just as Burk does in the book—making a half size, half body mallard.

Prescott has his first try on the shelf of his home study along with others he has done since.

Seemingly ignoring that with his first attempt, he picked up the little mallard with one side completed and said simply, "This isn't really very good."

And he wasn't very complimentary about his second and third attempts either.

However, when he took a delicately painted partridge, his expression changed. "I like this one," he said.

And then, as if saving the best for last, he took hold of a green winged teal which had a very professional quality to it. The back tail feathers were clearly defined. The underfeathers along the rib cage are carefully painted in, a technique which Prescott called vermiculation.

IN HIS WORKSHOP, Prescott has a drawing of a green winged teal in flight. One wing is partially done with more on the underside to be hollowed out. The body is roughed out in wood and the head in the beginning stage. It is his most ambitious undertaking and

he's not sure it can be pulled off. But what is completed so far is impressive.

All of these stages indicate steady progress in this art which has captured his interest.

In several ways, Prescott had a head start. As a duck hunter, he knows how decoys are used and how they should act—which is to say balance properly in the water, not list or tilt.

And while the decoys now being carved by hobbyists as Prescott usually fall into the classification of decorative rather than working, they still carry many of the attributes of the original function.

Many of the antique decoys now considered collectables were made to be working decoys. Now, they are a thing of the past.

"Commercial decoys are vastly improved," Prescott said speaking of those used by duck hunters. People just don't spend the time and effort to make them by hand anymore. Working decoys take a beating and you can't have museum pieces thrown together in a bag," he said.

"IF YOU'RE OUT on a lake shooting over diving ducks, you may use as many as 100 in a set. Sometimes 200 or 300 in a set."

Because of the expanses of water, Michigan has always been prominent in the decoy carving world—first as a center for working decoys and later for decorative ones.

"This particular area is among the richest in wild fowl lore of any place in the country," said Prescott who is also an amateur ornithologist.

Happily the headmaster's home is located on a bluff just above Kingswood School and a few feet from the front door there's a stream and pond. So Prescott, his wife and small children can watch the migration of mallards, Canada geese and other birds.

"Mostly we can see mallards," Prescott said. "Occasionally we'll see a few black ducks and wood ducks."

Carving fits beautifully into his appreciation of birds and his love of duck hunting.

"You learn a lot about bird anatomy," he said adding that to achieve the desired effects with painting and carving requires study of both the media and the subject.

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Green winged teal, William Prescott's most recent carving, shows the progress he has made as a carver and painter.