



Duck decoy carver Dave Justus joins the growing rank of artists who are now contributing to the revival of folk art. The revival of the duck decoy as an art follows the revivals of stenciling, toile painting and early needlework techniques.



The male wood duck was a novice division second place winner for Dave Justice in one of the first competitions of duck decoy carving he entered. He thinks of this piece as his best effort to date.

## Recreation supervisor is after-hours carver

By Loraine McClish  
Staff writer

When Farmington Hills' recreation supervisor can't be found skiing or canoeing or sailing or scuba diving, either on or off the job, he probably can be found engrossed in the American folk art of duck-decoy woodcarving.

"I think I must have been an old ship captain in my last incarnation," Dave Justus said. "So much of what I do and what I'm drawn to seems to be related to water. When I started carving it was because I was attracted to the ducks and the water birds."

"I have no ambitions to carve a moose. But I have carved a whale," he said.

His penchant for carving began with an inexpensive kit and then only tentatively because he said he never thought of himself as an artist.

But now, less than six years later, his hobby has brought him several prizes in both regional and national duck-decoy-carving competitions.

He's shown some of his pieces in Farmington Community Center's art shows, and this summer will pack up his station wagon with the wood ducks of all shapes and sizes and genre he's carved to set up booths in several weekend festivals.

"THE GOAL is to reach realism," Justus said of the carving and painting

Justus' decoy of the golden eye, found in far northern regions and named for its stunning bright yellow eyes, was a third place winner for Farmington Hills' recreation supervisor.



he does for competition.

"You are allowed to be as creative as you can be while you are recreating something that already exists," he said. "It's a lot different than making something that just looks good on a shelf."

The duck-decoy societies that keep the competition going stem from the period between 1900 and 1920 when hunters chose to carve their own decoys rather than spend money for the

machine-made wood figures.

"Now carvers do it just for the art of it," Justus said.

"The good ones, the ones who are known, can command several thousand dollars for one piece, and the collectors seem to be growing in number."

Justus was introduced to duck-decoy carving when he brought a class in duck identification for hunters here through his job in the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Department.

"The instructor used some of his own decoys for the class, and I was fascinated by the fact that someone could turn a piece of wood into something so beautiful as those ducks."

"He told me where the next (duck decoy) competition was going to be if I wanted to see a good show of woodcarving, and that's where I ran into duck mania."

JUSTUS' OWN duck mania started at the same show when he bought his first kit, "a simple thing to give you the hang of it," he said.

This led to the purchase of fine bird and duck prints to help capture the color and detail for the realism necessary for competition, then the conversion of his home basement into a woodworking shop.

Now he says he travels "with one eye out for old barn beams. They are not hard to come by, you just have to keep an eye out for them," he said.

The 100-year-old barn beams, along with several types of petrified wood, are used to carve the decoys and other birds that he sells in shows and festivals in the \$20-60 price range.

"This is the folk art," Justus said. "This is the reproduction of the duck decoy that was actually made by the hunters in the first part of the century."

"We use old woods, leave the grain and its texture, its seasoning show through to make it appear antique."

### Staff photos by Randy Borst



Exquisite detail of texture and coloring on the gray, white and brown plumage of the pintail won Justus his first blue ribbon in a regional contest.



Carving for competition, which might mean 80 hours for a single piece, vies for Justus' time that might otherwise go into recreating the duck decoys hunters made for themselves in the early part of the century.



The carved decoy begins with a small block of wood the actual size of the duck's head. Traditionally most carvers carve the head



first, separate from the body. Tools, Justus said, are fairly simple ones and not very expensive.