

“CLASSIC” ONTARIO SHOREBIRD DECOYS

Rare gems
from north of the border

FROM MY EARLIEST collecting days I have been intrigued by shorebird decoys, which were used profusely on the sandy beaches and capes of North America’s eastern seaboard from Massachusetts through the Carolinas, providing an abundance of variety by maker and species for today’s collectors. However the few Canadian shorebirds pictured in books – “Decoys of Maritime Canada,” “Ontario Decoys II” and “Traditions in Wood” – are truly rare gems, providing a challenge for collectors north of the border. After acquiring my first, one of the exquisite “Malcolm rig” yellowlegs, I set out to research all the shorebird “finds” I could, hoping to trace their roots, as much as possible, in order to determine if there were similarities and/or features or stories that might help in the search for provenance, possibly to identify the “maker.”

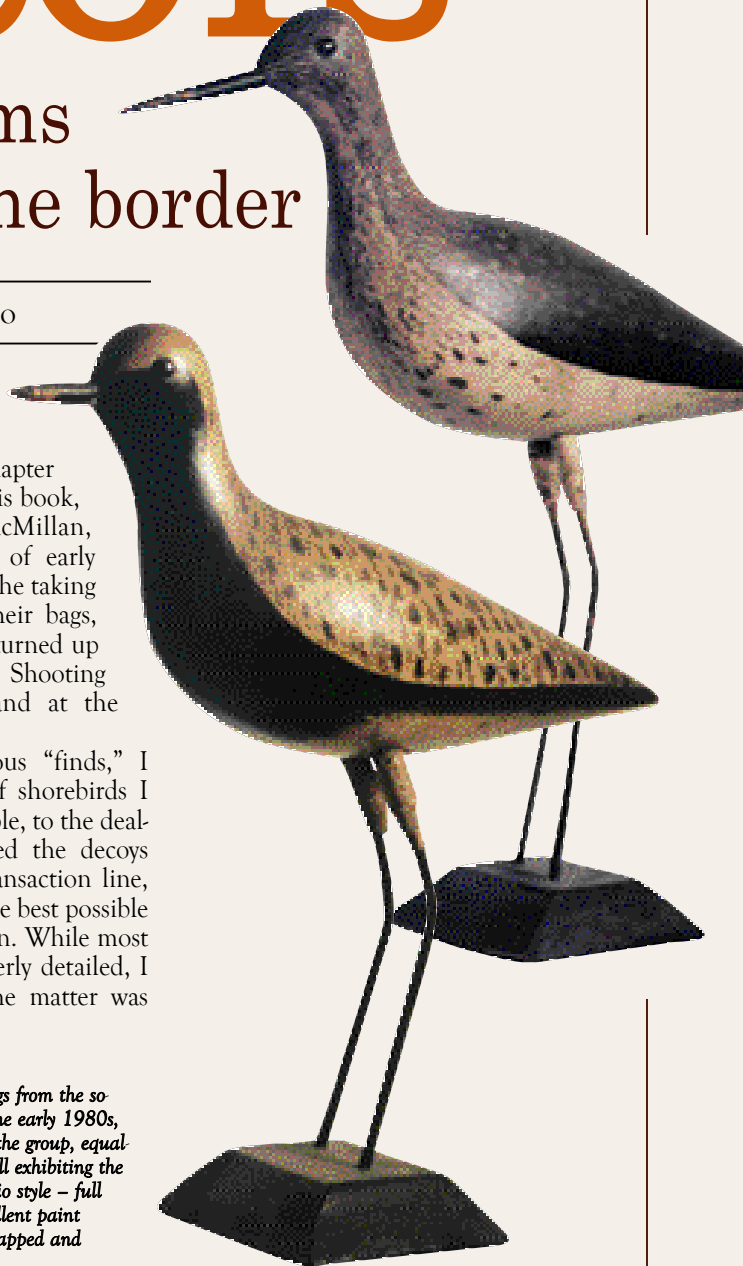
Shorebird or snipe shooting, as it was often called in general terms, was not as prevalent in Ontario as on the Atlantic coastline. Yet it is highly probably that early Canadian market shooters and sportsmen hunted shorebirds on the sandy spits and beaches of Lakes Ontario and Erie at Point Pelee, Eriean/Rondeau, Long Point, Crystal Beach, Toronto Island, Squires Beach and the Prince Edward County beaches. In fact, Chatham born Edwyn Sandys, a renowned sporting

by Paul Brisco

writer from the turn of the last century, wrote about shooting curlew on “the Bar” at Eriean in a chapter titled “Beach-combers” in his book, “Sporting Sketches,” MacMillan, 1905. As well, a number of early hunting club logs mention the taking of various shorebirds in their bags, and shorebird decoys have turned up at both the Lake St. Clair Shooting Company/Canada Club and at the Long Point Company.

In tracking down various “finds,” I talked to all the owners of shorebirds I could find, and when possible, to the dealers or parties they acquired the decoys from, and on down the transaction line, until I could put together the best possible “picture” of what was known. While most “rememberings” weren’t overly detailed, I believe a good sense of the matter was obtained.

Black-bellied plover (L) and yellowlegs from the so-called “Malcolm rig.” Collected in the early 1980s, these are two of 12 shorebirds from the group, equally divided between the two species, all exhibiting the finest aspects of this “classic” Ontario style – full body form, delicate bill carving, excellent paint patterns, enameled tack eyes and wrapped and painted wire legs.





Full bodied golden plover (L) and red knot, ex-Southam rig, with tack eyes and typical wire leg construction. There is still evidence of leg wrapping on the red knot.

In all, there were 12 to 14 groups of two to 80 decoys “found,” as well as quite a few singles. In total there were 175-200 shorebird decoys representing at least nine species, including yellowlegs, curlews, knots, ruddy turnstones, dunlins, sanderlings and a few types of plovers. They were found throughout Ontario - Toronto, Lake Scugog, Prince Edward County and the Niagara Peninsula - as well as in Manitoba, British Columbia and south of the border in Ohio. But interestingly and of note, all could be traced back to Ontario upon probing their provenance.

In summary, nearly all had wire legs, in most cases two wire legs, sometimes with one cut short. In many cases the legs were wrapped with cotton at the top, and in a few cases, the legs were painted. The bills were finely carved wood in the best decoys, wire in other cases, and occasionally wire or a nail replacing what was probably a broken carved wooden bill. The bodies varied from flattie to half round to full-bodied. The paint varied from plain to crude to finely painted with feathering. The eyes were either painted on or tacks were used, with enameled tack eyes on the highest quality decoys. Lastly most had a wooden shelf or stand with the wire legs running through it, which was likely to stabilize the decoy when wires were put into the sand. I call it a “sand shelf.” It is the

two wire legs and the “sand shelf” that distinguish these shorebirds as a “classic” Ontario form, classic meaning both typical to the area and of excellent quality.

In pondering this Ontario classic form, and using the old decoy axiom that form follows function, I suggest that the lack of tides in Ontario’s Great Lakes subjected shorebird decoys to perpetual wave action, as opposed to shorebird shooting on the eastern seaboard where they were hunted in tidal pools and on the receding tide. Thus the two-legged structure, with the sand shelf to bury in the sand, would give the decoys stability in a wave-eroded beach. It’s just a hypothesis, and we may never know the answer for sure.

While the body of knowledge about Ontario shorebirds has slowly grown, it’s hopeful there is still much to learn. I would encourage anyone with knowledge of existing shorebird decoys, or early written references to hunting shorebirds in Ontario in magazines, manuscripts, hunting logs or diaries, or additional advertisements for Ontario shorebird decoys, to make this information available. The Canadian Wildfowling Heritage Conservancy, a non-profit company dedicated to the preservation of decoys and related waterfowling objects of Canadian heritage, would dearly love to broaden the research and continue the quest.



Primitive, slightly flat-sided black-bellied plover with tack eyes and wire bill. While this shorebird lacks the artistic touch applied to many Ontario shorebirds, it still has the typical wire legs.

To participate in the Canadian Wildfowling Heritage Conservancy, contact Paul Brisco, 49 Bromleigh Ave., London, Ontario, Canada, N6G 1V1, (519)641-4790.

**Read the “rest of the story”
in the Sept./Oct. 2004 issue
of Decoy Magazine.**