Tom Boozer

1. Shaping the decoy body…(02:15)

T. Boozer: I'm Tom Boozer, workin' on a blue wing tail decoy today. I been, uh, makin' decoys for a little over twenty four years. I really started uh, makin'em to fulfill an [own] need I had as a hunter and I really didn't have the resources to purchase decoys so uh, I learned how to make'em. A friend of the family, [Olen Valentine], uh, he's up in his late eighties now, uh, was a very, uh, good woodworker and carver and he taught me, uh, the basics of making a good workin' decoy. And that first rig probably is not a rig that I would want anybody to see today but, uh, nonetheless, I believe it brought in some ducks for some of those early hunts. I'm using a draw knife that's uh, a little over a hundred and fifty years old and the wood that I'm usin' is white cedar. And I'm basically workin' the body down at this point in time to be used with a rasp to do the final shapin'. <*T. Boozer switches tools*> I'll be changing tools to the rasp and this'll take out most of the knife marks but at the same time it adds texture to the wood. You don't want your decoys too shiny 'cause they reflect too much light so the rasp adds enough texture in there to keep it from being smooth and therefore shiny. When you're makin' a decoy, you always need to think round; there're no square edges on a bird <*laughs*>. So if you can always think round, take all those edges off…<*Video ends*>

2. Undercutting the primary feathers…(02:18)

T. Boozer: ....It gives a more natural look to the decoy as it sets on the water. <*Makes a cut*> Make two simple cuts. <*Leaves the shot momentarily*> Find my chisel. And we'll take some of the excess wood out. And that will define the primary feathers of the duck's wings. Ducks, just like people, have attitudes and while they're sittin' on the water a duck at rest's tail will sorta point down so I'm gonna roll that tail down. If he gets scared or excited, that tail'll stick up and of course you don't want your decoy's lookin' scared or unnatural 'cause the real, uh, duck can pick up on that and we don't want that.

<Video cuts briefly and then shows T. Boozer working on the bottom of the decoy>

T. Boozer: As I'm doin' the undercutting on the tail, to feather in, so to speak, the uh, the body in the tail. *<T. Boozer switches tools>* Again, if you remember, we always wanna think round when we're makin' a bird. So all these edges that look kinda square…are just being rounded up now.

3. Hollowing out the decoy body (02:45)

T. Boozer: There were two reasons, uh, for hollowin'. One, of course, was to lighten, uh, the decoy because in the old market gunnin' days sometimes a rig of four or five hundred decoys was-was not uncommon, so uh, obviously when you hollow'em out to about a half inch in thickness… *<Grabs another decoy already hollowed out>* This uh, bird here has already been hollowed. That's the step I'm gettin' ready to do now. Uh, you take out almost half of its weight, just by hollowin' it. Then when you put ballast, uh, back on the bird, uh, you gotta remember that uh… *<T. Boozer begins to drill his decoy>*

<Video zooms in on the decoy being drilled>

T. Boozer: What I'm doin' here is drillin' a series of holes close together and I'll come back and clean all that out. A lot of people ask me if I've ever gone through and I guess I need to tell the truth, I've gone through once, so it's just something you learn over twenty four years.

<Video cuts and then shows T. Boozer chiseling the bottom of the decoy>

T. Boozer: And you wanna keep it as fairly uniform as you can so that when you get ready to ballast the uh, the decoy it won't have too much wood on one side so that you have to move the weight around. And uh, if you can keep it uniform you just saved yourself a lot of work later on. I have a little pond right over here behind the shop where, uh, I ballast the decoys. Basically what you do, once they're hollowed and the heads are put on, they're painted, each bird requires a different size weight to ballast it. But, just from workin' with'em you know what size to start with on each-on each size decoy and you hold it on with rubber bands. When you balance it in the water, you can move the weight around, because of the rubber bands and once you find the balance point, then you can go ahead and screw it down.

4. Carving the decoy's head… (03:22)

<*Video begins with a scrolling look at some of T. Boozer's decoys*>

T. Boozer: They may be cocked up or sideways, but they're-they're intentionally all made, uh, different. And of course on sleepin' heads you can turn them to the port or starboard, left or right. Uh, you're reaching heads can be turned. Uh, one thing that I don't do is I never make a straight on decoy.

<*Video cuts and then scrolls over to T. Boozer carving a head*>

Uh, the heads on a hollow body decoy, of course, are made separately just like a-a solid body. But instead of driving a-a nail or spike down through the top of the head to anchor it into the body, the hollow body- uh, one of the advantages of the hollow body is a much stronger head because it's put on from the inside with a screw. And with the screw coming up through the body from the inside, you get a much better attachment because most-most decoys are gonna be picked up by the head. That makes-that's your handle. <*T. Boozer holds a decoy by the bill*> Uh, so the head and the bill needs to be, uh, very strong. Even on a reaching head, if you pay real close attention to the grain in the bill, make sure that the grain runs right straight with the bill. And even on a reaching head <*T. Boozer picks up another decoy*>, which is prone to a lot of stress in this area, you can pick up the entire bird by the bill. So those are some of the points that you need to watch when you-when you are makin' working decoys 'cause the-the hunter doesn't want to get out there and pick one up by the head and it come off. Uh, he'd be pretty upset. But basically, again, you need to think round while you're makin' the head and I use a couple of Buck pocket knives to carve the heads. They're also made out of a white cedar. And once the profile is made, again, it's just a matter of roundin' it up and takin' all the square edges off of it and-

Interviewer: Once you round it you take all the square edges off, but then what do you do?

T. Boozer: Uh, you mount it to the body, uh, and because it's painted as a-as a unit, you want your paint to flow together uh, at the neck line. Uh, once it's mounted on the body and-and initially sanded, then I set the eyes. You don't wanna set the eyes first because you got a lot of sandin' to do. And of course you could scratch-scratch the eyes. So you

do all of your-all of your rough sandin' is done before the eyes are put in. Uh, once the rough sandin' and the final shapin' is done, uh, then you can set the eyes. Uh, the eyes are then feathered in to the pockets, uh, to what is known as an eye trough. And uh, once they are feathered in, the entire decoy is then sealed with-the spar varnish is not mechanically heated, but I set it out in the sun to make it thin and by bein' thin, when you apply it to uh, to the bird, it soaks it up. And as everybody knows, spar varnish never ever gets real hard. It always remains flexible and that way it won't crack and let water in, uh, in any shape or form. So once they're sealed…<*Video ends*>

5. Finishing the head…(03:15)

T. Boozer: Uh, as you can see, the eyes are on wire that they're called a type one, uh, glass eye. And you basically just bend a fish hook in the back of the eye, like this, I'll cut it off right here. And the purpose of that is when I push it into the wood it'll actually hook and therefore, uh, hopefully not ever come out. So that's another little step in makin' a workin', uh, decoy, uh, to make them as durable as possible

<*Video cuts and then shows T. Boozer carving a decoy head*>

T. Boozer: Uh, I use Resorcinol glue. Uh, anybody familiar with boat building would know that that's the only completely waterproof glue that there is besides the new space age, uh, things that-that are just prohibitive in cost to use, although Resorcinol glue costs about fifty five dollars a gallon <*laughs*>. Uh, but that is, historically, the right kind of glue to use and uh, so that-that's what I use. Uh, the head is, believe it or not, almost through. It's-It has now been rounded up with the bill. Uh, when you're doin' the-the eye troughs, the crown of a duck's head is usually three quarters of the width-and I'll put a pencil mark on here <*T. Boozer begins to make markings with a pencil*>. If you were to draw an imaginary center line, the top of the head is basically three quarters the entire thickness of the-of the head out to the cheeks. And what I'm gonna do now, to define the eye trough is work to that crown.

<*Video cuts and then continues to show T. Boozer carving the head*>

T. Boozer: No, no sharp corners, right? I had actually cut one so now what I'm doin' is roundin' off that sharp corner that I made…so that…that now…do a little bit on the crown…so now it's rounded out <*holds the head up for display*>. Now you notice that I

haven't done anything to the bill. I like the-the bill actually fades in to-to the head so I like to get the head pretty well done. Now one other thing we gotta do is-is do the underside of the cheek. And you basically just accent that as a neckline.

<Video cuts and the shows T. Boozer displaying his decoy>

T. Boozer: And there's the head.

6. Painting techniques…(03:29)

T. Boozer: This is nothing but an old brush, well, with a piece of a hair comb *<displays the brush>*. Uh, you know how a comb is divided onto two ends: there's coarse teeth and there's fine teeth. This is the coarse one. And basically the way-see if I can fine my, uh, my fine…fine one. Yeah, here's the fine one. On a-for instance a mallard, the back of the mallard is comb painted with the coarse comb. The black color is painted on first, then the light grey color is painted on. And before the light gray is painted on *<makes painting motions with his brush>*, you just pull the comb through the light colored paint and it exposes what's underneath, which of course is the dark. *<T. Boozer turns the mallard to the side>* Now the sides of the mallard are done with the fine comb. And it's basically done the same way. And if you just kinda zigzag it and pull it through and that's-you can do it in, like I say, very, very quickly, but very effective vermiculation. This is called vermiculation on a duck, so if you've ever seen a mallard or a pin tail or a green wing teal drake or a buffle-not a bufflehead, but a blue bill or a canvas back, those particular birds have vermiculation and that is the quickest and most effective way to put it in there. *<T. Boozer reaches for another bird>* Now the feather and horn of a hen, such as a mallard hen or a pin tailed hen is-is simply done with a small brush. It's done in three different colors. And basically your lightest color is put on first. Then you can see the edges come in with your darker color. Then finally, the darkest color is put on. But those are all done with, uh, with brush strokes. *<T. Boozer gets another decoy>* This, uh, this is a sleeping black duck that has now been sealed. As you can now see the-the joint here is where the bottom board, once the head is put on, the bottom board is put on with copper boat nails and Resorcinol glue. The-the dark brown line, of course is the Resorcinol glue. This has been sealed with spar varnish and I'm getting ready to scuff it up, uh, and actually do the painting. So that-that would be the next step after this step

here. *<T. Boozer places the decoy back on the shelf>* And-and really the last thing to do is to paint it. Uh, make up your lead pads-the lead pads are made out of uh, roofers lead which comes in big sheets and you just simply fold it over and over and over. Now I know that on a mallard that it takes a two and a half by three and a half pad, folded four times. Ok, so I go ahead and make up the pads, put the rubber bands around it, put it in the water, I roll it over, make sure that it will self right and then screw it down. Put your anchor [fob] which is made from leather-historically it was made from uh, uh, full cow hide. That's what your anchor line ties on to and then with the addition of the anchor-these are lead anchors-and your anchor line, you're ready to throw'em in the water.

7. Native American origins of the decoy (01:49)

T. Boozer: The decoy has been proclaimed as the finest folk art in America. That's because it's indigenous. We-we learned decoy making from the, uh, the Native Americans. The Indian taught, uh, taught us how to make decoys because over in Europe, uh they never made decoys, uh, they-they used live birds. That-it was called the [coy] bird. The word decoy comes from an old Dutch phrase which, uh, means decoy trap-uh, duck trap. Excuse me. Means duck trap or duck cage.

<Video cuts momentarily>

T. Boozer: Basically cages were built over wetlands and ponds where the water fowl were, uh, uh, known to frequent and live birds, that uh, that had been trained to swim around in the mouth of the net and then go to the rear of the net because of the food being placed there, would draw, uh, the wild birds into the net. And then, of course, they were usually clubbed to death or their necks wrung or ever how they, you know, were able to gather their waterfowl. But that's basically how water fowl was hunt-was hunted in-in Europe. And, uh, the, uh, again, the decoy was never-never widely used and there are very few examples of European, uh, decoys that we have. But in America, uh, is, as long ago as, uh, 1100 A.D. uh, maybe 1000 A.D. we found examples of Indian-Native American made, uh, decoys out of bulrushes and feathers-they would actually take feathers from the actual birds and stuff them into-into the reeded bodies and tether'em on a-on a rock anchor. They real-the American, uh, the Native American really taught us to-to make a workin' decoy.

8. Process of collecting white cedar logs (01:15)

T. Boozer: The process of, uh, decoy making, of course, starts with, uh, wood. This is white cedar <*Camera zooms in on cedar log*>. Uh, I go out in January and February during the colder months of the year. Uh, the sap is down in the trees and it's a better time to cut it. Uh, when we cut the trees it's in a swampy area, sometimes maybe about six to eight inches of water. Uh, we'll let the trees fall in the water uh, and the-the moisture keeps the ends of the trees where we've cut'em, uh sealed up-to keep'em t-too bad. Uh, usually go back in June or July, uh, maybe sometimes have to wait 'til August when the swamp is dried out and then we can drag the logs out. Once I drag the logs out, uh, they're sawn into either a four inch thickness or a six inch thickness depending, uh, on the actual decoy that will be made. <*T. Boozer shows the sawn end of the log*> It takes six inches to make, uh, uh, things like a goose or a swan. Uh, it takes usually about four inches to, uh, uh, make your mallards, your black ducks, your pin tails. Uh, I don't saw anything any less because my band saw is capable of resawing these blocks, uh, into the thicknesses for heads, smaller bodies, and uh, and shore birds.