



**ARTISTRY ON THE WATER** With Lars the Labrador standing watch, Ole Olsen and a friend chat while waiting for ducks to be lured to the expert carver's handmade decoys. If sold individually to collectors, the decoys in Olsen's typical spread would fetch a total of roughly \$7,000.



# to CARVE a DUCK

IN TOWNSEND, "OLE" OLSEN TURNS TREES INTO ARTISTIC WATERFOWL ATTRACTANTS



**W**ilford "Ole" Olsen of Townsend gets his ducks the hard way. He drives 1,000 miles to buy pieces of wood, which he cuts, carves, sands, and paints to resemble live ducks. Then he sets several dozen of these hand-made decoys in the water and waits for them to draw real birds into firing range.

Olsen, 76, has been hand-carving decoys for more than 60 years. As a young hobby carver growing up during the Depression in upstate New York, he made his initial decoys with a hatchet. The creations were so crude, he says, "my mother often tossed them into the stove to warm the kitchen." No one is doing that these days. Today his decoys, which sell for roughly \$150 each, are sought by collectors throughout the country. "The ducks are the harshest critics," says Olsen.

Olsen moved to Montana in 1975. Tens years later, he retired from the U.S. Forest Service, where he'd been a logging engineer. But he never really retired. Olsen carves about 180 decoys each year. About half he sells to individual duck hunters and decoy collectors. The rest go to Ducks Unlimited auctions (and half of those he donates). The continent-wide conservation group has recognized his generosity with its National Distinguished Service Award.

Two years ago I went hunting with Olsen and his massive black Labrador retriever, Lars, on Canyon Ferry Reservoir.

"Are you going to be useful as well as ornamental?" Olsen asked me as we headed out. I assured him I'd do whatever he needed. The main job that morning was to help set out the four dozen "blocks" (decoys) in his spread. Watching the canvasback and redhead decoys ride the water took me to a time I'd only

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
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read about, before the invention of plastic and battery-powered duck imitations, when all decoys were carved of wood by hand.

The ring-necked ducks flying past our blind thought the wooden decoys looked pretty good, too. Several landed in the spread, even as Olsen was setting out the last few.

One reason the decoys appear so realistic is that Olsen knows his wood. Each year he tows a trailer from Montana to a small mill in northern Minnesota to buy basswood and northern white cedar—the two prime woods for carving.

The decoys are highly coveted. Ducks Unlimited has presented his decoys to many of its top officials in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. For hunters and collectors, Olsen is back-ordered a year or more. His most popular decoy is the hen mallard, due to the unique scratched-paint, fan-brushed feathering technique he uses. Of the two dozen species he carves, Olsen favors the cinnamon teal.



**SITTING DUCK** Olsen's decoys ride in the water just like real ducks.

“They have a unique bill that’s longer, wider, and shaped differently from most puddle ducks,” he says.

Though there are far fewer decoy carvers today than in years past, the tradition lives on in books and websites devoted to the craft.

“Study what a real duck looks like,” is Olsen’s advice to new carvers. “Look at the feather groups, the patterns, and how real ducks ride the water.”

Olsen carves decoys in the Great Lakes style, which imparts more detail and a flatter bottom than decoys traditionally carved in the Chesapeake Bay region, home to many of this country’s premier decoy carvers over the past century.

In the hand, his decoys are works of art. Seen bobbing in the waves, they look remarkably lifelike. Olsen says he once watched a hen canvasback land in his set and swim around looking for companionship. She swam up to one of the drake sleeper decoys, attempting to flirt with him. She bumped her breast against his side, but no response. She swam around and bumped against his other side. Still no response. Ignored, she swam over to another drake, but he too remained woodenly aloof. She returned to the sleeper, tucked her own head back, and stayed beside him for an hour. When Olsen started picking up his spread, the hen continued to stay by her sleeping beau, only an oar’s length from the boat. Finally, Olsen had to scoop him up. With a nasty look at the intruder, she reluctantly left her silent companion and flew off. 🦆

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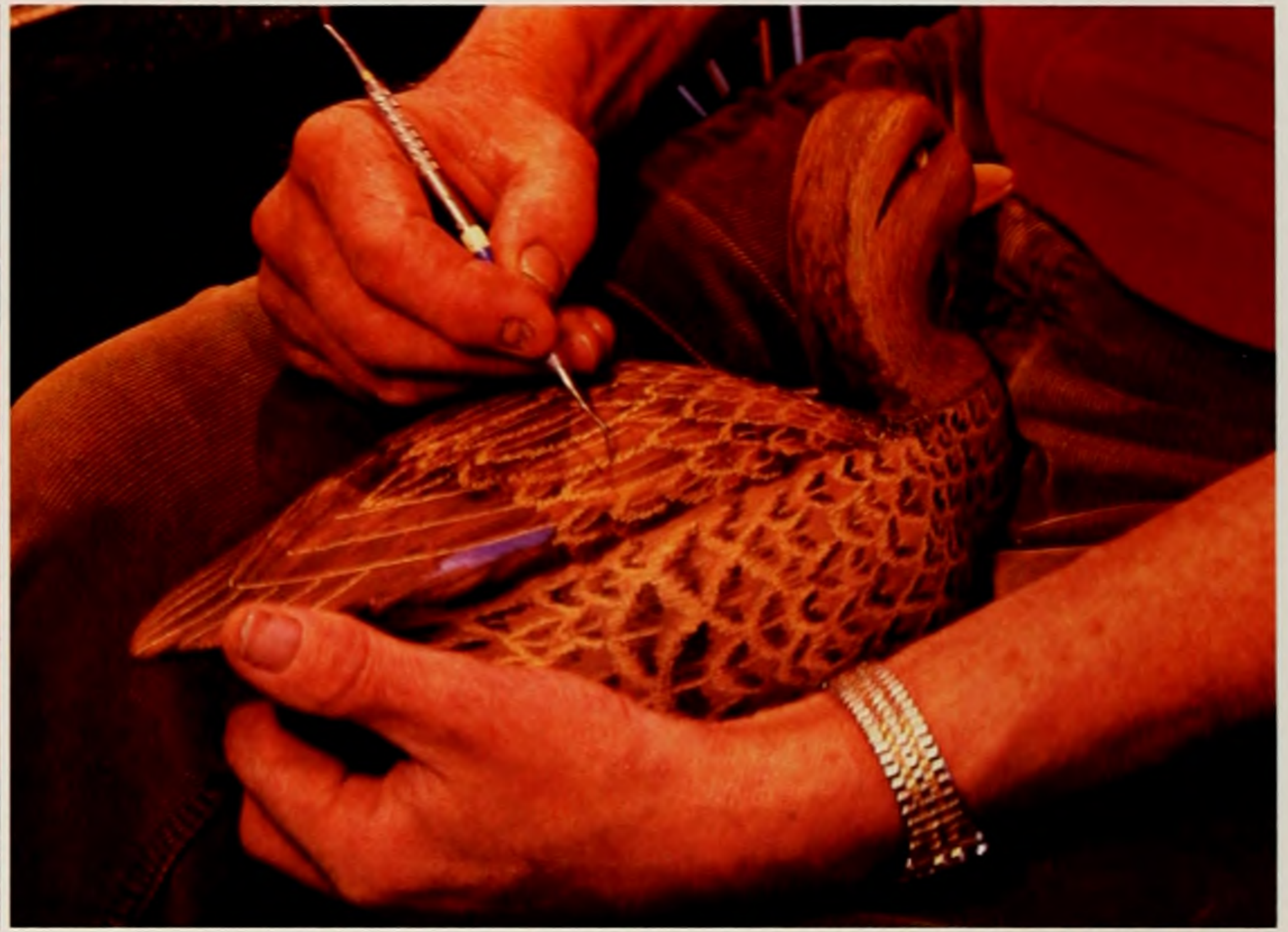
**THE DUKE OF DECOYS** Olsen, of Townsend, says it takes roughly one day to make a finished decoy. First he ages and dries northern white cedar planks before gluing them together and cutting the body outline with a band saw. Next he carves the body with a razor-sharp draw knife. Then he shapes the decoy body with a rasp. The head, which he carves earlier, is made of basswood, a tightly grained wood. (Continued) >>>











#### >>> FINISHING TOUCHES

After fitting the head with glass eyes, Olsen begins the meticulous task of painting the decoy. He also uses a wood-burning tool and scribe to create the realistic feather patterns that collectors rave over. Each finished decoy is stamped with a number and signed by the artist. Olsen's decoys fetch hundreds of dollars at auctions, and have been presented to Ducks Unlimited officials throughout North America.







**MADE TO BE USED** "They look good on the shelf, but they look better on the water, doing what they're supposed to do," Olsen says of his decoys, which he hauls to nearby Canyon Ferry Reservoir each fall during the waterfowl season. The 76-year-old hunter has been setting his spreads on the Missouri River impoundment for more than 30 years. Right: Olsen holds a drake canvasback duped into shotgun range by pieces of wood, masterfully transformed.

