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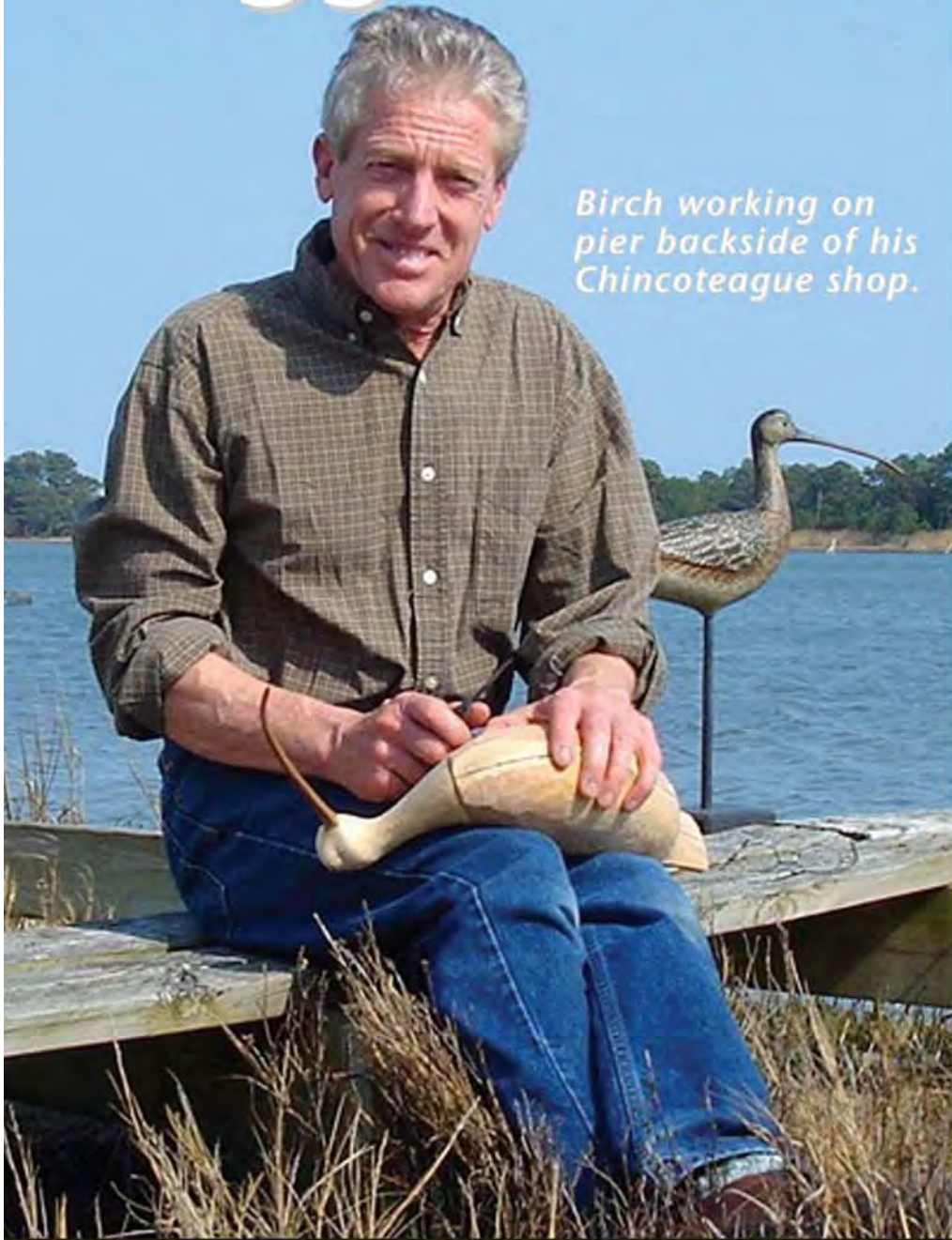
Reggie Birch: Chincoteague Carver.



**BILL GIBIAN DECOYS
"DEGREES" OF ORIGINAL PAINT
FRED LEXOW: THE MAN, HIS ART, HIS FAMILY
GUN COMPANY "COVERS"**

Reggie Birch:

Birch working on pier backside of his Chincoteague shop.



Chincoteague Island Craftsman, Artisan & Decoy Maker (Restorations a Specialty)

By James L. Trimble

Many fine decoy collections include decoys made by a select few of today's contemporary carvers. Several of those carvers are from Virginia's Eastern Shore; Reggie Birch's artistic carvings rank among the best of them.

Assateague Island is a 37-mile-long barrier island that runs along the eastern shorelines of both Maryland and Virginia sheltering, like a protective arm, the tiny Virginia Island of Chincoteague from the sometimes rough and turbulent seas of the Atlantic Ocean. Like many current-day Chincoteaguers, several generations of Reggie Birch's ancestors, until the first-quarter of last century when the federal government cleared the island of "squatters," called Assateague Island home. Birch's grandfather was among the last generation of Birch family members born on Assateague.

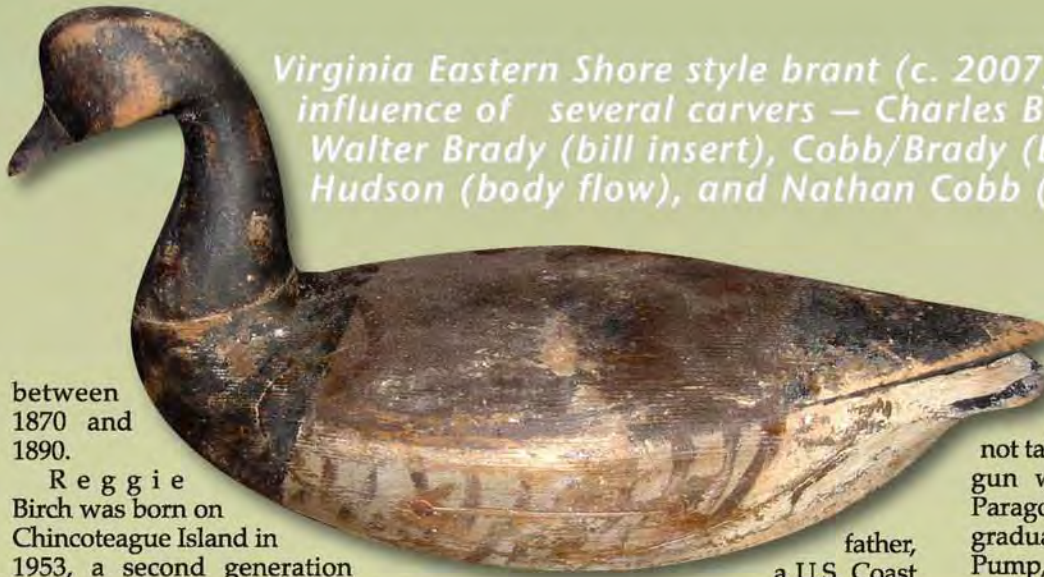
During early colonial times, Assateague became inhabited by English speaking people for the purpose of raising livestock and harvesting salt. The first salt works there, with many to follow, was established during the Revolutionary War. The natural resources of bay and ocean provided sustenance, and eventually income, as seafood was harvested, processed, and an industry developed. A lighthouse was built in 1833 with lifesaving stations built in 1870 and 1875. Nearby mainland populations were drawn to Assateague in pursuit of income, working in the emerging seafood industry. The completion in 1876 of a nearby railroad line to the mainland's Franklin City created an economic boom as the island's seafood harvests could now be shipped to markets near and far.

Salt was a valued commodity because of its taste and, of course, its ability to preserve yields. Enterprising islanders, like generations of islanders before them, dug large holes on the beach filling them with water. The collected water was poured into large pans, stacked on blocks, then boiled away, leaving the salt that was then scraped and collected. Besides local use, the salt was packaged and shipped to mainland markets. Numerous salt works came and went with the years, one such being Birch's Salt Works that operated near the Maryland state line

Virginia Eastern Shore style brant (c. 2007) showing influence of several carvers — Charles Birch (head), Walter Brady (bill insert), Cobb/Brady (body style), Hudson (body flow), and Nathan Cobb (paint on the sides).

between 1870 and 1890.

Reggie
 Birch was born on Chincoteague Island in 1953, a second generation Chincoteaguer from the transplanted Birch line, which traces its roots back to 1763. His family members are listed in census data with occupations closely associated with the water. Besides Salt Works, other occupations listed include U.S. Coast Guard, Merchant Marines, U.S Life Saving Service, and waterman. Birch is not certain of his family's connection to Lou Birch and Charles Birch, local decoy carvers from the first and second quarter of the last century; but he comments that in all probability they share the same DNA pool. Birch's early childhood was spent along the water's edge, but not all of it on Assateague or Chincoteague. His



and Ira Hudson's. "I was hooked, but my brothers did not take to it," states Birch. "My first gun was a 16-gauge side-by-side Paragon that I still own. But I soon graduated to a 12-gauge Remington Pump, then a Browning Automatic!"

father, a U.S. Coast Guards-man, moved his family with various station assignments. Besides Chincoteague, other assignments included Jacksonville, FL, Virginia Beach, and Hawaii. Birch was 13 when his father retired and returned home to Chincoteague.

Birch was also 13, possibly 14, when his father, an avid hunter, introduced him and his two brothers to waterfowl hunting. His father maintained two blinds at Black Point at the southern tip of Chincoteague, overlooking Tom's Cove. It was fall and they were shooting black ducks and mergansers over a rig of island-made decoys, primarily Miles Hancock's

Also at age 13 or 14, Birch acquired his first boat, an 11 1/2 foot bateau, powered by sculling hole and oar, built by Hudson. The bateau gave him access to the waters that surrounded and ran through Chincoteague as well as access to nearby Assateague, located just across the Assateague Channel. Within a few years, the bateau gave way to a 16-foot Chincoteague plank-bottom wooden scow, a shallow draft waterman's workboat powered by a 25 hp Evinrude engine.

When not in school and not doing chores, childhood hours were often spent fishing, hunting or spending time on Assateague beach with a



Red-breasted merganser drake, Lothrop Holmes style, c. 2004.

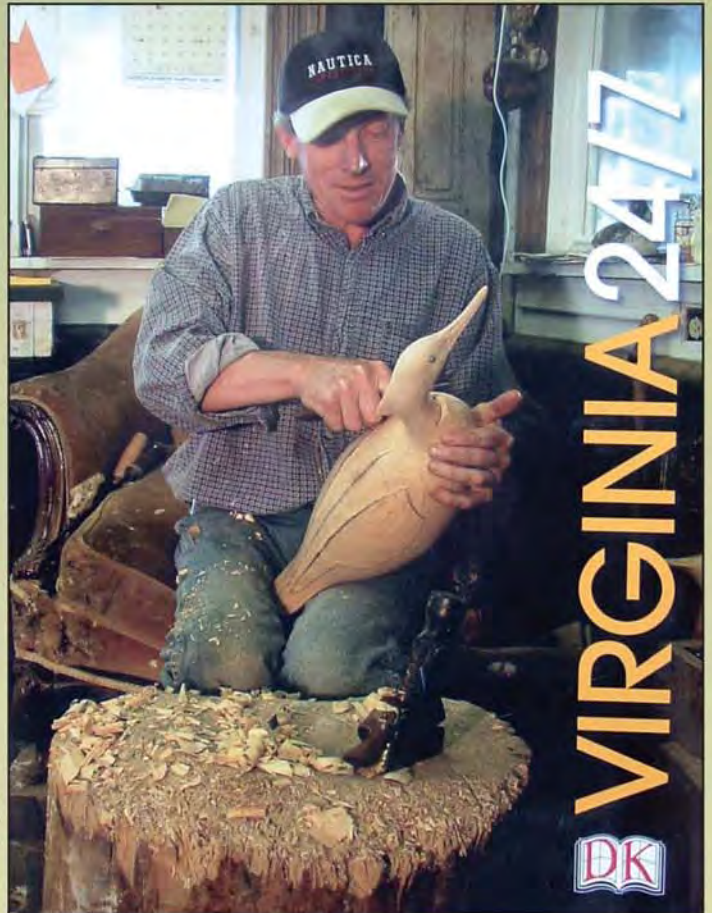


Northampton style curlew with inserted oak bill, c. 2007. Used as current Birch logo.

surfboard, a skill and passion that he developed while living in Hawaii. This passion carried into adulthood with many trips up and down both coasts as well as Puerto Rico and Hawaii, to catch the perfect wave. It is an activity, along with scuba diving, that he still pursues.

Upon his return from Hawaii, one of the island kids that Birch befriended was Bill Beebe whose family owned the 60-acre Beebe ranch at the south end of the island. The ranch was home to numerous "Chincoteague ponies," among them lineage descendants of Misty, an island pony made famous in Marguerite Henry's 1947 book, *Misty of Chincoteague*. From time to time, Birch rode the ponies with his friend Beebe. As they got a little older, and without parental supervision, the two rode ponies carrying shotguns, and after setting a few decoys, would lie down in the tall grass of the fresh water glades, using their ponies as partial shields, while the horses ate and drank, and call the birds in. "The ponies were so tame they did not pay attention to us. The gun shots did not bother them," comments Birch. With a larger motor-powered boat, and with other island kids with the same hunting interests, his hunting domain expanded with each passing season.

After high school, Birch worked several jobs from carpenter to waterman to insurance man where he traveled the area collecting weekly premiums. He also hunted each ensuing season, in many cases with the island kids with whom he had



Birch on the cover of the Virginia 24/7 2004 magazine.



Red-breasted merganser pair with solid bodies and carved crests and bills, c. 2001.



Long, sleek, red-breasted merganser once used as Birch's logo bird, c. 1995.

grown up. Remnants of his father's old wooden decoys were still used, mixed in with cork and Carry-Lights and other plastic decoys that he and his hunting group used.

One close-by location was the south side of the mainland causeway road where they maintained two stationary blinds, a good location for shooting black ducks. Besides gunning normal hours, often in the evening, they would cross the Chincoteague channel by boat, set five or six decoys, and stay way after dark and "way after shooting time." Sometimes in early morning, they just parked their car on the causeway, set a few decoys, and began shooting as the birds came in. The downed birds were marked and the decoys quickly retrieved; the hunters would return later without guns, but with oyster baskets, digging for a few oysters as they retrieved earlier downed birds from the grassy marshy area. During late evening sunset hours the causeway provided wing shooting for teal and widgeon, usually without decoys. There was always concern about the game warden motoring across the causeway.

The group also hunted Gilroy Shoals at the north end of the island where they maintained two stationary pole blinds, usually putting out about 150 decoys. Besides shooting black ducks and an occasional goose,

it was a good location that attracted pintails from Assateague at low tide.

In 1977, Birch started making his own decoys, at first cork black ducks and then wooden buffleheads and mergansers that were used that season.

Birch reflects on an early incident

that made him realize that his wooden ducks had value. One day during season, he was standing along the water's edge with his rig of bufflehead decoys laid out before him. "It was a day that the birds were not flying," says Birch. A local guide with two sports in a boat came by and hailed him. The guide asked who made his bufflehead decoys, and would he sell a few to the sports as a memento of their hunting trip. Several floating birds were retrieved and sold for \$20 each. The next day, the guide stopped by Birch's house and bought four more

Large great blue heron with fish; one-piece construction, c. 1990.



decoys, again at the same price. "Not bad spending money at the time," comments Birch.

New awareness of the value of his decoys, and wanting to make a better bird, drew him to local waterfowl shows where he looked and handled contemporary ducks, eventually saying to himself, "Hey, I can do this," and he did! Birch notes that he had been selected the "Outstanding Industrial Arts Student" both his junior and senior year of high school. In 1978, one year after carving his first gunning rig, he took a table at the Virginia Beach Waterfowl Show to sell his hand-made ducks, many of them miniatures. He did not sell a one!

Undeterred, he sought out the help of local decoy maker Delbert "Cigar" Daisey. Daisey advised Birch that he would not teach, but that he could sit and observe. "He was the best on Chincoteague, and he was getting top dollar for his birds," states Birch. "I was stopping by his shop several times a week to



Full-size swan 34 inches long with wings added, c. 1990.

eye-opener was an artistically pleasing pintail sold to an antique dealer that promptly re-sold it for \$165. "Whoa!" thinks Birch.

Birch, who first emulated Daisey's carving style, had definitely developed his own artistically pleasing "old style" decoy carvings. In 1986 Birch began carving gunning birds full-time, usually from cedar, both solid and hollow, most with artistic flair. He also began restoration work on old decoys. At that point in time he had three antique store or decoy dealers who assured him that they would purchase anything and everything that he carved, and that they would also keep him busy with restorations. One of those

sit and observe. He became my idol; I wanted to carve just like him." Birch also took a one-week carving class from highly regarded decorative carver Dan Williams of Baltimore, Maryland. "I carved some decoratives after that, but I did not enjoy it," says Birch.

He reflects, "My real love was the gunning decoy. My carvings were beginning to look more and more like the style of those made by Cigar Daisey, and who better to emulate." Birch began making birds for competition entry and began winning ribbons, lots of them. He carved competition birds for about seven years, winning over 200 ribbons, many of them blue, many of them "Best in Show." The competition birds were marketable, augmenting income along the way. In the mid-1980s, Birch was selling his decoys for about \$25 per bird. An



Sicklebill curlew with removable head and bill, c. 2008.



Cormorant, c. 2000.



Wood duck, c. 2009.



Red-breasted merganser hen, c. 2009.



Red-breasted merganser drake, c. 2009.

dealers owned a Barnegat sneak boat, the ideal boat for marsh access while gunning black ducks. Birch traded several of his carvings for the boat that he used for the next 20 or so years before donating it to Chincoteague's Oyster Museum.

Birch does not carve for decorative realism, but for the look of yesterday's carvers, adding "father time" to his decoys, as he replicates a time-worn look, often with creative flair. Along the way, he gave up his power tools and acrylic paints for hand tools and oil paints, the same tools and paint used by early decoy makers. His pleasure comes in discovering and developing ways to reproduce works similar to the old masters. "Besides the carving, I have spent a lot of time experimenting with lye and other toxic chemicals (for working with an antique finish). It has taken me 20 years to perfect," says Birch.

During the late 1980s while Birch was perfecting his technique, he mentored two carvers who were in and out of his shop over a two-year period. One was Kevin Williams, who eventually returned to the West Coast where he made a few decoys,



Birch-carved "Gentleman's Peep-Box."



Ira Hudson style mallard miniature, c. 2009.



Ira Hudson style Canada goose miniature, c. 2009.



Birch's signature on all of his birds.



North Carolina style, fat ruddy duck, c. 2005.



Channel Bass Inn sign with flying least tern (striker), c. 1995.

but is better known for the fine guitars that he makes and repairs. The other was Cameron McIntyre, a well known contemporary carver and fine restorer. Birch says it was a good exchange as he taught carving technique, and McIntire brought with him a wealth of knowledge on oil paints that he readily shared. The three remain good friends to this date.

Birch has an uncanny eye and artistic skills for style replication of yesterday's high profile carvers. Cobbs and Dudleys are favorites with collectors, as are decoys by Hudson and Caines. Shorebirds by Verity and Chadwick are also popular. "They can buy from me for about \$500 and get a time-worn stylistic replica, or they can buy the real thing, pay top dollar, and not be sure of its history or where it has been,"

says Birch. He is well aware of deceptive practices by a few and takes time to carve deeply an "R. Birch" signature, a signature that takes creative effort to remove.

He has seen his work, after changing hands from the initial purchaser, being offered for sale at auction or by vendors, described and priced as the original work of yesterday's artisan whose style he replicated. In most cases his name has been carefully removed. In one case, yellowed masking tape was on the bottom of the mis-identified decoy with written history ticket on the tape including the replicated maker and where the bird was used. When he lifted the tape, he found his carved signature.

Birch also tells of area collectors, who after buying a decoy, will find their way to his home, most with an

inkling, to confirm that their newly purchased decoy really is a Hudson or other island maker and that Birch did not make it! "When it is one of my birds, and I confirm it, they leave my shop feeling disappointed," says Birch. For the most part, these are knowledgeable collectors who have made a mistake, and Birch is the messenger. "Upon close examination, we usually find the area where my carved name was removed. Maybe it is a left-handed compliment," says Birch, "but I know that the collector has been hit in the pocketbook and in his pride!"

Reggie is also a highly regarded restorer of old decoys, repairing broken wood and applying paint application to aged original likeness. His results are spectacular! "Some of the decoys by yesteryear's high-profile carvers are in real bad shape," says



Fifteen Cobb Island curlews; 8-foot long grouping, c. 1988.



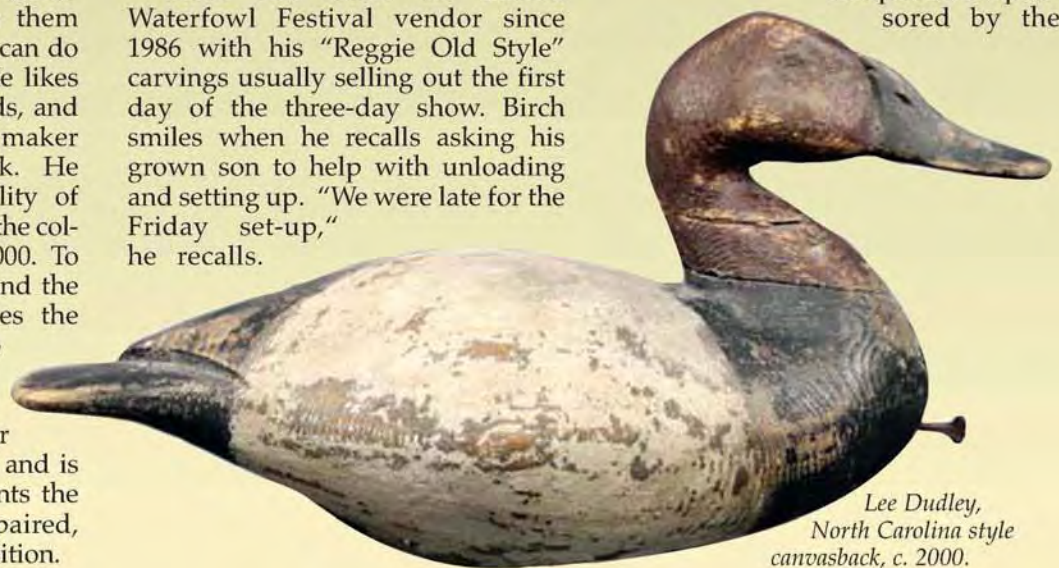
Caines style mallards, c. 2007.

"A crowd of collectors gathered as the boxes were unloaded, and they began picking them up and holding onto them. I started quoting prices and asked my son to collect the money." Birch was aware that his son was listening to the collector's banter about his work. In twenty minutes or so he had sold the entire inventory; and his son, standing there with \$8 or \$9,000 in his hand, told his dad that he had a great appreciation for him and his work! "That made my weekend," said Birch.

Besides the aforementioned ribbons, Birch has received recognition from a variety of waterfowl shows where he has served as a carving competition judge, including the Virginia Beach Show, the "World" competitions sponsored by the

Birch. "They almost qualify as clunkers. But the owner wants them restored, and he knows that I can do it - and I do," says Birch. He likes restorations, handling old birds, and connects to yesterday's maker through the feel of their work. He can also feel the responsibility of working on a decoy for which the collector has just paid \$25 to \$35,000. To Birch, the flow of the wood and the old paint application dictates the repairs to be made to restore to original likeness. However, Birch takes nothing for granted as occasionally the collector has a different result in mind and is specific as to the way he wants the decoy manipulated and repaired, perhaps with unique head position.

Birch has been an Easton Waterfowl Festival vendor since 1986 with his "Reggie Old Style" carvings usually selling out the first day of the three-day show. Birch smiles when he recalls asking his grown son to help with unloading and setting up. "We were late for the Friday set-up," he recalls.



Lee Dudley, North Carolina style canvasback, c. 2000.



Red-breasted merganser hen, Lothrop Holmes style, c. 2004.



Black duck in Shang Wheeler style, hollow-carved with scratch paint, c. 2000.

Ward Museum, and the Chincoteague Easter Show. It is ironic that the Virginia Beach Show is the same show where he as a vendor, could not sell a duck many years earlier. He has taught carving classes for a variety of sponsors, including the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum and the Ward Museum. He has also given carving and painting demonstration/talks, sometimes as many as 20 times a year. His decoys have been displayed at the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum, the Ward Museum, and the Refuge Waterfowl Museum.

For several years, he has served as Chairman of Chincoteague's Easter Decoy Festival and he has served as President of the Chincoteague Carver's and Artist Association. He has also served on the board of the local Ducks Unlimited Chapter and the Chincoteague's Oyster Museum as well as a variety of Chincoteague civic boards. Over the years, many of his decoys have been contributed to a variety of civic and non-profit groups to be auctioned as fund raisers. In the 1990s, the Discovery Channel produced a Chincoteague piece that included Birch carving in his shop. That same film is used to this present date by the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce.

He has been featured in several decoy books, the most recent being Loy Harrell's book, *Decoys - Sixty Living and Outstanding North American Carvers*. He has also been featured in numerous local Eastern Shore newspapers and both local and national periodicals. Birch,

"Reaching" Nathan Cobb Island style brant, c. 2004.



working in his shop, made the cover of one of those "special issue" periodicals that featured unique occupations in Virginia. Birch, who was still hunting about 30 days a year at the time, was also featured in a "Working Birds" article in the Nov/Dec '97 *Sporting Classics Magazine* that featured his decoys along with two other Eastern Shore of Virginia carvers. In that magazine article he comments, "The biggest spread I've used numbered about 250, and every one of them was made by me and a good friend. Hunting with that many hand-made decoys heightens the waterfowling experience, especially when you have carved and painted them yourself."

Birch explains that as an adult his hunting environs had expanded from Accomack County south into Northampton County,

hunting the fabled gunning grounds of Cobb, Hogg, Cedar and Paramore Islands, as well as all the gunning island waters in between. Besides waterfowl, hunting trips also included clapper rail, doves, rabbits and deer, both with gun and bow. At one point in time Birch held the record for the largest Sika deer killed with a bow on Assateague Island - 109 pounds. Birch is also a fisherman, something that he has been doing since childhood. With adulthood came larger boats, the last being a 23-foot Southwester used for over-night fishing trips south to Cape Charles for Cobia and Drum, and, of course, speckled trout. The boat also took him offshore fishing for false albacore and tuna. Other trips took him around the Cape Charles Light and into the Chesapeake Bay waters that surrounded Tangier and Smith Islands, usually pursuing bluefish and rockfish.

Birch, like many current day carvers, now sells on the Internet. He is making "time-worn" decoys and is selling them through modern technology. This serves him well as he has slowed down on production, and with a traveling bug, is spending time in Germany, often traveling to other European countries. He now spends about half his time overseas and the other half at his home in Chincoteague. While overseas, he is still dealing with the same col-

Brant, Ira Hudson style, c. 1998.





Gus Wilson style turned-head black duck, c. 2007.



Large, hollow-carved, Cobb Island style merganser with inserted bill and inleted neck seat, c. 1995.

lectors and dealers that used to stop by his shop. They now communicate and place orders by phone or by email, and with UPS delivery from Europe at less than \$25, it is not a problem. Birch acknowledges that restorations have been impacted as collectors will not risk shipping high value decoys to Europe. Instead, the collector is well aware of his anticipated return dates to Chincoteague, with Birch usually facing a mountain of restoration work upon arrival.

Birch's restorations have been done for auction houses, dealers and collectors. Websites with Birch decoys for sale pile up accolades as to quality of his carving, style and paint. When a high profile carver's decoy offered for sale has been restored by Birch, it is usually noted as a plus. At the time of this writing there were three such decoys on two different websites, two Hudsons and

a Ward with noted Birch restorations. "Paint has been restored & aged by Reggie Birch in the proper Ward Brothers style & has great color and warm patina" was the commentary on a Ward Goose.

When I visited with Birch in his Chincoteague shop this past spring, he was dabbling and swishing wet on wet paint to a Charles Perdue teal hen that would soon be aged and returned to a Midwest collector. He had also applied paint to a recently made large hollow swan that would also soon be aged. The order was from another Midwest collector who had provided a picture of a confidence decoy from long ago and wanted one replicated like it. On the floor was an Ira Hudson original paint canvasback decoy with small chunks of wood glued here and there, perhaps covering severe dog-chew damage, and soon to be carved

back into the flow lines of the decoy and then aged paint applied. I saw that decoy two weeks later at an east coast decoy show, all "original paint," and could not believe it was the same bird.

Birch's favorite carving work is creating an old-style decoy, manipulating the wood to give it an artistic expression. He says that he can do more with shorebirds, as ducks and geese tend to be stiff. Seasoned collectors, many with high profile collections, will include in their display, an "old" Reggie Birch decoy with "punch" or artistic flair, perhaps a preening merganser or a raised-wing shorebird, a decoy acquired over the years as they found their way to Birch's door to have him repair and restore one of their prized possessions. His success in style replication to original likeness of a famous maker is a tribute to his inherent skill. Many of our collections, instead of a Nathan Cobb brant or a Huck Caines mallard, will have a counterfeit cousin in stylized likeness, except for the R. Birch signature carved in the bottom. □



Wood duck, created as a one-of-a-kind woody in the Dudley pattern, c. 2009.

(Editor's note: "Thank you" to Grant McLoughlin, Guyette & Schmidt, Gary Campbell, and Reggie Birch for providing photos for this article. Readers wishing to contact the carver, Reggie Birch, may do so by calling 757-336-5727 or if in Germany, calling 01149-3085757895. You can also contact him by email at rbirch@verizon.net or visit his website at www.reggiebirchdecoys.com. The author of this article, Jim Trimble, can be reached at 703-768-7264 or Potomacduck@cox.net)