

# Duckboat Show & Waterfowl Festival

Article and photographs by Steven Jay Sanford



Grassboats come in many shapes and sizes, but should blend with the saltmarshes.

**E**arly on a Sunday morning last fall, a squintingly brilliant sunshine and an invigorating northwest wind presented a glorious November day on Long Island's Great South Bay. Mere yards above my head, a broad-chested peregrine falcon rowed its way into the stiff breeze. Its presence signaled the vitality of the south shore marshes and beaches as winter approached.

Each fall, throngs of bathers and boaters retreat upland as temperatures drop. Meanwhile, others prepare to enjoy the sights and sounds of the next three months. Today, hundreds of waterfowlers, those who pursue ducks, brant and geese with boats, decoys, dogs and guns, were gathering in celebration of their sport. The Duckboat Show &

Waterfowl Festival was opening for the nineteenth time in as many years.

The Festival began as a duckboat competition in the early 1980s. Members of the South



Built to blend in with the waves, layout boats are designed for hunting diving ducks in the open bay.



Decoy carvers sell their wares and compete for prizes.

Shore Waterfowlers Association, one of Long Island's oldest conservation groups, decided they needed a way to share their thoughts on the many challenges faced by those who hunt ducks on Long Island. The combination of low-growing saltmarshes, ever-changing tides, ice and wind demand specialized craft from which to hunt. The need to carry dozens of decoys, to remain hidden, to be safe and comfortable, inspires creative solutions. Over the years, the event has grown to involve much more than a collection of hunting craft, but the Duckboat Show remains the heart of the Festival. It gives anyone the opportunity to see dozens of fully equipped boats, and to talk with their owners. The boats are displayed on their trailers and not in the water so they may be closely inspected, and so all can gather 'round with some hot coffee, ask questions, and perhaps tell a story or two.

There's plenty to see and do for hunters and for those who may not hunt but are nonetheless intrigued by this slice of Americana. A waterfowlers' sporting clays event features target shooting under actual gunning conditions. Many people bring their retrieving dogs to participate in a little casual competition—the Gunning Buddy Qualification—or simply to watch demonstrations by professional dog handlers. Others enjoy the art of decoys. The regional Great South Bay Decoy Contest offers friendly competition for both real gunning stool and fancier “slick” birds. Vendors display both kinds of decoys for sale. Others offer hunting gear of all kinds, as well as books and artwork.


Almost every young attendee—and a few who are still young at heart—is drawn to the decoy painting class sponsored by Ducks Unlimited. Anyone old enough to hold a paintbrush is shown how to paint a decoy head, and it's theirs to keep and display proudly at home.

This fall, the Twentieth Annual Duckboat Show & Waterfowl Festival was held on Sunday, November 4th at Cedar Beach Marina in Babylon. Hosted by the South Shore Waterfowlers Association, Ducks Unlimited and the Town of Babylon, the show runs from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

There is a large parking area, ample dockspace and a boardwalk over the saltmarsh. Most importantly, you can enjoy tremendous views of Great South Bay and the Cedar Island marshes. Admission is just a dollar, so bring your family and friends along. Bring any old gunning gear you have for the “garage sale,” and your boat if you have one.

If you'd like to shoot clays, don't forget your duck gun and some steel shot. If you're a carver, bring along some decoys. Whichever part of waterfowling suits your interests, the boats, the dogs, the decoys or the bay, you'd be hard pressed to find a better way to spend a day. For more information, call Curt Matzinger at 631-661-0379, John Hazlett at 516-679-5911 or check out their website at <http://ssw.fwsl.com>.

Steve Sanford is Chief of DEC's Bureau of Habitat.

***If you go:*** 

Located just east of Jones Beach, the Cedar Beach Marina is on the north side of the barrier beach between Oak Beach and Gilgo. It is accessible from Ocean Parkway; just look for the signs with the flying ducks.

Be aware if you are pulling a trailer you may not use the Parkway system except for south of the Sunrise Highway (State Rt 27).