

THE DECOY

Early History

Berkeley New Decoy was completed in 1843. The Old Decoy which is about $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles to the westward was threatened by the construction of the Sharpness-Gloucester canal, which passes within 100 yards of the old pool. The New Decoy was laid out to take its place, but it was found that, once completed, the canal had little disturbing influence on the Old Decoy which continued to be worked successfully.

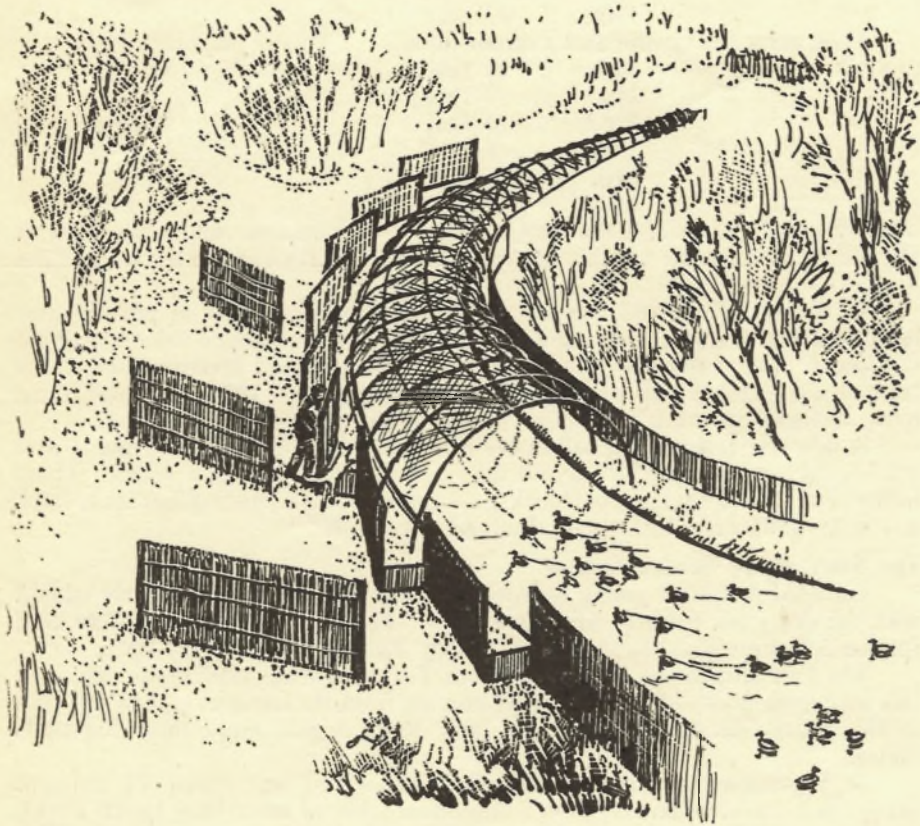
The New Pool was dug a little smaller than the Old and it is the smallest of the nine decoys still being worked in Britain. The open water is 0.86 of an acre. As in the Old Decoy, the design was of the "skate's egg" type with two pipes at each end of the pool, curving together at their points. All four pipes were originally dug, but only two of them were kept up (one at each end). In subsequent cleaning out of the pool, mud had been heaped at the mouths of the other two pipes, blanking them off.

Accurate records of the catches in this decoy have been kept since the beginning and have lately been plotted as graphs. They are of limited scientific value because of the unknown factors such as relative skill of the different decoymen, cutting of the trees in the decoy wood, number of tame ducks reared, etc.; but they are of considerable historical interest. The best annual take in this decoy was in the year 1853-54 when 1,410 birds were caught of which more than 1,300 were Mallards. On January 4th, 1854, we are told that 238 Mallard, 7 Wigeon, 1 Pheasant, 1 Hawk, 1 Moorhen and 1 Blackbird were caught in one pipe at the same time. This probably took place in a frost when the water in the pipe had been kept open by icebreaking.

The catch figures were over 1,000 again in 1861-62 and also in 1899-1900. After that they fell off rapidly until the decoy became disused in 1929. The pipes were reconditioned in 1937 but the decoy was scarcely used and a considerable amount of repair was again necessary in 1946 before it could be put into working order to be used by the Trust for ringing.

The pipes in both Berkeley decoys are exceptionally large and the hoops are made of metal. The nets on the two pipes in the New Decoy were reasonably sound and repairs were made. Some of the old reed screens still stood (a few ivy-covered), but many new ones had to be built and straw was used instead of reed. Two observation huts were built on the banks of the pool. This work was not completed until well into the autumn of 1946 and it was then too late to build up a proper "lead" of wild ducks, which can only be achieved with a nucleus of tame call-ducks and complete peace and quiet from the end of July onwards.

For those who are unfamiliar with the method of operating the decoy it may be helpful to explain that once the ducks have been encouraged to come and rest in the wooded shelter of the pool they have to be enticed into one or other of the curved ditches or "pipes" which lead away from it. These are covered with a tunnel of netting stretched on hoops and flanked with overlapping screens of reed or straw, cunningly arranged so that the decoyman is invisible to the birds on the pond but can, at the critical moment, appear behind the ducks in the pipe, between them and the pond, and barring their retreat. They have no alternative but to fly yet farther up the pipe, round its bend and on into the *cul-de-sac* at its end. To entice the ducks into the pipe food may be used, tame decoy ducks may be trained to give them confidence, open water may be offered to them in frost, but the most usual and at the same time the most extraordinary method is by using a small dog. The ducks will mob the dog, for it cannot catch them so long as they remain in the water. They do this in much the same way as small birds will mob an owl; and, if the dog appears always to be running away, their bravado increases. In this way they can be lured into the pipe, whereupon the decoyman runs back to the "showplace" and drives the birds forward into the detachable tunnel net, from which they are extricated, ringed and released.



The First Season

No dog had been trained during the season 1946-47 for the New Decoy and since there was no lead of ducks the catch was disappointingly small. Three Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*) were caught by moonlight feeding in the north pipe on the day the Trust was formed. (One of them was subsequently shot near Cheltenham.) Two Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*) were

surprised feeding in the small end of the west pipe and in April a pair of Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) appeared on the pool. They were carefully watched and eventually swam into the west pipe. When they had been driven down the female escaped through a hole in the net, but the drake was duly ringed, bringing the season's total to six birds.

The way in which a lead of birds may accumulate is rather strikingly shown by the Teal which spent the day on the New Pool during November. On 9th November the work of repairing the decoy finally ceased, and on 10th one drake Teal spent the day on the pool. Thereafter the numbers increased as follows :—

10th	..	1 Teal (drake)
11th	..	2 Teal (drakes)
12th	..	3 Teal (drakes)
13th	..	5 Teal (drakes)
14th	..	5 Teal (drakes)
15th	..	9 Teal (8 drakes)
16th	..	11 Teal (8 drakes)
17th	..	20 Teal (14 drakes)
18th	..	27 Teal
19th	..	27 Teal

Then came heavy rain and a minor flood.

20th	..	10 Teal
21st	..	9 Teal
22nd	..	20 Teal
23rd	..	8 Teal
24th	..	6 Teal
25th	..	None.

During the long frost the pool was frozen over and no wild birds came at all, and by the time the weather broke most of the ducks had left the neighbourhood.

In the summer a third pipe—the South—was dug out and entirely new hoops, nets and screens were put up. Some work was begun on opening up the fourth pipe at the east side of the pond which should be completed in the coming summer and will be known as the House pipe. This is the traditional name in most decoys for the pipe nearest to the decoyman's cottage.

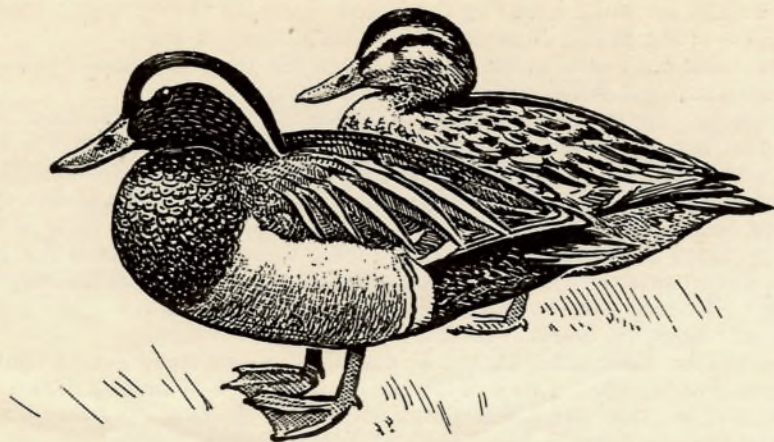
A dog was trained and call-ducks which had been presented by the Bristol Zoological Society were tamed and their young reared as decoy ducks. These birds were hybrid Mallard × Black East Indian so as to distinguish them from any wild Mallards which might frequent the pool.

The Start of the Second Season

On 23rd August a young female Garganey and a drake Teal were caught with the dog—our Curator Miss Overend's "Blondel." These birds were kept for the collection and the Garganey quickly became exceptionally tame.

The first birds to be ringed were four Teal caught on 17th September. At this time large flocks of Mallards were coming from the stubbles nightly to drink in the decoy, but never stayed by day. Some nights more than 200 birds arrived.

In September the Director visited Holland and was shown 22 different decoys in a week, several of them with annual takes of more than 10,000 ducks. In one, 40,000 Teal were said to have been caught in the season 1938-39. This insight into the finer points of decoying caused a change in the catching methods in the New Decoy soon after his return. Hitherto it had not been considered right to catch for less than a dozen or so birds and the only two catches made were regarded as mistakes undertaken in special circumstances. Now, however, it was decided to try to catch every duck which came to the pool—even one at a time.



The results were more satisfactory and by the end of October over 40 birds had been caught of six species—Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*), Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*), Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Pintail (*Anas acuta acuta*) and Garganey (*Anas querquedula*). On 22nd December a pair of Wigeon were caught which brought the total to 101.

It was still difficult to persuade the ducks to stay in the decoy by day, and there is no doubt that the extreme proximity of the farmyard with the tractors and lorries of the War Agricultural Executive Committee starting up and operating within less than 100 yards of the pool itself had much to do with this failure.

Results

The best catch was made by moonlight on 18th December when ten Mallards were run in the West pipe, and two in the South (although the drake escaped before being ringed). On 5th December nine Mallards were caught at daybreak, enticed in with the dog.

By the New Year, 106 catches had been made. But six of these were recaptures of birds which had been previously caught and ringed, and four had been kept alive for the waterfowl collection. Ninety-six ducks had therefore been ringed and six more in the previous season. Of these 102 birds nine have so far been reported.

These results are as follows :—

- 925951 Mallard ♀ ringed 10.11.46. Shot Boddington, near Cheltenham, 29.1.47.
- 925968 Mallard ♂ ringed 5.12.47. Shot Kerne Bridge, Hereford, 9.12.47.
- 926002 Mallard ♀ ringed 26.10.47. Shot Kings Stanley, Gloucester, "end November."
- 926004 Mallard ♀ ringed 26.10.47. Caught in Old Decoy 29.10.47 and released.
- 926014 Mallard ♂ ringed 20.12.47. Shot Longney, Glos., before 14.1.48.
- 904219 Shoveler Immature ♂ ringed 12.10.47. Shot Wexford Slob, Ireland, 3.12.47.
- 904221 Shoveler Immature ♂ ringed 12.10.47. Shot Josselin, Morbihan, France, 9.12.47.
- 904176 Teal Adult ♀ ringed 23.9.47. Shot near Whittlesey, Cambs, 17.1.48.
- 904222 Teal, Immature ♂ ringed 12.10.47. Shot at Framilode, Glos., "December."

The rings are those issued by the British Trust for Ornithology ; they bear the address of the British Museum of Natural History, London.

The Trust has joined in the overall scheme for ringing wildfowl sponsored by the International Wildfowl Enquiry Committee.

Although the current season's catch has not been outstanding,¹ it has shown that the decoy has great possibilities. During the summer it is hoped to rear a large number of call-ducks from pure Mallard stock which will replace the present half-bred Black East Indians. Experience in Holland has shown that wild ducks can be persuaded to remain on ponds even quite close to farm-yards, provided a predominant number appear to be at ease. In a few weeks without disturbance the wild become accustomed to strange noises, learning from the tame. In turn they spread confidence among newcomers. At least 200 hand-reared birds are essential for the first nucleus.

In addition the fourth pipe will be completed and a small hut on stilts will be built to give Members a view of the pond without risk of causing disturbance.

Some of the trees are still too high to give the ducks a good access to the pool, and the low cover is being thickened by extensive planting of evergreen shrubs. It is hoped that the catch figures will once more exceed 1,000 in the season of 1948-49.

¹ The total catch from August, 1947, to April, 1948, was 133 ducks.

