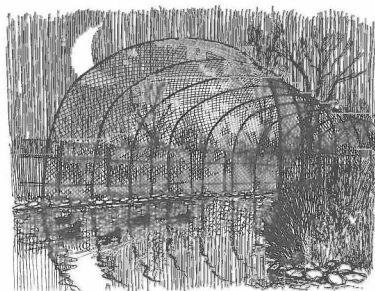


# Duck decoys in The Netherlands

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*The Netherlands still has most of the duck decoys of the world. Decoys were a Dutch invention, and have been known there for over 600 years. This contribution gives a concise, up-to-date account of Dutch decoys, as well as a survey of the numbers of ducks caught over the past five seasons.*

*Keywords: Duck Decoy, The Netherlands, Mallard, Wild Duck, Catching, Ringing*

Under hunting-law, 118 duck decoys are registered currently by the Netherlands government. A duck decoy is defined as a device to catch wild duck species and, as such, is acknowledged and protected by law. Since 1984, no new duck decoys can be registered.

## The right of duck decoy

The Right of duck decoy is divided into two parts, the Decoy-Right and the Delimitation-Right. The Decoy-Right is a collateral right to catch ducks in a particular place with a catching-device and imposes certain conditions on the decoy and the decoyman.

The Delimitation-Right is a collateral injunction by which the surrounding grounds are encumbered with the obligation that all persons must abstain from actions that may disturb ducks in the decoy (for instance, hunting with a gun is forbidden). These circular "silence-areas", marked by signs, vary in size from 7 to 712 ha, with an average of 293 ha per decoy; for the whole of The Netherlands, they amount to a total of about 30,000 ha.

## The duck decoy and its functioning

The principle of a duck decoy is simple, a pool of water is surrounded by quiet woodland in a wetland-rich area. Size varies from 0.5 ha to 35 ha, but is on average 2 ha; at the four corners of the rectangular decoy-pool (0.75 ha), catching-pipes are constructed (see **Figure 1**).

The decoyman's tasks consist of catching the ducks (for consumption and for wildfowl research) and the management of the catching device, the decoy-pool, wood-

land, nesting-baskets, the care of the call ducks, the decoy-dog and so on. Ducks are caught by enticement in a unique cooperative effort of the tame resident call ducks, the dog and the decoyman (see, for instance, Kear 1993).

## Origin, numbers and distribution

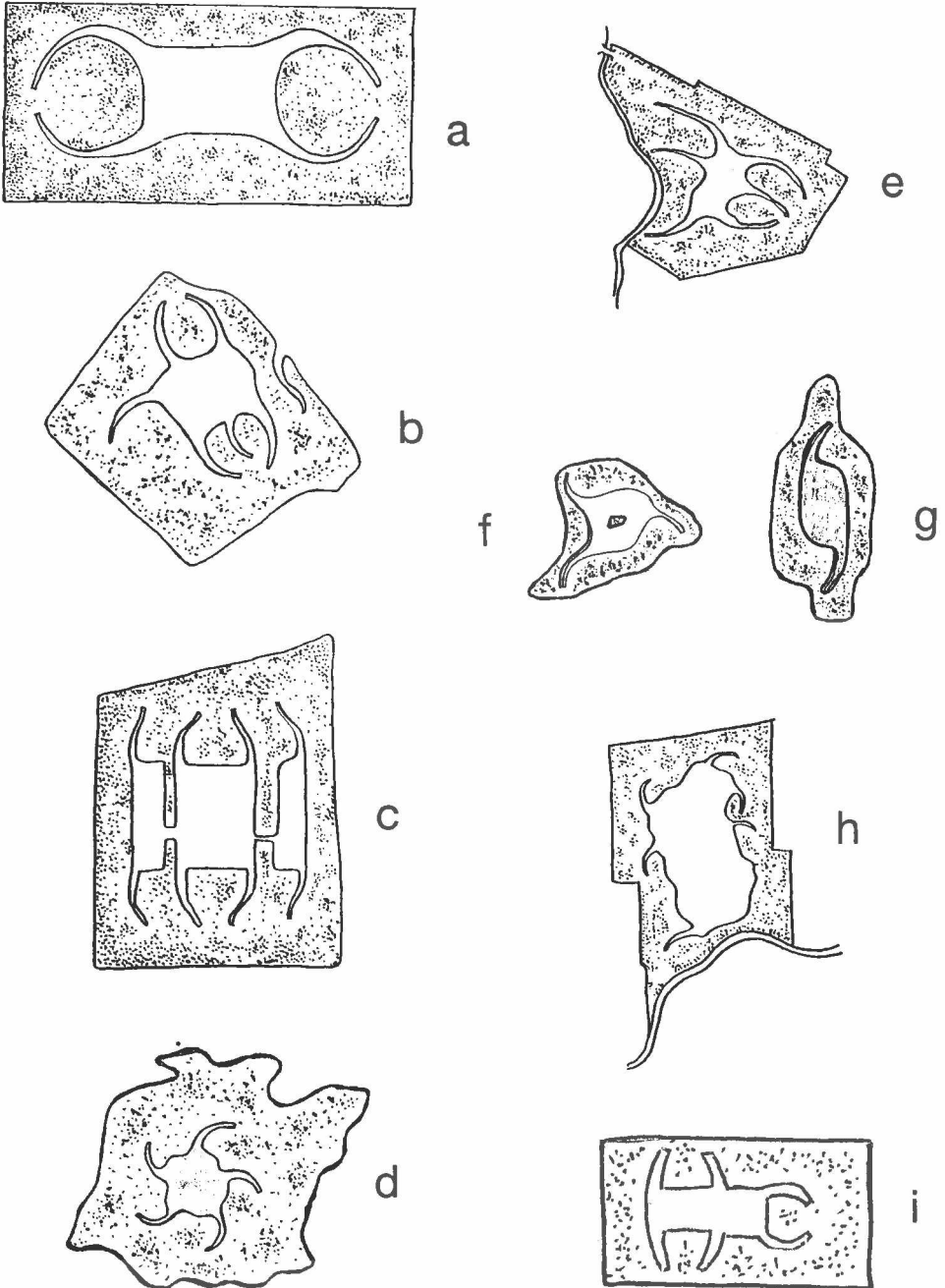
Decoys originated from independent "catching-pipes" that were constructed along rivers and ditches. Later, creeks were dammed and, subsequently, the much more efficient decoy-pools were dug and discrete duck decoys were created.

Based on regional research, it is supposed that there were formerly some 1000 decoys. At the time of the first registration in 1813, there were 264 and since 1979 the number has remained constant at 118. Thus about 90% of Dutch decoys have disappeared.

Their distribution is linked with the existence of quiet wetlands that are rich in wildfowl (and where there is a market for the consumption of dead ducks). Geographically, this implies that most of decoys are situated along rivers and are in the north of the country (see the map of The Netherlands in **Figure 2**).

## Ownership, use and management

At the moment some 60% of decoys are owned by nature conservancy organizations that have purchased them for their cultural and historic value, as well as for the importance of their natural history and landscape, and the great value to wildfowl of their legally protected surroundings. For the purpose of recreation and education, tens of decoys are, in a limited way, open to



**Figure 1. Some examples of duck decoys in The Netherlands.** a. Basic duck decoy (the "skate's-egg" model). b. River-decoy in dike-burst with one external pipe. c. Overijssel-duck decoy in peat exploitation area, with several decoy-pools. d. Dune-decoy at the coast in the province of Zeeland. e. Six-pipe-decoy in the province of South Holland. f. Small field-decoy in Overijssel. g. Polder-decoy in a peat-meadow area. h. Six-pipe-radial-decoy in a river area. i. Frisian duck decoy.



Figure 2. Distribution map of duck decoys in The Netherlands.

the public, and a small number of these have been specifically designated for that sole purpose.

Private duck decoys are being conserved mainly for tradition and are, for the greater part, in use only as a secondary profession. Their distribution per province and ownership are indicated in **Table 1**.

### The variety of decoys

Decoys vary greatly in appearance, type and characteristic depending on the way that they evolved, their use, situation and catching-area, period of catching, composition of the catch, construction of the decoy and the number of pipes (Van de Heide & Lebret 1944, Karelse 1983). They may be land-decoys, sea-decoys, river-decoys, mudflat-decoys and so on. According to the period of catching the decoys are sum-

Table 1. Distribution and ownership of duck decoys in The Netherlands.

Province	n	Private	Nature Protection Organisation			
			Vogel-Bescherming	Regional Organisation	Natuur-Monumenten	State Forestry Service
Groningen	2	1	-	1	-	-
Friesland	28	14	-	8	2	4
Overijssel	14	4	-	-	4	6
Gelderland	24	13	-	1	-	10
Utrecht	3	-	-	-	1	2
Noord-Holland	13	2	1	4	4	2
Zuid-Holland	17	9	-	6	2	-
Zeeland	4	2	-	1	-	1
Noord-Brabant	13	4	1	1	1	6
Total	118	49	2	22	14	31
%	100	41.5	1.5	19	12	26

Source Eendenkooi Onderzoek - J.J.H.G.D. Karelse - April 1994

Vogelbescherming = The Society for the Protection of Birds in The Netherlands

Natuurmonumenten = The Society for the Preservation of Nature in The Netherlands

mer or winter-decoys, according to the duck species caught they may be wigeon-decoys, non-mallard-decoys, etc (catching Pintail *Anas acuta*, Shoveler *Anas clypeata*, Gadwall *Anas strepera*, Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Teal *Anas crecca* and such but not Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*). Sometimes there are several pools in a single decoy, with irregular forms and, formerly, there were also pipes separate from the main decoy - so-called external pipes - (see reconstruction in **Figure 3**).

Differences in construction are usually regionally recognizable, among other things because of differences in origin, landscape and natural circumstances. This has lead to a variety of types such as the province of Holland type, the Frisian type and the province of Overijssel type. Some examples are given in **Figure 3**.

### Numbers of duck caught

The catching-season and the type of duck that may be caught are limited by the Game Act. Decoying activities are nowadays executed only by private persons who either own a decoy themselves or lease one from a nature conservancy organization. Although the decoy as such is hardly profitable, the legally regulated permission to operate has been an important reason for the preservation of the trade.

The removal of domestics of Mallard-types is done routinely; this is important for the preservation of the pure wild species. The harvest of wild Mallard comes mainly from a natural increase,

within the decoy itself, which is stimulated by the placing of hundreds of nesting-baskets for the female birds.

Research and estimates made in 1948 (Brouwer 1974) showed that about 200.000 ducks were caught in duck decoys, of which 70% were Mallard (Eygenraam 1954). In 1952, a total of 300.000 was reported of which 75% were Mallard (Lebret 1952). The Dutch Decoy Association has collected information on catches over the past five years, and shown a reduction of 75-80%, partly caused by a halving of the number of operating duck decoys.

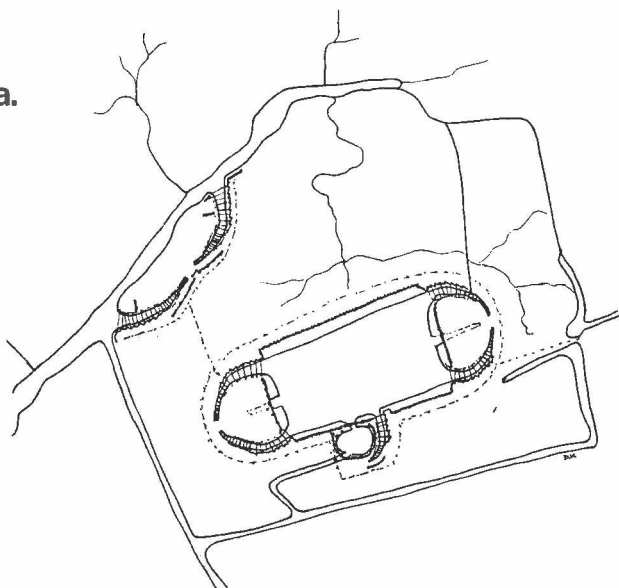
There can be no question of decoys damaging duck populations. As is obvious from **Table 2**, only small numbers of ducks are caught in decoys and, in comparison with hunting by guns, these numbers are tiny. This is confirmed by comparisons made during the 1991-92 season; the catch in decoys, expressed as a percentage of the total number of birds taken were Mallard 5%, Wigeon 19%, Teal 10% and Pintail 4% (Karelse & Wertenbroek 1992).

Nowadays, commercial catching takes place in only 45% of existing decoys, and they take a smaller catch than formerly. On average, the catch per operating decoy is 1000 ducks. It is hardly profitable, any longer, to catch ducks on a commercial base.

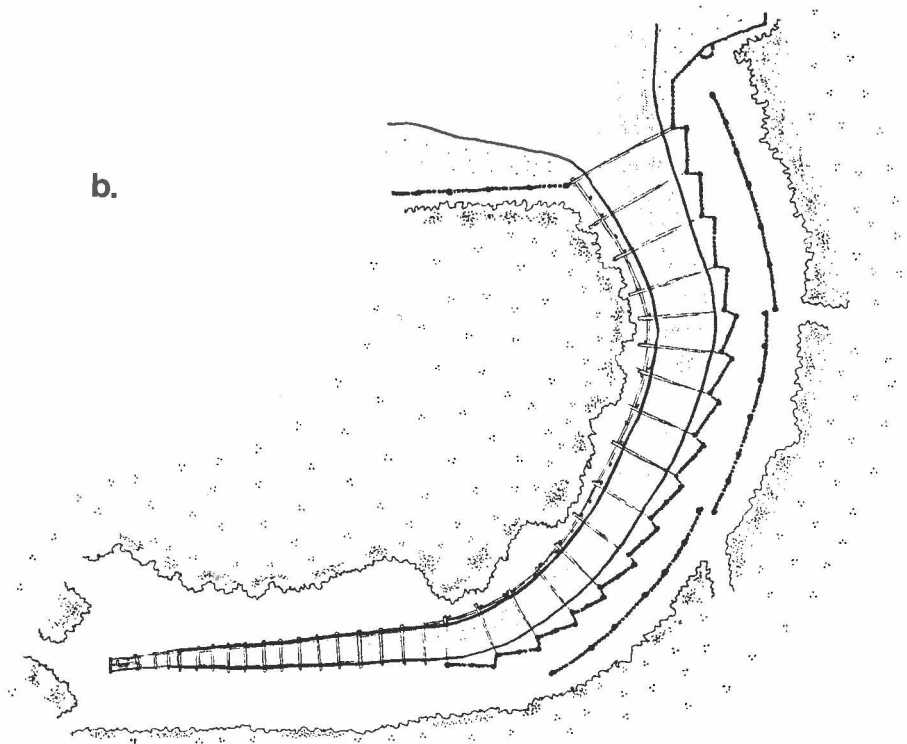
**Figure 4** shows catch numbers in recent years and, from this Figure, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The total shows a downward trend
- Annual catches vary
- The Mallard, at an average of 85.5%, is the most important species

a.



b.



**Figure 3.** Some examples of duck decoys and catching-pipe layout. a. Northern duck decoy (sea-decoy) with Frisian pipe. b. Southern duck decoy (river-decoy with two pipes) with Brabantine pipe.

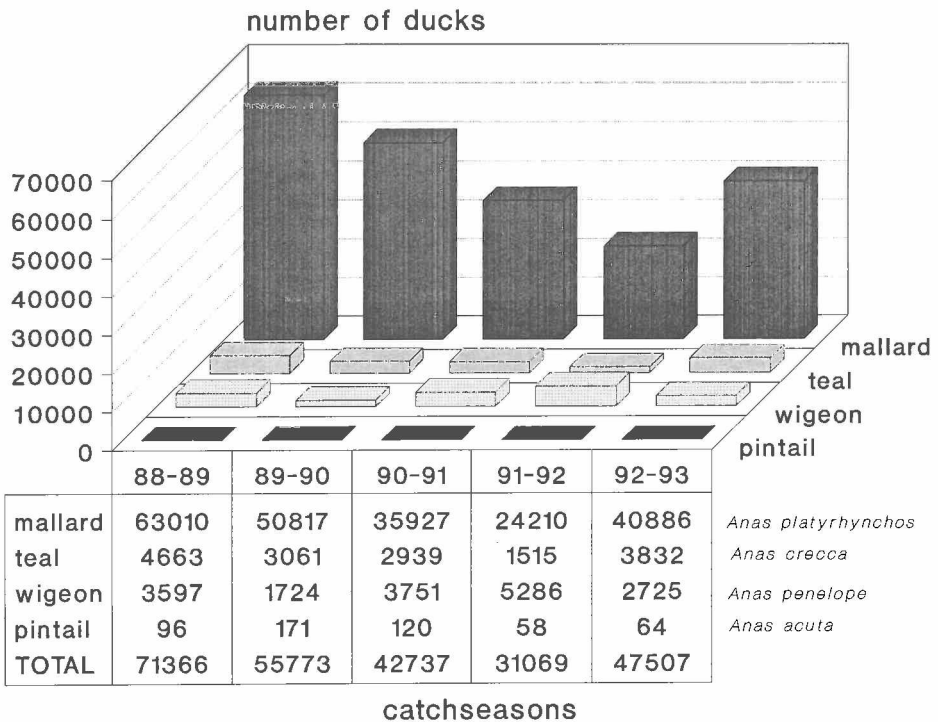
**Table 2. A comparison between the numbers of wintering ducks: numbers shot and numbers caught in decoys in The Netherlands**

	Wintering ducks <sup>1</sup> <i>n</i>	Shot <sup>2</sup> <i>n</i>	Caught <sup>3</sup> <i>n</i>	The annual catches as % of the average no. of wintering ducks
Mallard	583000-624000	ca.500000	42970	7.4-6.9
Wigeon	266000-547000	ca.45000	3416	1.3-0.6
Teal	22400-51100	12000-20000	3202	14.3-6.3
Pintail	13300-17900	1000-4000	101	0.75-0.56
Pochard	86500-96600	5000-11000	-	-
Tufted Duck	162000-205000	7000-18000	-	-
Gadwall	1200-3600	2000-3000	-	-
Scaup	70600-129100	800-1500	-	-
Shoveler	3000-7800	6000-8000	-	-

<sup>1</sup>The average numbers of wintering duck refer to numbers in both mild and severe winters in January (Bink *et al.* 1994).

<sup>2</sup>The numbers shot refer to the full hunting season and are only to a limited degree comparable with the numbers for January. These figures are based on extrapolations of hunting figures for The Netherlands over the period 1979-92 (Bink *et al.* 1994).

<sup>3</sup>The catching figures refer to the complete catching season and are again to a limited degree comparable with the numbers for January. These figures are based on an average for Dutch decoys in the period 1988-93.



**Figure 4. Numbers of ducks caught in duck decoys in The Netherlands (1988-93).** Source: Nederlandse Kooikersvereniging, J.J.H.G.D Karelse, April 1994.

- Hardly any Pintail are caught (average 0.2%)
- Catches of Wigeon comprise on average 8%, and Teal 6% of the total.

### The use of decoys for duck ringing

In the past, duck decoys were used extensively for ringing. As early as 1911, the first duck was ringed in a Dutch decoy. Mainly because of the cost, ringing of wild duck practically ceased. In the meantime, however, it has been realised how valuable decoys are for research and, last year, the "Vereniging Natuurmonumenten" (the Dutch Society for Nature Conservancy) started ringing in four decoys. Regionally, provincial nature conservancy organizations had been active for some time, and now, ten decoys are involved in ringing. They ring only the non-Mallards.

### Conclusions

Duck decoys are precious and unique; they are irreplaceable cultural, historical and scientific landscape features. From an international point of view, The Netherlands has a responsibility for their preservation. The same is true in countries such as Great Britain, Germany and Belgium, where the Dutch had an important share in the development of decoys.

The conservation of duck decoys, with their associated catching activity, is of great importance for the preservation of refuge areas, especially for wildfowl, and on account of their significance as ringing centres. They are no threat to duck populations, on the contrary, their use is valuable in wildfowl research. Duck decoys can be better used internationally for migration studies. The decoy operators alone have the knowledge and the ability to catch birds, and to ring and release them unharmed.

*My thanks to the Dutch Decoy Association for the supply of statistics, and to Mick and Dirk Zuidema for the translation of my text into English.*

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