

DECOYS CAN GIVE YOU THE EDGE

Decoys can be an invaluable aid to the wildfowler. CLIVE ELLISTON gives some tips on how to make the most of them.





DECOYS ARE A useful asset in the wildfowler's armoury. They may not always bring ducks sailing in to land confidently in your pattern, but if they bring them close enough for a shot or two then I reckon they've done the job required of them.

The choice of decoy, in both material and design, is now far greater than it ever was. Both ducks and geese are available as floaters, silhouettes and shells, as well as the traditional full-bodied variety. They're made from an assortment of lightweight materials such as plastic and foam and are available from a variety of sources. You may not find a great choice in a traditional gun shop, but nowadays there are several specialist UK retailers of wildfowling gear offering choices that fowlers could only dream of a few years back.

Decoys are most often used when tide-fighting, but I'm sure wildfowlers could make better use of them by dropping a couple in a creek at morning flight, or perhaps placing half-a-dozen in a splash for an evening flight. Unless decoys have been over-used in an area, and made the birds decoy-shy, then their use can only improve one's chances, and surely any tactics that can give us an edge over our quarry must be worth a try?

When setting out decoys we need to try and make them look as real as possible – don't put out 40 decoys in an area where you'd only expect to see half-a-dozen ducks. Likewise, if you're shooting over a large expanse of open water, two or three birds would look lost. Realistic and believable are the keywords; whatever layout you choose must look natural.

Your decoys must also be in range! It's all too easy when tide-fighting to set your decoys out as the tide makes, only to find that at the top of the tide, just as birds are fighting and looking for somewhere to land, you've been pushed out of range by the tide – yes, I speak from experience!

Setting-out decoys

Decoys can be strung and weighted singly or "gang-rigged" in strings, using a motherline system – motherline clips are now available from the specialist wildfowling retailers to facilitate the use of this system. The clips can also be sourced from across the Atlantic, via the internet.

Both systems have their good and bad points. Individually strung decoys can be placed more precisely, but setting-out and retrieving them can take longer and be more of an effort than using the motherline system, especially in the dark. Stringing six to ten decoys in a row from one large weight can be a quicker and easier method to use but may not look quite so realistic.

Often, when shooting the tide, I'll compromise by setting out two or three motherlines in arcs and filling in the gaps with a couple of well-placed singly-strung birds to make the pattern look less regimented. With the motherline system you can also, if your lines are long enough, bring the free ends back to dry land, thus making the retrieval of your decoys a much easier task. Of course retrieving decoys is one of the nuisance factors when using them, especially in deep water or over soft mud.

When tide-fighting, decoys can be set as the tide floods and retrieved on the ebb; but on my usual 'fowling grounds the tidal regime is five hours up and seven down. This can mean a long wait before retrieval is possible. Being a lazy 'fowler I've always trained my dogs to retrieve decoys, which is a useful skill for them to have but a problem when decoys are brought to hand rather than shot birds!

I can also think of one instance when a fellow 'fowler's dog got tangled in decoy lines and had to be rescued – a traumatic experience for the dog and a cold wet one for the 'fowler!

Caption

Decoy retriever

Recently I've begun using a homemade decoy retriever. This was simple to make and consists of a three metre extending fibreglass landing-net handle equipped with a double hook at the business-end to snag the decoy lines with. The double hook was made from an old landing net frame so it can be unscrewed for easy transportation. When used in conjunction with chest waders this extends my reach considerably so I can pretty much retrieve decoys at any state of the tide.

I reckon this will also prove useful when retrieving decoys from a boat, potentially saving a significant amount of time and effort manoeuvring around trying to grab decoys.

This new tool also works well at low tide; a couple of decoys in a small creek can prove an asset but often the mud is too soft to get close enough to the creek - now I have the answer. It was cheap to make, is easily portable and works a treat.

I have also made winders to hold a couple of motherlines - these are simply a giant version of the crab-line winders that we all used as kids. The neat trick with my winders is that I made them half a metre in length, I can therefore set my motherlines and as I unwind them I know exactly how far out they are if I bring the lines back to the shore where they can be secured with pegs.

Caption

Calls and concealment

Calls, when used in tandem with a suitable decoy spread, can really enhance the effectiveness of your set-up. If you're not too sure of your calling ability then only call if the ducks are bypassing your rig or looking to settle out of range, that way you've nothing to lose, but you may just turn them back over your decoys.

Finally, good concealment, whether it's natural cover or an artificial hide, is vital. Nothing will make ducks flare away from your decoy spread quicker than movement, and that goes for your dog as well as you!

Just to summarise - set your decoys out in a realistic fashion to suit the situation and conditions. Always carry at least a couple of decoys - placed in a creek or small splash they may just put a bird in the bag on an otherwise blank day; and work out easy ways of retrieving your decoys so you can move location, or pack-up, as and when you want. Lastly, but vitally important, keeping still and well concealed could double or treble your chances. Enjoy your decoying!

Clive Elliston is honorary secretary of Langstone Wildfowlers. You can find out more about the club at its website www.ladwaca.com

