



Decoy Tactics

Decoying Basics:

Through scores of seasons, many decoying theories and systems have been developed. Some emerged more successful than others and became the old standbys. But sometimes one will work, another time it may not. You have to match your decoying to the place you hunt, the way you hunt, and the birds you hunt to get them to come hunting you. The Science of decoying waterfowl consists of decoy location, pattern, type, number, and placement.

Scouting Location:

Preparation is the key to successful waterfowling. For every hour spent hunting, an hour should be spent scouting to find where ducks and geese feed, rest, loaf, and seek refuge and what their flight patterns are between these areas. When doing your preliminary scouting before a hunt, take notice of what direction ducks are flying into the marsh to roost. Ducks will usually fly out of a marsh in the same direction from which they arrived. Geese will return to the place where they fed last. If they have not depleted the food source. This will help you determine where to place your decoys and blind.

Location of decoys:

Location of the decoy spread is critical for several reasons. The basic rule is to keep the sun, wind, and right amount of cover at your back. The spread must be close enough to the blind that ducks or geese are not prone to landing out of shotgun range. Decoys should not have any obstructions. You want the flocks to see your spread. Decoyed waterfowl will invariably try to land into the wind, so you can usually predict their angle of approach. Decoys should be located so ducks attempt to land just as they get past the shooters, which sets up the best shot—when birds are closest and flying slowest. As most puddlers are wary of shoreline, in circling into decoys, and especially will avoid timber you will have more success placing your blind and your decoys spread where ducks don't have to circle over shore or woods, to light within range- a point, or an out-circling bend are ideal, therefore. Ideally, the decoys should be set so that you are between the decoying bird and the sun. This hinders the waterfowl's sight defenses while helping you shoot better, and also makes it easier to identify waterfowl species and sex.

Pattern of Decoys:

The pattern of your decoy set is also vital in attracting birds and luring them to where you want them to land. Most patterns have an opening or pocket facing downwind where the decoying birds should land. These patterns are often described as C, U, V, and J patterns, after their shape as seen from above. The opening or pocket should be well within shotgun range and encourage the most ideal angle of approach. There should be no decoys downwind of the opening because waterfowl are sometimes reluctant to make a low landing approach over sitting birds. The outside edge of the spread should also be within range, so that ducks that opt to land there are legitimate targets.

TIP: use a range finder to set the outside edge of the spread to 35 yards.

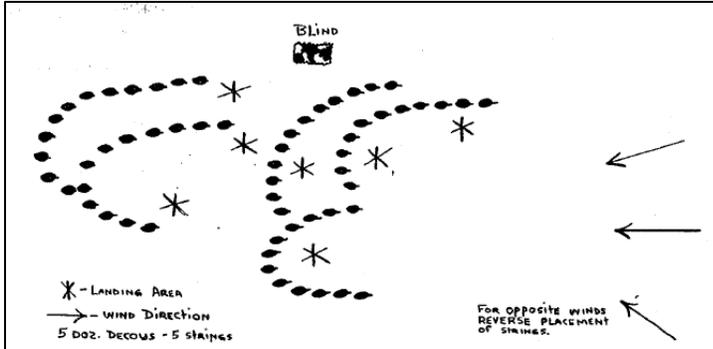


Figure 1. Five dozen decoys for cross wind. If hunting mixed species, puddlers should be in rear, downwind, divers upwind.

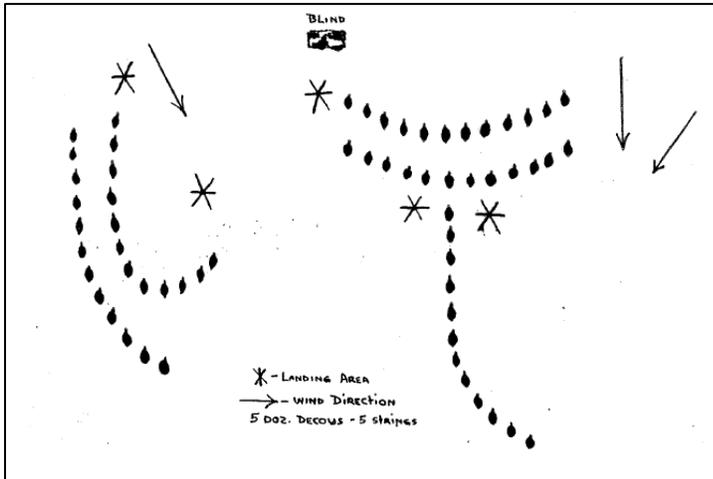


Figure 2. Five dozen decoys, puddlers to the left, divers to the right. Good for mixed species.

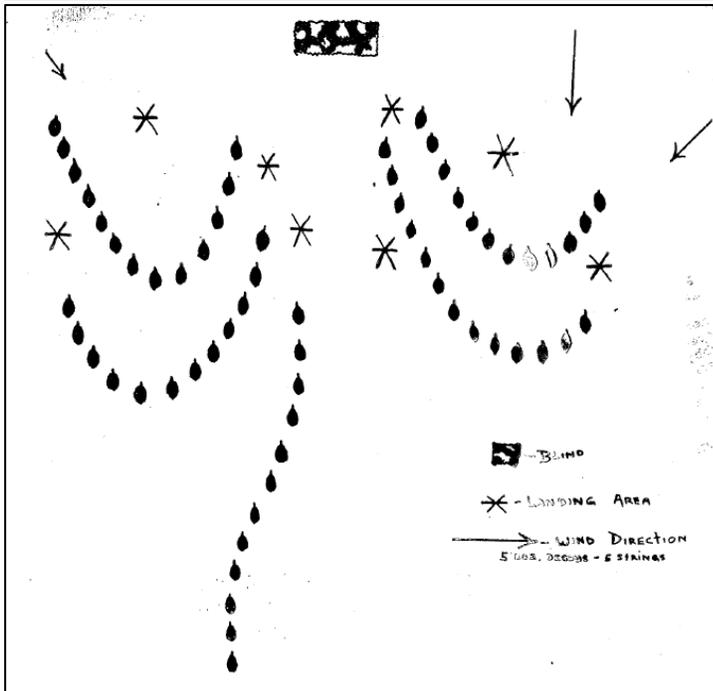


Figure 3. Four dozen rigged decoys, with one dozen teaser string to entice ducks, this being very effective at times. Total set up is five dozen decoys. This works well on all species, especially at the beginning of the season.



Number of Decoys:

In most waterfowling, the amount of waterfowl you will attract is proportional to the amount of decoys you have. As waterfowl get more and more wise to the ways of hunters, it takes more and more decoys to convince them it's safe to land. Especially in the late season. The big-rig rule doesn't apply in all cases however. Small openings in flooded timber or marshes (early season) need few decoys; small bunches look more natural. Hunting the wary black duck, you may have more success using two or three decoys than using more.

Type of Decoys:

The size, shape and color of the decoys you use can affect success. Try to use decoys matching the same species you're hunting. Always use puddle duck decoys for puddle ducks and divers for divers. If you're not sure about the species you'll be hunting, go by this rule: Select puddle duck decoys if you hunt marshes, timber and potholes. Diver duck decoys if you are hunting big water. The oversized decoys available today are very effective in fooling waterfowl because the birds can see the decoys at a greater distance. Waterfowl have very poor depth perception and size of the decoys do not flare an incoming flock. Feel free to mix decoys of different sizes, but don't have extreme size differences in the decoys. You want the spread to look natural as possible.

TIP: Decoys should be the most detailed, realistic contours and paint scheme to get the best results.

Placement of Decoys:

The way you set decoys is important in several ways. Most decoys spreads work best if decoys are set in groups of three to five resembling family units. Don't set the too closely or let them touch; this simulates an alarmed flock ready to take flight. Make sure no decoys are tipped and showing their undersides or anchor strings. If you use decoys representing different species, keep all of the same species together. Always set the most realistic-looking decoys on the downwind side of the spread, as these decoys will be eyed most carefully as bird's approach from the direction. When calling, always keep at least one hen decoys close to your blind (6 to 10 ft.). Sometimes waterfowl can pinpoint the sound, and they may spook if they don't see a decoy there. If your decoys are in front or beside a point of land, which is the best of all locations, put another group in the lee (calm) side, fairly close together. These "sleepers," peacefully at rest, seem to add the final, attractive, confidence-begetting touch, and the wariest flights wheel in over them.

Anchors and Rigging:

They make many types of effective decoy anchors and it's up to personal preference on the style. The best anchor line for decoys is strong, dark colored specially made decoy line. Do not use light colored cord, as this can be quite visible to descending waterfowl. Ideally, each decoy should be equipped with just enough line to reach bottom on the deepest waters you hunt. When you hunt shallower areas, wrap surplus line around the decoys keel and tie it off.

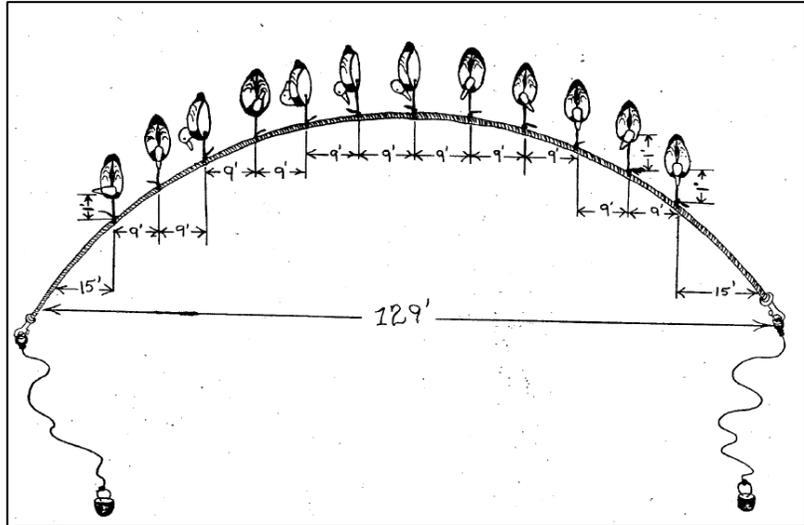


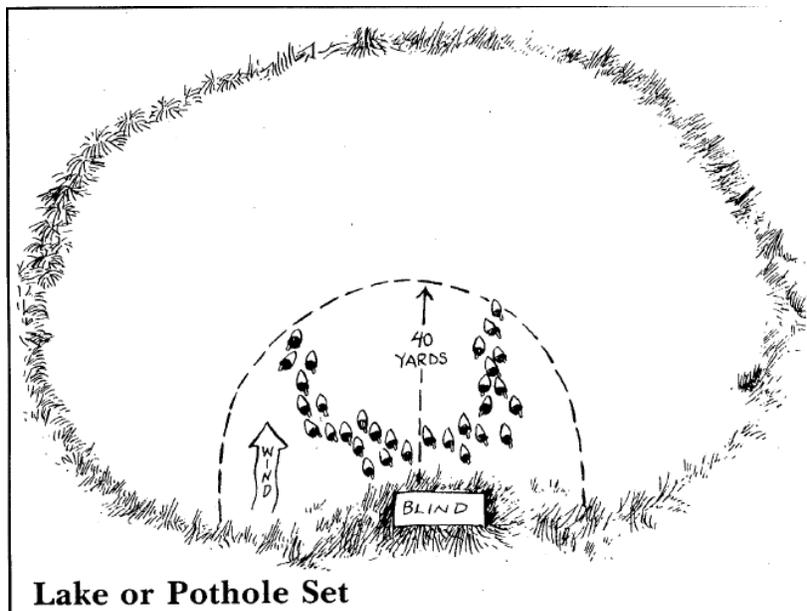
Figure 4. A dozen decoys rigged together to one main line.

You can also rig your decoys together by tying decoys together to the same main line. Up to a dozen decoys per line can be managed by a single hunter, and some big operations can handle more. Make sure the line has sufficient weight at each end to keep the line taut between decoys.

Puddle Ducks:

A.) Early season:

Ponds, marshes, small lakes, and sloughs – Mallard ducks are the most sought after of the duck family. Place your decoys in odd number of 3, 5 or 7 to imitate family groups of ducks. Puddlers gather randomly, in small bunches, so your decoys should too. Puddle ducks are usually warier than divers, so a realistic spread is important. To help fool the birds on wing, also use teal, wood ducks, pintail or other puddle species along with your mallard decoys. Remember various confidence decoys such as blue heron decoys or coots along the shore help ease birds that may hesitate otherwise.



Lake or Pothole Set

TIP: Use more hens than drakes in your spread. Most drakes have not reached full plumage yet. A big mallard spread on a freshly flooded field is one of the most productive rigs around. When you get that lone single hen mallard coming into your spread let her land it will add movement to the spread and she



may even call. Ring-necks will sometime land into puddle duck spreads, when coming upon a pothole with dabbling ducks.

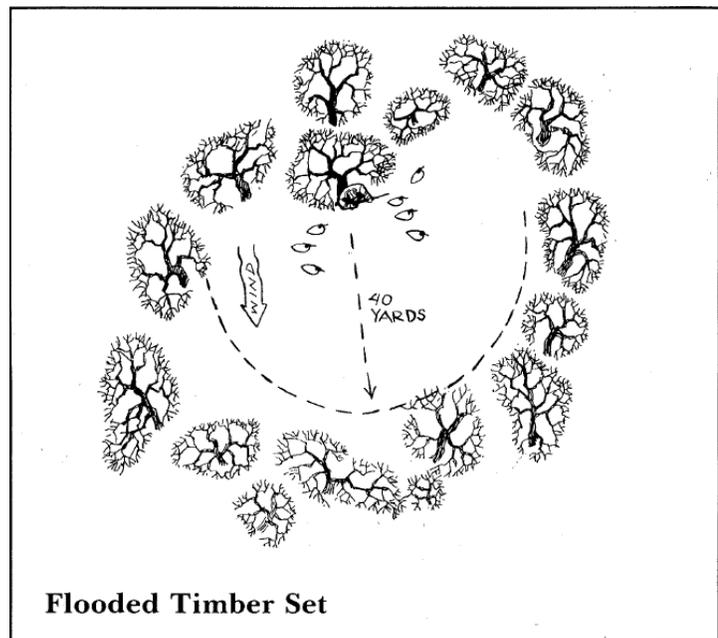
B.) Late Season:

Local ducks should be south from shooting pressure. Northern flights of ducks that have been shot at are now more wary than opening day. Confidence is the key to turning large migrating flocks to your decoys spread. On bigger water, use as many decoys as you can; but separate the species with open pockets of water for incoming ducks to land. The standard C or U pattern is generally used during the late season. If the weather is rough, puddlers seek shelter. Coves or sloughs that are not frozen over are then the best places to hunt on big water. Always keep your decoys into the wind with the opening in from of the blind facing downwind.

TIP: Puddlers will come in better to loosely spread group, scattered fairly well inshore, with four or five or the birds right along the shoreline.

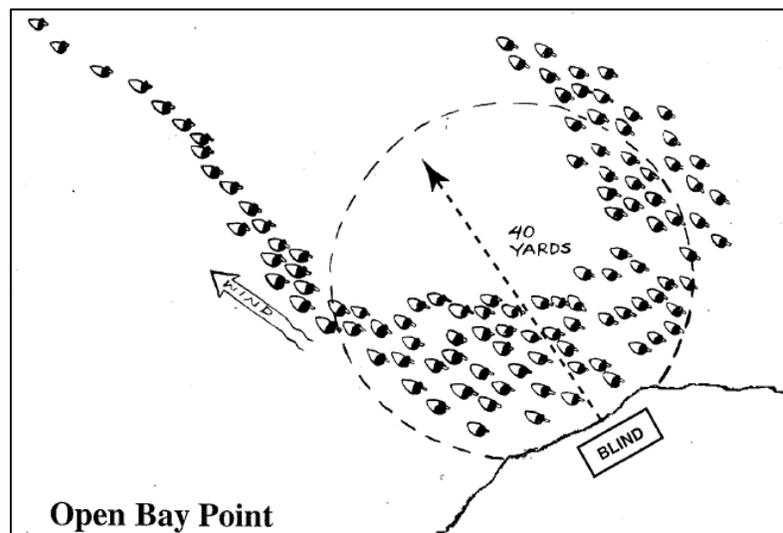
C.) Flooded Timber:

Find an opening large enough that passing birds can see your spread easily. Set up on the upwind side of the opening and set the decoys, six to two dozen, on either side of your blind. The decoying ducks will tend to fly at you over the water and land in the opening directly in from of you. Kicking the water surface depicts the commotion of feeding ducks. The sound can attract ducks as a feeding call would, and the ripples moving through the spread add sight attraction. Use duck butt as well in your spread.



Diver Ducks:

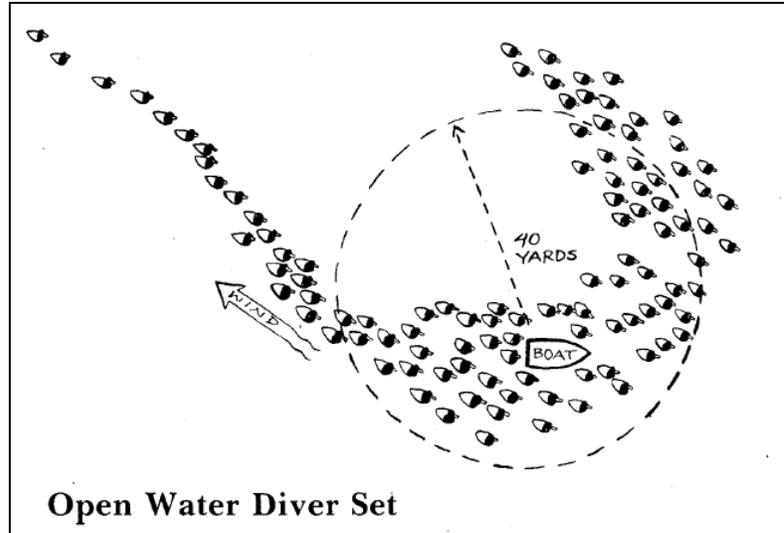
Divers as a rule are not as spooky as puddle ducks. Divers seek security by singing out over open water and avoiding shorelines. Rather than striving for a natural, randomly spaced spread, diver hunters make bolder rigs designed for high visibility and pulling ducks close. Diver duck hunting typically means big water and big rigs. Rigs are commonly 100 or more decoys, laid out in strings or elongated hook patterns. Diver ducks relate to and follow geographic contours, such as





underwater drop-offs or weed beds. Therefore, it is natural for decoys to be set in lines, and natural for decoyed divers to follow these lines - - theoretically, to the hunter. The most common set for divers is the J or fish hook pattern. The shank of the hook is extended 100 yards or more into the water with decoys set more sparsely at the far end. These decoys are attractors that draw fast-flying divers toward the pattern's bend. Toward the bottom of the bend the pattern gets more dense and helps distract the flock's

attention from the boat or blind. The hunter should be hidden near the point of the hook and pick his shots as the birds try to land inside the bend.

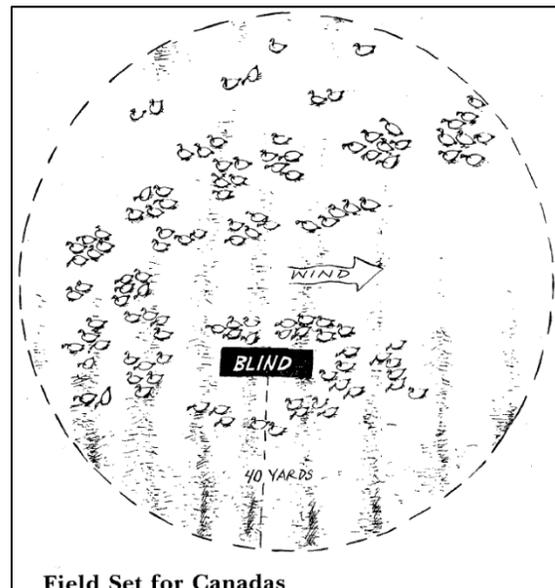


Another good diver set, again exploiting their tendency to follow strings of decoys is the V pattern. Strings of diver decoys, about 100 yards long, are set in a V formation. The blind and biggest concentration of decoys are at the bottom of the V, which points into the wind. Make sure the pattern is denser at the tip of the V, to encourage birds to land close to the blind and not at the opening of the formation.

Tip: Use the magnum decoys as the attractors to form the shank of the pattern. Divers rely on two major characteristics – body silhouette (shape) and color (white). Divers approaching the spread may flare up and make a second pass over the spread. Customary of wise and wary divers to sometime land outside the spread and sim into the spread. Goldeneyes prefer the shoreline or rivers over deep water and they do not flock or mingle with other species often. In balmy weather set your spread in loose formation. In stormy weather a more compact arrangement is needed.

Canada Geese:

Among the wariest waterfowl, Canada geese look over a decoy spread closely, invariably circling several times, before coming in or flying off. But careful rigs and good decoys can make them easier to hunt than some ducks, because they are susceptible to good calling. Goose hunting is usually on fields, so dry-land decoys are the rule. Always locate your blind and decoy spread on the highest part of the field. Geese don't like low areas that they can't see from. A minimum of four to six dozen decoys are needed. Place decoys in a cup or inverted V shape pattern facing the find. Grounded geese nearly always face the wind to aid them in fast unexpected take off. When setting out your decoys, place in number

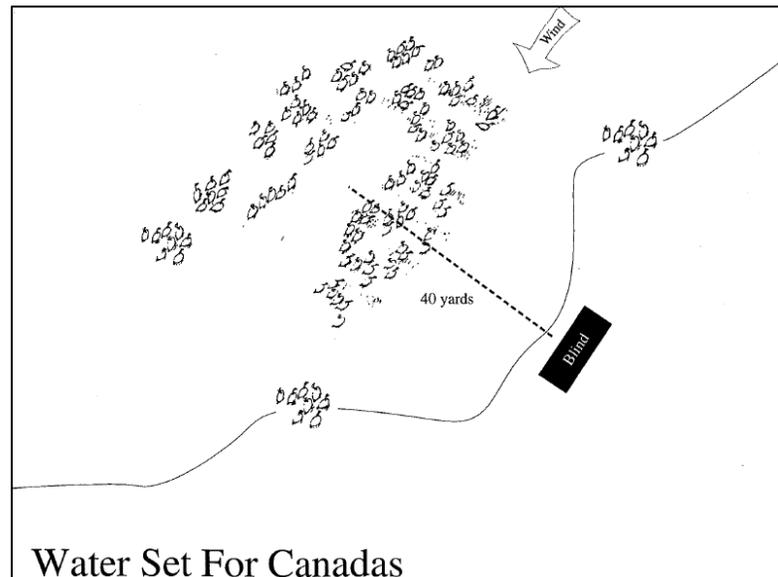




of three to eight decoys to initiate family group feeding. About two geese for every dozen should be sentinels with the rest “feeders or sleepers.” Leave a landing pocket in the center, or downwind of your decoys, for the geese to land in. During the late season use more decoys and tighten up the spread into on big flock (shallow cup pattern). Keep feeder decoys to the front, resting decoys center and one to three sentry birds at the end or front 10-15 yards in front of the main flock. It helps to have a small group of decoys situated just a bit ahead and to the one side of the pocket. Water rigs for Canadas consist of floating decoys set around the blind within gun range, along with some high-ground decoys at water’s edge.

TIP: Canada geese will use the same fields as long as food is available and hunting is minimal. Do not place decoys in close proximity to abandoned field or a wood lot.

Use those extra sentry decoys to form a single-family unit line, downwind, leading to your main spread. Flag waving, an attractor that simulates geese flapping their wing, often gets excellent results. Include a wind sock goose decoy in each family group. Place a flock of flying goose decoys upwind of your ground spread. Incoming geese seem to concentrate on this active flock and sometimes stall out waiting for the decoys to land. This stall out action should occur over well-placed hunters in the spread.



Tip: Late season shallow water holes freeze over, break into large sheets and push the broken sheets under the ice on the edges of the opening. Another method is to use a clear or see through blue polyethylene sheet to simulate water on a field when the weather is dry. Both methods will attract ducks and geese like a magnet.

Hunting with the aid of artificial decoys provides a very rewarding and enjoyable hunt. By mixing good decoy tactics and good calling you will have mastered one the of the most beneficial and rewarding aspects of waterfowling. Also, be able to cut down on the two things that waterfowlers fear most, cripples and lost birds.

A big thanks goes out to WDNR and WWA staff who put this document together in 1994. It was reformatted in 2018.