



Crowell goose brought \$661,250 and "calling" yellowlegs \$172,500. (Copley auction)

Facts, figures and photos compiled from the top four 2009 shows...

by Jim Stewart

Recession dampens waterfowl auctions

After many years of burgeoning prices for North American waterfowl decoys, collectors and dealers were apprehensive about 2009. Did the recent high prices – often in the tens or even in the hundreds of thousands of dollars – represent the same kind of bubble that had afflicted the stock market and the US housing market?

At the four major American Spring-Summer auctions, my impression was that attendance, sales and prices were all down, perhaps 20%, not a gloomy picture, given the depth of the recession. This was probably not just due to buyers' pessimism. No doubt collectors have been hesitant to consign decoys and this has affected both the number and to an extent the quality of the offerings.

At the April show and auction at St. Charles (Chicago), the largest annual gathering of collectors, attendance was down and the action was slow. The Guyette and Schmidt auction yielded about \$2 million, the lowest of the last five years for that auction, but by no means a disaster. (All prices quoted in this article are in US dollars and include the buyers' premium).

The same general pattern was seen at the three July auctions – the Decoys Unlimited (Harmon) auction at Cape Cod, the Copley Fine Arts Auction (Copley) at Plymouth, Mass. and the Guyette & Schmidt (G&S) auction at Portland, Maine. A

larger than usual number of lots did not sell. There were fewer of the hot bidding competitions that drive prices to high levels. Decoys of lower or questionable quality did not sell well, some going at distressed prices. However, good quality decoys sold at good prices, although there were bargains. Still, the recession has not caused the major correction that has occurred in other fields. The four auctions sold about \$7 million of decoys.

At three of the four auctions, there were fewer "blockbuster" decoys – those estimated to bring more than \$50,000. The exception was the Copley auction, which courageously offered seven Elmer Crowell decoys (Massachusetts), some of the best ever auctioned. They had been in the same family since the early 1900s. These decoys were extensively promoted in a fine catalogue, accompanied by a hard cover book that described their history. Speculation ahead of the auction gave two of them – a Canada goose and a pintail – a chance of getting close to a million dollars. Similar Crowell decoys had previously sold at that level. But not these decoys in this market. The pintail sold for \$546,250 (estimate \$575,000 to \$920,000), the goose for \$661,250 (estimate \$690,000 to \$1,035,000). Very high prices all the same.

The Copley auction had one day of decoys and



Pintail with wonderful form sold for \$546,250. (Copley auction)

one of "sporting art." The excellent selection of art sold at good prices, usually within and in some cases above estimate, many pieces selling between \$10,000 and \$40,000. A fine watercolour by Ogden Pleissner (American, 1905-1983) had a Canadian connection: it was of salmon fish-



Watercolour of salmon fishing on the Upsalquitch by Ogden Pleissner \$26,500. (Copley auction)

ing on the Upsalquitch River (New Brunswick). Pleissner, himself a salmon fisherman, wonderfully captured the tension of being hooked into a big salmon: when will it jump? It sold for \$26,500, within estimate. The audience at the art auction was a quite different group from the decoy-buying audience the day before.



Appealing 1937 oil of an English setter, one of several of bird dogs, sold for \$6,900. (William Foster, American, Copley auction)

Antique fish models continue to sell well. At the G&S July auction, a mid-nineteenth century model of a 43 lb. salmon by the English carver Edward Thatcher sold for \$14,375, within estimate. This carving is the earliest such model yet documented.



Thatcher Salmon model, mid-1800s, \$14,375 at G&S July auction.

Canadian Decoys in the Four US Auctions

American auctions continue to be the main public venue for the sale of better Canadian decoys and there were some fine ones. Like their American cousins, good ones sold well, but any of lower quality or with “problems” were in trouble. Unlike 2007-2008, few records were set.

Several outstanding geese were auctioned. At the April G&S auction, a hollow Chambers (Toronto) goose sold for \$19,550 (estimate \$22,500 to \$25,900), while an excellent John Reeves (Long Point) goose failed to sell (low estimate \$20,700). At the July G&S auction, a Warin (Toronto) goose brought \$24,150, well above its high



Warin goose, one of the best, \$24,150 at G&S July auction.



Superb Canada goose, late 1800s, attributed to an unknown Western Ontario carver, fetched \$25,300. (Harmon auction)

estimate. That tied the record for a Warin goose decoy, set almost 20 years ago.

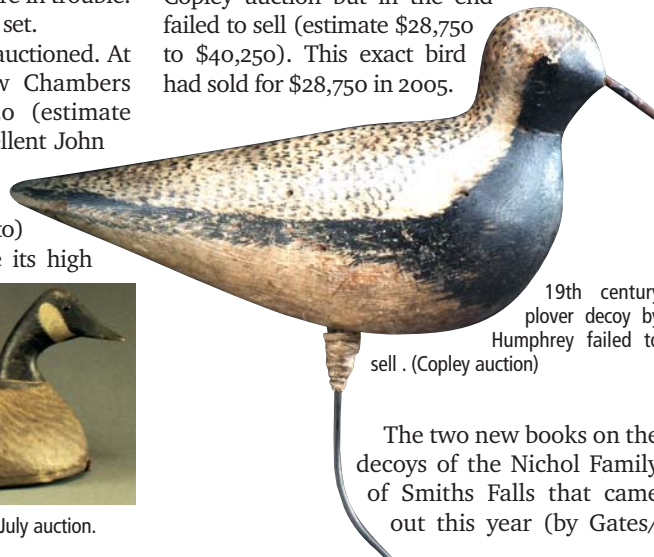
To me, the finest Canadian-made goose offered this year was sold at the July Harmon auction for \$25,300. The photograph does not do justice to the untouched condition, the lovely patina and the graceful form of this ultra-light decoy by an unknown “Southwestern Ontario” maker (probably Long Point). In a hot market, it could have gone for more.

One of the most spectacular decoys sold was a hollow swan from the St. Clair Flats Shooting Company rig, made in the early 1900s by an unknown carver. It sold for \$29,900 at the G&S April auction.



St. Clair Flats swan, \$29,900 at the G&S April auction.

Few Canadian shorebirds came to auction this year. At the April G&S auction, a John Ramsey (PEI) plover brought \$3,750. An excellent black-bellied plover decoy (William Humphrey, Toronto, mid-1800s) was bid well up at the Copley auction but in the end failed to sell (estimate \$28,750 to \$40,250). This exact bird had sold for \$28,750 in 2005.



19th century plover decoy by Humphrey failed to sell. (Copley auction)

The two new books on the decoys of the Nichol Family of Smiths Falls that came out this year (by Gates/

Mewburn/Reeves and by Lunman) may have buoyed up the prices of their decoys. An Addie Nichol whistler hen, one of the best old Nichol decoys, was purchased at the Harmon auction by a Canadian collector for \$14,375. It had previously sold for \$9,200 at the McCleery auction in 2000. Among the dozen Davey Nichol decoys sold were a bufflehead that brought \$1,150 at the Copley auction and a pair of mallards at \$2,375 at the G&S April auction.



Addie Nichol whistler with elegant feather painting. (\$14,375 at Harmon auction)



Davey Nichol bufflehead (\$1,150 at Copley auction)

As well as the Addie Nichol decoy, several other good birds came back to Canada. They included a William Hart (Belleville) merganser, a solid cousin to the hollow-carved decoy that sold for a Canadian record of \$203,000 a few years ago (Copley) and a James Harper (Hamilton) canvasback.



Hart merganser, \$15,000 at Copley auction.



Harper canvasback, \$12,075 at G&S July auction.

Collectors of Ken Anger (Dunnville) decoys had 20 lots to choose from at the four auctions. Their prices were all over the map, illustrating the uneasiness of buyers in this market. At the G&S July auction, a very good pair of redheads

brought \$5,175, above the high estimate of \$4,600; a pair of mallards \$4,310 and a pair of canvasbacks \$4,600. At the Harmon auction, while some Angers sold, other seemingly good birds failed to meet their moderate estimates.



Ken Anger redheads, \$5,175 at G&S July auction.

Two of the best of the unusual, old hollow "Markham Rig" decoys sold at high prices but within estimate at the G&S July auction, a drake redhead for \$15,625 and a hen for \$14,660.



Markham rig redhead, circa 1890, \$15,625 at G&S July auction.

Collectors could have obtained good Canadian decoys at relatively moderate prices at these auctions. I have always liked the whistlers made by the Nova Scotia carver, Willard Robertson, and a good pair of his decoys made in 1937 sold for a modest \$690 at the Copley auction. Two Billy Ellis (Whitby) whistler decoys, a drake and a hen, both in fine condition, sold at the Copley auction for \$805 and \$863 respectively, below their estimates. Other examples of decoys in good condition that sold at moderate prices included carvings by Walter Humphries (Toronto), Reg Bloom (Kingston), Cliff Avann (Toronto), Beany Anderson (Trenton), Lawrence Austin (Port Hope), Percy Shupe (Nova Scotia) and Michael Bucklin (Bury, Quebec)



Willard Robertson whistlers, 1937, \$690 at Copley auction.



Ellis whistler, a good buy at \$805. (Copley auction)



Walter Humphries bluebill decoys, early 1900s, \$4,025 at G&S April auction.

A set of five Robert Kerr (Smiths Falls) miniature decoys failed to sell at the April G&S auction but sold at the July G&SW auction for \$520, a bargain price for these fine Canadian decorative miniatures.



Well-carved canvasback from 1950s by Lawrence Austin, Port Hope, \$250 at Copley auction.



Merganser by Percy Shupe (NS), one of several mergansers from Quebec and the Maritimes, sold for \$1,210 at the G&S July auction.



Pintail hen, 1950s, Michael Bucklin, Bury, Quebec, \$115 at Copley auction.

Photos provided courtesy of Copley Fine Art Auctions, LLC; Guyette and Schmidt, Inc.; and Decoys Unlimited, Inc.

TOP 25 AUCTION RECORDS FOR CANADIAN DECOYS

The table lists the top 25 prices for Canadian waterfowl decoys at auction. Most are from American auctions and are in US dollars, including the buyers' premium. Two sold in Canadian auctions are in Canadian dollars. Of the top ten prices, six were for decoys from Eastern Ontario, one was for a decoy from Toronto, two for Hamilton decoys and one for a decoy from Central Ontario. The depth of quality in decoys from Toronto is apparent. In the top 25, 12 were from that area, including those from the "St. Clair Flats." Most of these were made by Chambers, Warin or Wells. Two of the top ten were by unknown makers. Four were hooded mergansers, a species that seems to fascinate decoy and folk art collectors.

For many years, the price of Canadian decoys had escalated steadily. Last year there were seven new entries in the top 25, including one over \$100,000. This year only two new listings were added to the 25.

Rank	Maker	Decoy	Price	Notes
1	William Hart	HC hooded merganser drake	\$203,000	2005
2	Thomas Chambers	HC wood duck drake	\$187,000	2004
3	Ivor Fernlund	HC pintail drake	\$126,000	2007
4	Unknown Central Ontario	hooded merganser drake	\$88,250	2007
5	Samuel Hutchings	hooded merganser hen	\$83,600	2007
6	James Harper	HC canvasback hen	\$80,500	2007
7	William Hart	HC green-winged teal hen	\$63,250	2005
8	Unknown Ontario (Perth)	wood duck pair	\$110,500	2004 PR
9	Bob J. Jones	HC redhead drake	\$51,750	2006
10	Samuel Hutchings	hooded merganser drake	\$51,700	2007
11	Thomas Chambers	HC Canada goose	\$46,000	2007
12	Phineas Reeves	HC Canada goose	\$37,375	2008
13	William Hart	HC hooded merganser drake	\$35,650	2008
14	Samuel Hutchings	hooded merganser drake	\$34,100	2004
15	Thomas Chambers	HC Canada goose	\$33,925	2008 NR
16	Thomas Chambers	HC Canada goose	\$33,000	2002
17	Unknown Toronto School	HC pintail drake	\$31,900	2001
18	Unknown St. Clair Flats	HC swan	\$29,900	2009 NR
19-20	William Humphrey	black-bellied plover	\$28,750	2005
19-20	George Warin	HC canvasback drake	\$28,750	2007
21-22	Unknown St. Clair Flats	HC Canada goose	\$27,600	2004
21-22	George Warin	blue-winged teal hen	\$27,600	2006
23	Thomas Chambers	HC pintail drake	\$27,500	2001
24	John R. Wells	HC canvasback drake	\$26,950	2004
25	Phineas Reeves	HC Canada goose	\$26,450	2005

HC = hollow carved NR = new record for carver since July 1, 2008 PR = pair with price halved for listing order