



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)