

## A Bird's Life: Habitat Design

This lesson is inspired by the Museum's *Oversize Slat Canada Goose Decoy*. We will learn about the traditional use of decoys, explore the importance of habitat and bird conservation by learning about the Migratory Bird Act of 1918 which preserved land for, and protected, migrating birds, and then create our own habitat for Canada geese.

### Goals

- Gain an understanding about the construction of a decoy.
- Understand the importance of the Migratory Bird Act of 1918.
- Design and build a habitat for a Canada goose.

### Vocabulary

**Decoy**—an imitation of a bird or mammal used by hunters to attract other birds or mammals.

**Goose**—term used for female Canada geese

**Gander**—term commonly applied to male Canada geese

**Shellac**—a thin clear varnish or sealant used to apply a shiny coat to decoys

### Standards

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**2-LS4-1.** Make observations of plants and animals to compare the diversity of life in different habitats.

### More Resources

Birds, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, <https://bit.ly/VFWbirds-SM>

The Migratory Bird Treaty Explained, Audubon Society, <https://bit.ly/Audubon1-SM>

Interactive Map, Vermont Land Trust Protected Lands, <https://bit.ly/VTlandtrust-SM>

Learn More about the Canada Goose, Audubon Society, <https://bit.ly/Audubon2-SM>

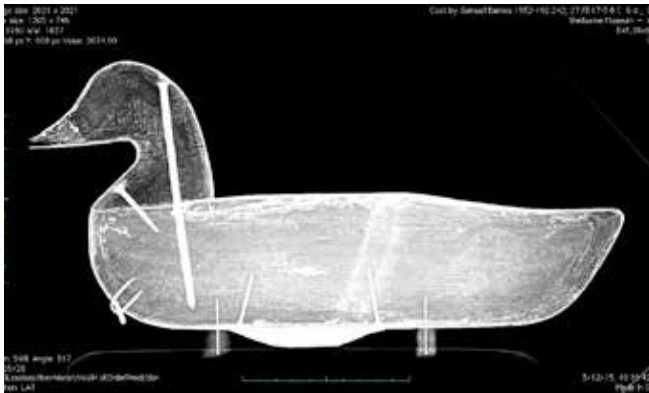
Canada Goose, All About Birds, <https://bit.ly/AllAboutBirds-SM>

Rogers, Kory W. *Birds of a Feather: Wildfowl Decoys at Shelburne Museum*. Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2017.

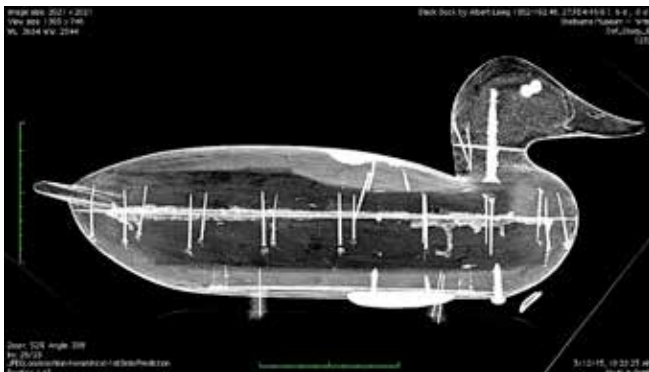


Unidentified maker, *Oversize Slat Canada Goose Decoy*, date unknown. Wood and paint, 37 x 18 ½ x 62 ½ in. Gift of Sterling D. Emerson. 1971-13.

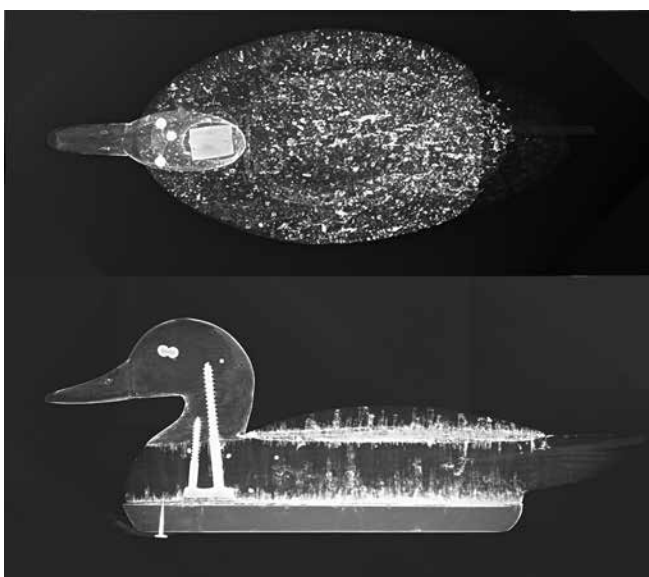
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**Solid Body Decoy** Radiograph courtesy of University of Vermont. *Lateral view radiograph of a Coot decoy by Sam Barnes, 1952-192.242*



**Hollow Body Decoy** Radiograph courtesy of University of Vermont. *Lateral view radiograph of a Black Duck Decoy by Albert Laing, 1952.192.46*



**Cork Decoy** Radiograph courtesy of University of Vermont. *Composite image of lateral and anterior-posterior views of Stephen Verity, Black Duck*

## What is a Waterfowl Decoy?

Originally used as a tool for hunting, decoys are carved or built birds used to help lure flying birds down to a hunt-able height. Decoys can be created from natural reeds and grasses, carved from cork, or made out of wood. There are three popular styles of decoy construction.

**Solid Body Decoys** are constructed in just two pieces: a head and a body attached to each other by means of a dowel or metal fasteners. Solid decoys have been characterized as being the most important since they have persisted through history.

**Hollow Body Decoys** were made from three pieces of wood; two to make up the hollowed body and one for the head. The pieces would be roughly cut to size before being attached or fastened to one another and final finishing. After sanding, the work was sealed with shellac, primed and painted using artist oil colors.

**Cork Decoys** became popular due to their ease of carving and ability to float. The practice of fabricating duck decoys from cork originated in the early part of the 20th century on the Great South Bay, a lagoon located between Fire Island and Long Island, NY. These decoys were almost always black ducks, constructed from two layers of cork re-used from life preservers and held together with wood pegs. They were fabricated in two halves that were cemented and pegged together.

## Other types of decoys include:

**Canvas**—Decoys were made by stretching canvas over a wood or metal interior frame. These were a light-weight alternative to carved wood decoys and were easier to transport, particularly for larger decoys such as Canada geese and swans.

**Stick-Ups or Shore Birds**—These decoys mimic small-bodied birds that are commonly found near the shore. These birds were built with sticks that could be placed in the sand to resemble congregating shore birds along the water line.

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## Background/ History

The use of decoys has evolved over time. Once used solely for hunting, they now also contribute to building bird populations and preserving habitat, as well serving as collectible objects of artistic beauty.

### Migratory Bird Act of 1918

The Migratory Bird Act of 1918 was critical for the conservation of thousands of species of birds. Before the act was passed many species of migratory and shore birds were hunted to near or complete extinction. As hunting for sport became popular, it was not uncommon for hunters to take hundreds to thousands of birds in a single day of hunting, dramatically reducing the number of birds around the planet. (Rogers et. al, p22). The act passed by Congress limited the number of birds per hunter to 25 birds per day and created a treaty between the United States and Canada prohibiting the sale of wildfowl. The act stated that hunting would be prohibited in spring as birds were flying back to their summer habitats and breeding grounds. This important act allows birds the opportunity to migrate and breed in their desired habitats without interruption.

### Canada Goose Information

The Canada goose (scientific name: *Branta Canadensis*) is found across the United States and Canada. Highly adaptable, Canada geese can make their home in many regions and habitats—near water, grassy fields, agricultural fields, even in parks, golf courses, athletic fields or suburban developments—

wherever a ready supply of grass and grain is available in the spring. They also look for wide-open spaces so they can see predators approaching. As they prepare to migrate south in the fall and winter they look for berries and seeds.

### Land Conservation in Vermont

Vermonters love to be outside and witness the natural beauty of our state. Currently, Vermont has over 1.5 million acres of conserved, preserved and protected lands. Conserving land helps to preserve natural habitats for future generations of migratory animals, and there are increasing numbers of local, community-based conservation efforts. Town planning and conservation commissions, watershed groups, regional planning commissions, state agencies, land trusts, and many others are becoming more active in conservation planning. Whether these organizations and groups are concerned about access to land, wildlife, and outdoor pursuits, or whether they are focused on the need for greater protection of land, they are increasingly important partners in the future of fish and wildlife conservation in Vermont. Preserved and conserved lands help protect our biodiversity, ecosystem, landscape, and communities leading to cleaner water, vibrant fisheries, and space for humans and animals to coexist.

(above) Captain Charles Christopher Osgood, *Osgood Canada Goose Decoys*, ca. 1849. Wood, paint, metal, and leather. Gift of Mrs. P.H.B. Frelinghuysen. 1953-301.5, 4 & 3. Photography by RLPhoto.

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## ACTIVITY

For this activity we'll be researching and creating a model of a habitat suited for a Canada goose. Canada geese are interesting birds because they are extremely adaptable. The purpose of this activity is not to think about habitats for hunting, but to think about how and why birds choose places to live. Keep this in mind as you begin to develop your habitat dioramas.

Before you begin to design, take a look at the Audubon website to gather more information about the habitat and migratory patterns of the Canada goose. Take notes on what you learned. Where do they like to live? What do they eat? How do they make a nest? Listen to its songs and calls.  
<https://bit.ly/Audubon2-SM>

Now that you have learned more about this bird you can begin to design and build your ideal goose habitat. If you have one, use a shoebox or cardboard box as the container for your habitat; if you don't have a box, you can create your habitat on a table and take a photo of it.

## Materials

Birds find their nesting materials in their habitat. Go outside and see what you can find! Sticks, grasses, pebbles, moss, even weeds—they can all be useful building materials.

- Shoe box or cardboard box
- Glue
- Scissors
- Tape
- Moss
- Grass
- Shells
- Sand
- Paint
- Pencils
- Plain or construction paper
- **Optional:** Model magic, clay, or Playdough to create bird figures.

## Steps

1. Gather materials so you can begin to design your habitat. Keep in mind that birds like to flock together so your habitat may include pictures of flocks of Canada geese!
2. Begin by painting or coloring the background of your habitat. If you are not using a box, make a backdrop with paper and prop it up against a wall, a book, or another sturdy flat surface that will allow you to stand your backdrop up.
3. Start building up your habitat. Think about how you want to divide the space to show their feeding and nesting spots. Do you need water? Plants? Open space?
4. Continue to add materials until the diorama is complete!
5. If using Model magic or clay, form the likeness of a goose, using the online resource images as guidance. Add a goose to your nest, or one that's feeding. Maybe there are goslings (baby geese) in your habitat.



Charles Sr. Schoenheider, *One Legged Canada Goose Decoy*, 1918. Wood, paint, glass, metal and iron, 19 3/8 x 8 in x 26 1/4 inches. Acquired by trade from Charles Schoenheider, Jr., Adele Earnest, and Donal O'Brien, Jr., 1986-42. Photography by RLPhoto.