

Fowl Play

by Wendy Mitman Clarke

photographs by Michael C. Wootton



Dogs, camo and happy crowds! Easton's Waterfowl Festival honors all things waterfowl.

“We used to have a restaurant and we closed it, but the soup was always a hit, so we still make that,”

Kelly Quinn is telling me as I close my eyes and let this rich, tangy dish of Shore Boys cream of crab warm me from the inside out. “We ship across the country. We did over 2,300 cups of soup at the festival last year.” ¶ It is, I decide, the perfect way to start a November Eastern Shore morning with the promise of a crystal clear day in the offing and a sprawling celebration of all things waterfowl (and then some) waiting for me to explore. After all, this is the 44th Annual Waterfowl Festival we’re talking about. It’s going to be a long, challenging day, trying to take in every sight and sound, from the artwork and the decoys to the flying dogs and the goose-calling contests. I need serious sustenance. ¶

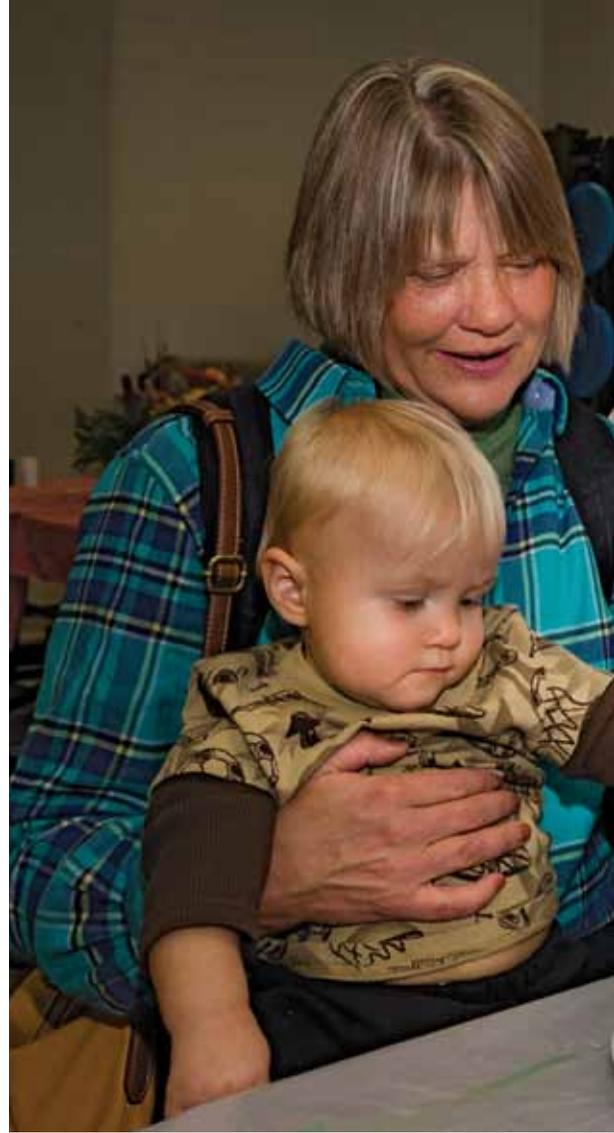
There will be fishing. There will be the winner of the Federal Duck Stamp

Competition, and the top 20 paintings of same. There will be retriever demonstrations and oysters and hot cider and Cabela's-as-fashion-statement and remarkable works of wildfowl art. There will be wine tasting and micro-brew beers, crabcakes and fried oysters, raptor demonstrations and dogsdogsdogs, decoys worth tens of thousands of dollars and goose calls named "Meathook" and "Bad Azz." And camo—all the camo—camo trucks, camo boats, camo hats, vests, and pants, camo baby strollers (really?!). If they made camo dogs, that would be the ultimate, and they would be here (they do make camo clothing for dogs, and yes, they are wearing it).

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More than anything, though, this festival is about the culture and heritage unique to this slice of the world, which is as much a time as it is a place, a moment of the sunrise melting across water not-yet frozen, of excitement and the call of Canada geese high on the wing, of finely trained dogs trembling in anticipation and the stubbled expanses of just-cut cornfields, of russet and golden leaves catching the sunlight and the crisp, clear air of autumn, of duck-blind camaraderie and breathtaking natural beauty.

Forty-five years ago, a small group of Eastern Shore sportsmen and women decided it would be a good thing to create an event to honor all of this, both to preserve the traditions and crafts surrounding waterfowling, and to raise money to help conserve and protect the migrating and wintering waterfowl and their vital habitat, which was slowly but surely beginning to feel the encroachment of the human population from the west. Since then, according to the history summed up in a door-stopper of a glossy show program and event guide, the Waterfowl Festival has grown "from three small exhibits in downtown Easton to more than a dozen venues throughout the town, with an annual economic



impact to the area of nearly \$6 million." The nonprofit organization formed to operate the event initially raised \$7,500, donated to Ducks Unlimited. Now "more than \$5 million in conservation grants [goes] to hundreds of projects by more than 50 organizations." The first festival had three exhibit categories: carving, paintings and artifacts. Now, it's a three-day extravaganza drawing artists from around the world for juried competition, as well as scores of events and displays, with shuttle buses running constantly to ferry thousands of people from venue to venue. The kids even have the day off from school, and the school buildings are used for festival events.

It's the kind of event that becomes a family tradition, much like the skills of waterfowling, passed down through generations. For Robert Ickes, a one-year-old from York, Pa., this year is his first, as he sits on the lap of his "Nana," Rebecca Naylor, while his mom, Leah Naylor-Ickes, helps him paint a small decoy at Easton Elementary School. On one side of the room,





cafeteria tables have been transformed into art centers, where kids and adults can choose a wooden decoy and paint it. “My husband and I used to bring her [Leah] and our other children when they were this big,” Rebecca Naylor tells me, nodding to her grandson. “It’s the first time I’ve been back in fifteen years.”

Nearby, Matthew Periconi, aged 8, works alongside his grandfather, Richard Slaughter of Easton, putting the finishing touches on a canvasback. “I have done five of them, this is my sixth,” Matthew says, clearly an old hand at the task.

In the school’s gymnasium, the Kent Island Carvers Club display is a wonder, not least



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Robert Ickes painting a decoy with a little help from mom Leah Naylor-Ickes and grandmother Rebecca Naylor; an eagle owl and its handler at the Raptor demonstration; and Daniel Irons demonstrating his carving skills. OPPOSITE PAGE: Sustenance for the day: cream of crab soup with sherry and Old Bay.

PRECEDING PAGES: The crowd on Easton’s Washington Street.



because two of the master carvers are the young brothers Daniel and Jonathan Irons, both homeschooled, avid birders, carvers and photographers, whose work rivals that of the adult artists here. “It’s good for other kids to see each other carving,” says their father, Mike Irons, who credits Dave Connelly of Centreville, the club’s leader, with getting his boys started in the art form.

Over the years festival organizers have added events and displays like these specifically for the younger crowd to encourage families to come, helping transform the Waterfowl Festival into an event for just about every age. It had been about 15 years since I’d been to the festival, and I was thinking I could just visit on the big day of Saturday and do it all. But climbing on the shuttle bus outside the elementary school, en route to the preliminaries for the junior division of the calling

competition, it was becoming increasingly obvious that I had drastically miscalculated. I was already two events behind on the schedule for the day, and I was going to have to hotfoot it to make it to everything I wanted to see in the next five hours—and even then, it would be touch and go.

At this early part of the day, though, the shuttle buses are still pretty empty, and with buses running every five minutes at most stops, I figured I’d still have a shot. When I get off the bus at the high school and look up, three bald eagles and a hawk are soaring overhead, while a pickup truck in the parking lot seems to be full of squabbling geese causing me to do a double-take; no birds, though, just someone warming up for the competition. The high school is the site of the Harry M. Walsh Waterfowling Artifacts Exhibit, which I unfortunately blow by so that I can make it in time to hear the young goose and duck callers who are taking the stage inside.

There is a unique, specialized world surrounding this single event at the festival. For the early rounds this morning, the auditorium is



nearly empty, but by tonight for the finals—with thousands of dollars in prize money, not to mention calling honors on the line—the place will be standing room only. No fewer than four world championships will be decided here tonight: the World Championship Goose Calling Contest (junior and senior divisions); the World Championship Live Goose Calling Contest; the World Championship Live Duck Calling Contest (junior and senior divisions); and the World Championship Team Goose Calling Contest.

“The beauty of Easton’s contests is the level playing ground,” the guide informs me. “Anyone, novice or master, can blow. Proud duck and goose callers representing at least sixteen states and Canada make the journey to Easton for the titles.” I settle in to watch the junior preliminaries get underway, and within seconds I’m enthralled.

Competitors, who take the stage in front of a set of artfully arranged cornstalks, phragmites, and marsh grasses, range from teenagers to one youngster who might be pushing five years old. Each is given the option of a quick practice, then proceeds to “for scoring” by the judges seated at a table at the other end of the stage. The precise and subtle sounds emanating from their hands, cupped around their calls, is a perfect symphony of waterfowl conversation and dialogue—squeaks, squawks, chirps, chortles, brassy, tender, blaring, warbling, trilling, hiccupping, chuckling. Nothing so mundane as a “quack” or “honk” ever could describe what these youngsters are creating.

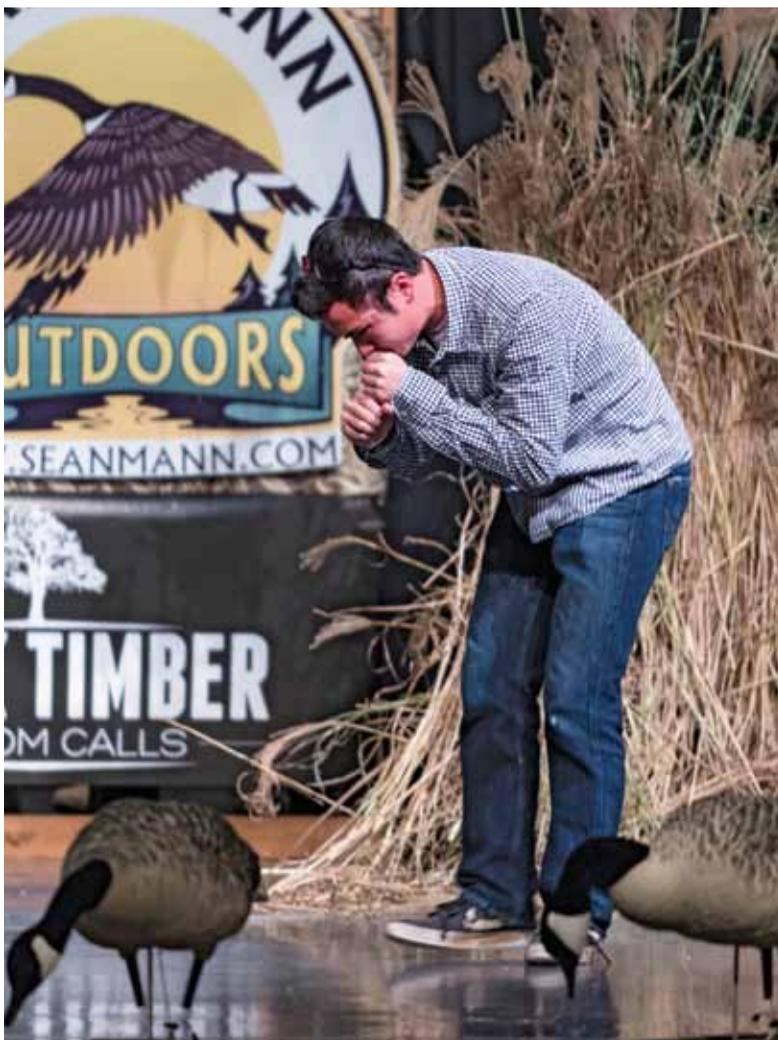
And along with the sounds, the body language reinforces each change in volume, pitch, tone, or mood—standing straight, doubled over, shoulders twitching, rolling, or heaving, pacing, bouncing, facing the audience, turning away, swaying, jerking. This is as much about showmanship and style as it is about technique. The competition will go on all day to culminate in tonight’s finals, but I leave after half an hour—places to go on my list.

Just across the street at the Elks Lodge parking lot stands the Sportsman’s Pavilion, which, as the name implied, is geared to the

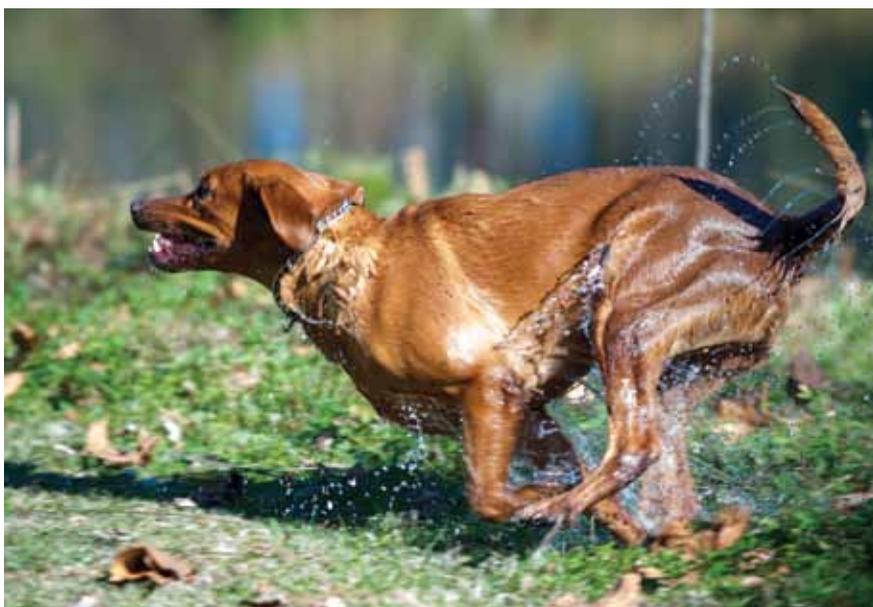
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RIGHT: A caller getting into the act during the calling competition (top); and a focused working dog chasing after a dummy bird in the retriever demonstration.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Five-year-old Paige Bodle rocking a mean tutu at the Kids’ Fishing Derby; and artwork on display at the Art at the Armory exhibit.



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nitty-gritty of the game. Here you can find all the camo couture you might want, as well as duck and goose calls that are as varied and nuanced in their creation as fine wine. There are taxidermy booths, adventure tour booths, displays of washable dog beds and bait-and-tackle booths. I'm cruising right along through here until I screech to a halt at the display by Adirondack Guide Boats, where the hand-made cherry oars, blond whicker seats, and elegant lines of these guide boats and fishing dories make me sigh out loud.

By now the sun is high and bright in the sky, and it's a fine day for a walk, so off I go heading back into town, my ultimate destination being what has always been my favorite event at the festival, the retriever demonstrations at the ponds on Bay Street. First, though, I navigate back to town center where the streets are closed to vehicle traffic, mobbed instead by people, strollers and dogs. Outside the Avalon Theater a scrum of kids rumbles by, every single one of them honking away on a plastic goose call, while nearby an over-stimulated dog is getting an earful from his person: "Sit. Sit! SIT!"

You can find comestibles all through the town during the festival—local churches, civic groups and schools make the most of the opportunity to sell thousands of cookies, crabcakes, burgers and cups of coffee—but on Washington Street, a kind of Eastern Shore food court has been set up by the Easton Lions Club. Straw bales stand in for tables and chairs, and the lines for soups, chowders, oysters and crabcakes stretch down the street.

I'm still running just fine on my Shore Boys soup, so I head down the street to the ponds, where the crowd is already gathering to watch the thoroughbreds of the hunting scene, the Labrador retrievers. Before the show starts, though, I meander over to the northern pond, where the Kids' Fishing Derby is well underway. Paige Bodle, aged five, wins my prize for pure style—wearing a zebra-print top and

pink and green tutu—as well as her approach to the contest, which includes dancing on the dock as well as waiting patiently for her bobber to bounce on the water's surface, indicating a sunny or bluegill on the line below.

"This is her second festival, and she was very excited," says her dad, Eric Bodle. "She's been bugging us all week to go." He helps her bait her hook with a worm, and she gazes up at him anxiously as he prepares the cast.

"Real far, Daddy," she says, as he zings it halfway across the pond. She tells me that so far today she's seen at the festival "a tiny owl, a medium-sized owl and a big owl, and an eagle." She also notes that she has her own fishing rod. "Sometimes when I want to, I put a toy fish on my rod," she says, and I'm thrown back about 12 years to when my son would do exactly the same thing, casting for hours around the house and the yard.

The Midshore Chapter of the Maryland Coastal Conservation Association provides rods, worms and bobbers for the kids, giving those less experienced than Paige a few lessons in the technical aspects. It's a catch-and-release derby, but the kids take home a certificate and booklet for participating, and Dick's Sporting Goods, which just opened a store nearby, is giving out gift certificates. "It's good times to see the smiles on their faces when these fish come in," says volunteer Dave Stepp.

By the time I make it over to the retriever pond, the crowd is ten deep, the overflow from the metal bleachers spilling onto the grass beside the pond. The Talbot Retriever Club puts on this show of working dogs, and the announcer runs down how it works and the terminology involved. A "mark," for instance, is a bird the dog has seen fall; a "blind" is a bird that the dog doesn't see. On this day there are no birds, only bright orange and yellow rubber bumpers used as training tools with a rope on the end, so the trainer can really wing it a long way.

Next to me, Fergus, a Wheaton

terrier, is occupying the grass along with his person, Kristin Junkin and her daughter Isabel Hardesty (who just happens to be the Chester River Riverkeeper). "He's actually a wannabe," Junkin tells me about Fergus, but when the first gunshot bangs close by, signaling to the working dogs that the fun is about to begin, Fergus starts coming unglued. "I didn't even think about the gunshots," Kristin says, trying to stop Fergus from climbing on her head and then dragging her across the grass. "Fergus, I'm sorry buddy." Hardesty is laughing out loud: "God, it's pathetic, he's an Eastern Shore dog!" But it's all too much for Fergus as time and again the gun goes off, and finally the three of them have to leave before he has a complete nervous breakdown.

Not so, the working dogs putting on the show. By the pond's edge and one by one, the retrievers do their awesome thing, trembling in anticipation, focused like lasers, their quivering limbs and powerful chests the perfect definition of potential energy, until their owner gives them the signal. Each demonstration creates a new situation that the dog has to respond to, whether that's leaping into the pond to retrieve a mark that's landed on the water, or leaping in and swimming to the other side in search of a blind. The commands are short, swift and precise, and the dogs' responses are the same, their dedication to and enthusiasm for their task completely unwavering.

"We love it, it's our third or fourth time," says Carol Meanor, who with her husband, Tim, is standing by the pond. They have come from Georgia to spend the weekend and visit their daughter who lives in Easton.

"We like the dogs, we like the food, we like everything about this festival," Tim says. "I had oyster stew and a softshell crab for brunch!"

If the retriever demonstration is the more traditional dog event, in the way that slalom and downhill are the more traditional alpine skiing sports in

the Olympics, then what I watch next could be considered the snowboarding, and that's the dog party that is the Delmarva Dock Dogs competition. This is held at Easton Middle School, where I decide to walk rather than take the shuttle bus—maybe a mistake in terms of efficiency of time, but it's still a beautiful autumn day, so who's complaining?

The atmosphere is decidedly less serious than up at the ponds; the Dock Dogs competition is held in a 40-foot-long pool that's set up on one of the athletic fields, and the dock, also 40 feet long, is more like a stage on which each dog is announced with fanfare and to wild cheers from the audience, which is packed into the bleachers alongside. Divisions for this nationally sanctioned competition include Big Air (long jump), Extreme Vertical (high jump) and Speed Retrieve (speed swim). Any breed can compete in classes from novice to super elite—and by way of example, a super elite dog can jump 25 feet in the Big Air division, and 6 feet or higher in Extreme Vertical.

It is a raucous and crowd-pleasing event, and the athletic prowess and enthusiasm of these dogs is no less dynamic than that of the working retrievers. So many dogs: Burmese mountain dogs, retrievers here too, Chesapeake, Golden Retrievers, Labradors, poodles, terriers, a St. Bernard that could give pony rides, mutts, hounds, spaniels, pointers, beagles. "Let's give it up for Cello!" yells the announcer, provoking wild applause from the audience as Cello, a three-year-old pointer wearing a chartreuse collar and spandex shirt around her tautly muscled body, hurls herself 20 feet, 9 inches across the water in sheer joy, bettering her earlier mark of 19 feet, 5 inches.

After a bit I meander away from the Dock Dogs to ponder my next move. There's a photography exhibit inside the school I'd really like to see, but I want to get over to the raptor demonstration back at the elementary school. Decisions, decisions and this time I have to wait for two full buses to

go by before I can catch a ride, but the driver is jovial and friendly and everybody on board is in a happy mood. And, it's a short hop to my next destination, where I am awed seeing an eagle owl up close for the first time ever and watching a raptor follow his handler's commands from tree to light pole to the quarry (a fake rabbit).

By now the light is getting long, and I bus it back to the center of the action on Harrison Street, stopping at the Wine and Tasting Pavilion, a tent just off the street that is jammed with festival goers who are trying local wines, beers, cheeses and gourmet foods. The vibe is decidedly different—no dogs, no camo, no kids, no goose calling—but no less enthusiastic. "Make friends," a complete stranger laughs to me as I squeeze past through the mosh pit so I can nab a sample of Crow Vineyard's merlot. I wonder if the theory might be to get people a little loose and happy with the wine (and maybe their wallets) so they then walk to the adjoining art gallery, where a life-size sculpture of a black lab is going for \$22,000.

My final stop is across the street at the Armory, where I zip way too quickly through the stunning "Art at the Armory" exhibit. In fact, I realize that I've proven that you may be able to take in most of the outdoorsy activities at the Waterfowl Festival in one day—albeit, quickly—but there's no way you can do that *and* spend the requisite time in the three separate venues for waterfowl art in its many forms. I feel a little gypped by my own ambition, having missed wandering for hours through the paintings, sculptures, carvings, and photographs that celebrate waterfowl and the natural world. Well, I tell myself wearily as I trudge back to the car in the growing twilight, there's always next year. . . . ↴

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