

Getting Started in Duck Carving. By Rick Mignano



Intro

This article is not for the experienced carver. It's for people, who like me, either young or old are fascinated with creating a wooden bird. Who don't think they are artists, or don't have a band saw, or just don't know where to start. I'm writing to share what I've learned in my career about the stuff you need to create a realistic carving; the reference materials, tools and a few techniques that can take you from, thinking you might like to carve a duck but never getting started, to actually holding your finished product in your hand.

In 1981 I saw my first decorative or realistic duck carving. It was created by Richard Lemaster. I was in awe that such a realistic bird could be carved in wood. I bought a Canvasback blank (rough pre-carved body), and a book by Bruce Berk and I was on my way. For the next 5 years I carved 25 birds, hopefully getting a little better with each project. I bought more books and tools and in 1987 I put down the tools and started building a new house. I was distracted by the move and my full time job.

Fast forward about 30 years and I retired from the job and dug out the old books and tools. Since that time, I've carved about 145 birds and won 37 ribbons at the Ohio, Wisconsin and Ward world shows. I've accumulated a loyal following and am currently accepting commissions about 7 or 8 months out.

I am a realistic or decorative duck carver. I don't do smoothies or decoys. My goal is to create a duck that sits on your shelf or coffee table and elicits a need to pick it up and feel the feathers. I love when viewers think it's a mounted bird. If that happens I am happy and so are my clients.

You can do it too! There is enough info available that, given some focus, practice and effort, you might surprise yourself and your friends. And once you get that first bird under your belt, you will be anxious to start on number two and beyond. So here you go my getting started list.

Reference

A very critical part of being a wildfowl artist. You can't make a duck look real if you don't know what a real duck looks like. The closer you look, the more you see. So the more info you can get on each bird the better your end product will be. The other part of reference is the 'how to' side. Learn from the experts. Fortunately there is a lot of good material available to give you step by step guidance on carving and painting. I've listed some of those that I have found most helpful.



My monitor with reference photos while

Books

- Painting Waterfowl with J. D. Sprankle About \$35 on amazon Also have found on Bay for around \$20. Great advice from a recognized masters step by step advice on about 0 species. Really good guidance on mixing colors, the use of washes, and blending.
- Decorative Decoy Carvers Ultimate Painting & Pattern Portfolio by Bruce Berk - Patterns and painting instructions for 16 species of ducks. Not as good as Sprankle but covers more species. Also has patterns and painted examples of each bird, both hen and drake. Around \$20 on Amazon
- Workbench Projects: Green-Winged Teal Pair Glenn McMurdo \$20 on Amazon or Ebay or any of the Wildfowl Carving Magazine workbench series. Canvasbacks, Mergansers, Wood Ducks. These are great highly illustrated with close up photos from the block of wood to the final painted birds. There are other workshop and how to books available from Wildfowl Carving Magazine. Consult the website to see what is in stock.
- Decoys: A Celebration of Contemporary Wildfowl Carving \$20 Amazon or Ebay. A great pictorial study of decorative ducks for the best of the best. Again by seeing what the masters have created you will get ideas about attitude, feather structures and so much more.



Internet

- Google or Bing the type of bird you are interested in. Download the pictures and start building a library of helpful shots on your computer. Get as much detail as possible of feathers and poses.
- There are also many sites that have photos of all kinds of birds.
 - E. J. Peiker -Nature Travel Photography. https://ejphoto.com/wild_waterfowl_species.htm

DVDs and Digital Reference

- Pat Godin 17 time World Champion
- DVD Videos Carving, Painting and Texturing the Hen Canvasback Set of 3 \$100. Painting a Mallard Drake \$40.
- Instructional CDs - how to guides on Carving, Painting, Feathers, Iridescence and more About \$35 from Godinart.com. Many species of ducks with step by step photos and instructions on carving and painting. Great carving tips and excellent painting help on color mixes when painting.
- Patterns- Many species are available at Godin Art website. Besides a pattern for cutting out a block, excellent for sizing anatomical details and feather patterns.

- **AlaskaNorthTaxidermy.com** great selection of reference photo CDs. Each disk has between 50 and 150 high res photos of a species. \$16.95 each
- **Youtube Videos.** World Champion Laurie McNeil has over 200 excellent “how to” videos on carving and painting. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0vwE2fiSuCCI2s5BtYCCDw>

Study Bills

- Castings of actual head of ducks that are a great guide to sizes and detail of each unique bird bill. Recommend buying one to start. Available at Jaymes Company \$18-20 each

Castings

- Full sized resin copies of finished works by the master carvers. If you can find one on eBay, from Pat Godin buy it. A great reference for how the master features and textures his birds. Estimated about \$100.

Rough out bodies

- One of the more daunting aspects of carving a decoy or decorative bird is going from block to rough body. In the middle is the band saw (which not everyone owns). Then comes a lot of shaping, chips and sawdust. I’m going to suggest, that in an effort to get over this hurdle, we start with a rough out body or blank. There are two excellent sources. Fowl Play studios - Jeff Moore www.fowlplaystudios.com and Duxdekes Jeff Duxberry www.duxdekes.com

- Both offer a wide range of species of waterfowl, raptors and other birds. Dux Dekes offers bodies in sugar pine and Tupelo. Fowl Play is exclusively tupelo. Tupelo is a bit more expensive but a bit softer and more grain free. A rough body will cost in the range of \$50 plus shipping.

Tools

This is an area where you can really go crazy, but for our purposes I’ll try to keep a budget in mind. I use power tools to carve. There are many great carvers who use knives but for our purposes I’ll stick with what I know.

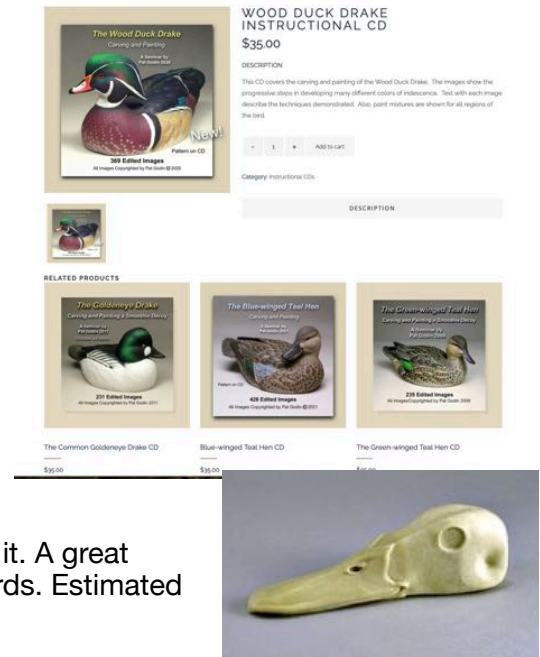
Power carving tools

Dremel -

- The simplest tool is a Dremel 7300 cordless grinder. It is also called a dog nail grooming tool , so if you have a dog it’s a dual purpose item. It comes with some sanding drums and costs about \$25 on Amazon. Buy a couple of extra batteries the Powerextra 4.8 volt 2 for \$22 on Amazon and the Dremel keyless chuck - \$12 also on Amazon. It is a light weight cordless convenient tool and, with the keyless chuck will accept a variety of shaft sizes. You can do everything you need with this tool. But as you progress you might be interested in one of the following...



- **Micro motors-** A micrometer is like a handheld dentist drill. It is easy to maneuver spins at very high speed and is a valuable tool for texturing and



detailed carving. I like the Gesswein Marathon Micrometer tool. It is lightweight, spins and 35,000 rpm comes with a variable speed foot control, and is very durable. It's \$350 at Gesswein.com. Also buy the 3/32 collet for it. You will probably use both sizes of bits.



Shaft Drive tools - Foredom or Dremel

- Many carvers use the Foredom Shaft Drive tool. Dremel also makes a very similar tool. The shaft drive is a more powerful tool. For heavy carving, like shaping a block it is great. With a heavy bit it can make removing lots of wood a simple task. For the beginning carver, it can come later. Foredom flex-shaft tools start at around \$350. You can buy it at Jaymes Company. The Dremel 9100 Fortiflex tool is \$240 at Amazon. I have had the Dremel model for about 4 years and it has never had a problem.



Carving Bits

There are hundreds of kinds and sizes of grinding bits, but I find I probably use only about 20 or so. The best source with the widest selection I have found is Jaymes Company at Jaymescompany.com.

Sanding bands- You will get some of these with your Dremel. They are available at any big box hardware store. Good to have course medium and fine grits. These can be used for almost the entire carving rough for heavier sanding and smooth for finishing.

Carbide Stump Cutter Flame -fine cut - This cutter is known as, The Mueller Bit, Godin's bit, Bob's bit, Bud's cutter, and more. No cutter works like this one. Press hard and you will easily remove wood, press lightly and you can powder cut. Use this cutter when you don't want to remove a lot of wood. Can be used on all types of wood, soft metals, brass, acrylics, plastic, ceramic, gourds. \$25.95 Jaymes Company. A great tool for defining feathers.



Kutzall Bits Kutzall burrs are coated with hundreds of sharp tungsten carbide teeth that remove stock quickly. They are not prone to loading, but may easily be clean with our bur solvent or you can use a gas torch to burn away debris; the heat won't harm the teeth. They are for aggressive removal of wood. About \$15.00 Jaymes Company



Diamond bits Great for finishing and cleaning up details. On feathers or the bill. I recommend;

- Diamond flame 7MM Medium Grit 12.95,
- Diamond pointed flame 3 MM Medium Grit 13.95
- Diamond flame 6.5 Coarse Grit.
- Diamond Flame 3.4 MM Fine grit. 8.95



Eye Cutter - While you can use a drill bit, These eye cutters from Jaymes company are very nice and controllable. Most eyes for ducks are 10mm I recommend getting a 12mm cutter. It gives you a little more room to position your eyes if needed. \$28.95 at Jaymes Company



Wood Burner and Pens

For fine feather detail, a wood burner is a must. There are sets starting at about \$30 on Amazon, but many have no temperature control and most of the tips are not for the fine



detail needed for feather barbs and quills. But you certainly can start with one of these inexpensive models. You will need a straight sharp tip and the ability to keep your temp low. One of the most common mistakes of a new carver is burning too hot and deep. Feather detail is lost.

Moving up to 'professional level' burners, the two big names are Colwood and Razertip. Both brands are available at Greg Dorrance Co gregdorrance.com. Kits start at \$135 and up. I use a Razertip SS D10 burner. The wood burner carving starter kit comes with 4 pens. I use the small and medium skew pens for most of my burning. \$275 gregdorrance.com



Other things

Dust control

Carving ducks make a lot of dust. Very fine dust that you don't want to breathe a lot of. You can use a mask to catch most of the dust on its way to your lungs, but that still leaves a lot of dust in the air and on everything around you. So a Dust collecting system is a great thing to have. Three best choices are

- DC 725 Dust collector \$279.95
- Razaire 530 Dust collector \$368.95
- Tornado 1000 Dust Collector. \$429

All are available at GregDorrance.com. I have used all three and the Tornado is by far the best.



Eyes

Glass eyes are available from many sources, but the best eyes aren't just a single color of red, brown, yellow, etc. they are blended colors or banded with a darker circle around the edge. The eyes make a big difference in the finished bird so spend a little more. Eyes run from \$3 to \$13 per pair. World class eyes are available from Tohickon eyes. Buy them from either tohickon.com or GregDorrance.com. There is a new source for eyes, Fulix.com. by carver Michael R Braun. His eyes look great, with more detail going into each species. They are priced at only \$6.00 per pair. fulix365.com



Wood Duck Drake

Fillers and Glue. Mounting heads, setting eyes, adding inserts all require good fillers and glues. Here are the products I have found best.

- **Epoxy** - two part epoxies work well for setting eyes and other applications where you want the product to stay moldable for a reasonable amount of time, say 20 minutes. Setting eyes are the perfect example. Eyes take a little fiddling particularly creating eyelids and making sure that both sides look the same. Apoxie Sculpt works well, giving about 20 minutes of working time. It also cleans up with water, so after the eye is in place, you can use a wet Bruch to smooth out around the eyelids. To use you mix equal parts of two clay-like components. About \$18.00 from Amazon
- **Wood glue**- For gluing heads on or separate parts, wings, inlays etc. I recommend Gorilla Glue. Sets up quickly and creates a very strong bond.
- **Plastic Wood** - Solvent based vs water based. I have never had a head come off or crack using Plastic Wood or good generic solvent based wood putty. I have had issues when I tried using water based, like Elmers. Works great for attaching heads and filling in cracks. Sands very smooth.



Caliper - A valuable tool to get sizes and positions correct. Great for measuring eye positions bill dimensions, size of feathers from patterns or study bills. You can get a traditional one or a very cool digital one. About \$20. Form Amazon or hardware stores.

Pencil - Almost seems silly to include, but a pencil is a very valuable tool. Sketching your feathers on the body is where your carving begins. Make sure you have several and a good rubber eraser.

Painting

- Sealer -Before painting the surface of the carved and textured duck must be sealed.
- Lacquer based sealer - Deft Clear wood finish semi gloss or Teekay's Rapid-dry sealer are recommended by many carvers.
- Acrylic based sealers- I use Liquitex or Traditions acrylic sealer and varnish.
- Acrylic Paints - There are many good quality acrylic paints. I recommend Jo Sonja or Liquitex. They are available on line or at several big box art and craft stores. When you are starting out a set of paints is a good idea. You will also get some decent brushes with the set.
- Interference, Iridescent and Pearlescent paints - many ducks have beautiful iridescent feathers on their heads, backs, primary and secondary feathers. Trying to recreate these colors is challenging. These three types of paints can get you pretty close. Sometimes a combination of them produces good results.
- Interference paints are airbrush ready but can be applied with a brush. They are a transparent yet iridescent paint.
- Iridescent paints have fine iridescent powder in them. They come out of the tube white and then turn into the appropriate color. They can look a little fake particularly if you see the little metallic flakes.
- Pearlescent paints - Have a pearl finish which when used in a mixture with interference or standard paints can give a good look to the feathers.



Brushes - Another potentially endless area. Buy the best brushes you can afford. Sable are the best. You can get them on Amazon or any art supply store. Raphael are the favorites of many world class carvers, but you will do just fine with less expensive choices.

You will want a few varieties

- Line and fine point brushes - these are great for feather edges and painting feather splits. A 0, 1 and 2 round brush will be a good place to start.
- Cat's paw or rounded brushes - number 6 is good for most areas.
- Blending brushes - These are soft fuzzy brushes that are great for blending colors. A small medium and large size will be useful.
- Fan blender- These fan shaped brushes are used to blend large color transition areas, like the white belly area and the colored sides of a bird.



Left to right #6 Cats paw or filbert, 0/5 liner, #2 Raphael Round, 2/0 Raphael round, Large and small blending brushes.

Air Brush - is a whole other art form and should be avoided by the beginning carver. At some point you will want to try your luck, and amazing results can be achieved, but control is a real challenge. When you are ready, some lessons from a pro would be worth while.

Spray water bottle - Use a small water spray bottle like a poor mans airbrush. By “spritizing” a small amount of water in the area I’m painting, blending is much more effective and easier. I then use a blending brush to softly blend the colors with the water.

Masterson’s Sta-Wet Pallet - A great invention!! It’s a sealed flat box with a wet sponge and a thick paper covering over the sponge. You mix your colors on it and when you take a break or are finished for the day but want to save your paint, just close the lid. Keeps your paint wet and flowing.



Vermiculation Pens - Vermiculations are, a time consuming but important part, of painting a realistic or decorative bird. Vermiculations are the tiny dots or dashes on the sides and or backs of certain species, Wood duck drake, canvasback, redhead gadwall, to name a few. For a beginning carver/painter, using a pen/marker is more controllable but produces acceptable results. Fine point Prismacolor, Faber Castell, or other WATERPROOF, light fast, archival inks are a good choice. Good colors are gray, light and dark, brown or sepia, and black.

Styrofoam Brush holder - an inexpensive way to keep your brushes organized is with a simple block of styrofoam.



Testors Dull Coat - is a spray sealer used after the painting is finished. It creates a dull more natural non glossy finish and protects your bird from water, handling and minor abrasion.

Getting started without breaking the bank

The shopping list of things to buy, is great but you don't need all that stuff to get started. So let's look at a simple beginning. We will plan on creating a canvasback drake for our first bird. It's relatively simple and Pat Godin has a great DVD to get you started with carving and painting your bird.

Reference -

- Google pics of Canvasback Drake - Free
- Pat Godin Canvasback hen and Drake instructional CD this includes patterns which if printed out to the proper size will let you get fine measurements. \$35.00 +\$5.00 shipping \$40
- Dremel 7300 Cordless tool. \$25.00 Includes sanding drums
- # 454 Dremel Sharpening bit for texturing feathers. \$3.00
- Basic wood burning kit Amazon Should have adjustable temp. \$40 or less
- Canvasback body from Duxdekes. With head attached and eyes included.\$45 plus shipping about \$10.00
- Complete Acrylic Paint Set from Amazon includes 12 brushes and 24 colors of paint. \$17.00
- Acrylic Sealer / Varnish \$5.00
- Small Plastic Wood. \$5.00

Total \$190.00.

The good news, is, if you choose the Canvasback hen as your second bird, your only additional cost would be the body from DuxDeKes. All the rest of the materials will last for many more carvings. You can add to your material and tool collection as you go along.

Tips Coming soon will feature some tips and photos of some things I think are important and will be helpful, but not how to carve from the block to the finished bird. Visit thewoodenbird.com for updates.

The pencil - Laying out feathers starts with drawing on the bird

Bits to use

Texturing

Setting eyes

Using a caliper with patterns and study bills

Digging in

Wood burning

Painting

