



Perham Nationals: “The Gathering”—2002



Top: A grouping of golden Trout entries.

Above: John Pususta's "Showdown" winning 30-inch walleye.

As I drove to Perham, Minnesota in early April, I was reminded of the small-town lifestyle that defines and describes Northern Minnesota. Pulling off of the freeway and onto the smaller county roads and highways, I felt the reality of living in a quieter, slower paced world. Perham is a small, closely knit town in Northwestern, Minnesota. Arriving downtown, the daunting bulk of the Tuffy's Dog Food plant looms on the right while the left side of the street is lined with smaller, old fashioned businesses.

Perham is a destination for serious outdoor sportsmen. It has over 75 resorts within 30 miles and is situated in the midst of over 1,000 lakes. Sportsmen can look forward to excellent Walleye and Northern pike fishing as well as to some really good deer, bear, grouse and turkey hunt-

ing. The rich atmosphere and sporting history of the town and surrounding countryside provide an excellent backdrop for the John Jensen National Fish Decoy Carvers Competition, and the Marty Hanson National Gunning Bird Competition. Also held this same weekend is a huge accompanying sporting collectibles show and auction.

Event promoter Rod Osvoild boasts that this is the largest fish decoy show in the country; and after one look around the room, it is obvious that this statement is true. The room is filled with over 125 vendors and fish decoy carvers selling their

wares. For many carvers, this is their only venue for marketing their decoys, and they come back year after year. The walk-in crowd is heavily local, but there are many out-of-state customers looking for fresh additions to their collections as well as dealers searching for merchandise to resell.

As if the show itself is not enough, the National Fish Decoy Competition and Gunning Bird Competition take place at the same time and in the same building. These combined events make Perham's annual "Gathering" a "must-be-there" destination for serious fish and bird decoy carvers from many states including Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Each year there are specific criteria for the carvers to work under. A broad set of general rules governs the actual entries as far as

by Tim Spreck



John Pususta's "Best of Show" Northern Pike.



A unique Christmas tree decorated with fish decoys. Done by Woody Peet Decoys.



John Oman (left) and Mike Ott at their display.

materials used for construction and performance required of the decoys. There are several classes of competition which carvers can enter. This year, some of the designated fish decoy categories were Golden Trout, White Sucker, Northern Pike and Whitefish, to name a few. Each decoy in these designated classes is limited to specific size restrictions.

The ever popular "Open Division" provided a contrast to the ultra-realistic fish decoys. This division produced high quality entries in the Folk Art fish decoy, Jig Stick, Lure, Bobber, and Ice Fishing Stick classes. As one would expect, the entries were widely varied, and the quality was fantastic. Overall, there were more than 400 individual entries in the fish decoy competition alone. The Gunning Bird competition had a lighter number of entries. Show promoters hope to build this event up over time. Among the designated classes were Snowy Owl, Snow Goose, and Rudy Duck. When judging took place, each fish and bird decoy was evaluated in a water tank for its performance, and also for aesthetics.

On Saturday evening at the Bruce Dixon Awards Banquet, promoter Rod Osvold handed out the awards for the winning entries for both the Gunning Birds and Fish Spearing Decoys. With dozens of awards to hand out, Mr. Osvold made good progress and kept the ball rolling smoothly. A series of

humorous spear fishing related poems by perennial favorite, Otis Lael, broke up the action and provided some lighter entertainment. Also honored during the evening were several old timers who were granted the status of "Living Legend" with a special award. Among these living Legends were Don Bethel, as well as Henry Max and Bru-Ell decoys (accepted posthumously). Also among the special awards were recognition for Rookie Carver Of The Year, Sharon Thomas. Special recognition was given to carver Bob Johnson who painted the original for the last year's Collector's Print as well as Tim Spreck who was recognized as Folk Art Fish Decoy Carver Of The Year. A Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to John Jensen.

Many glasses were raised in honor of the accomplishments of the winning carvers. Best of Show honors were bestowed upon current World Champion, Harley Ragan, for a fantastic Arctic Char in the

Airbrushed Fish Decoy Division. Hand Painted Fish Decoy honors were grabbed by world class fish decoy carver John Pususta for his beautiful Northern Pike. The Gunning Bird Best Of Show distinction was garnered by Casey Edwards for his stunning Snowy Owl.

The highlight of the banquet was the announcement of the winner of the "Showdown" competition. This was a new category for 2002, and it was a "winner takes all" award of \$1,500 in cash. The designated species in this category was Walleye. Not only was the designated species very difficult to paint with its subtle colorings, but the rules called for it to be 30-31" in length. The difficulty level of carving a working fish decoy of this size is very high. There were several outstanding fish decoys in this category carved by master carvers Harley Ragan, John Oman and Paul McNeal, but the top honor went to Minnesotan, John Pususta. His entry was stunning and excep-

tional in every respect. A complete listing of winners as well as pictures can be found on the NFDA's website at NFDA.TV.

Also of interest was the first annual Texas Worlds which is the brainchild of Bryan Tindall, a well known fish decoy collector from Texas. The rules were simple. A working decoy was to be carved by each entrant and painted in only the traditional colors of red and white. They were judged, and trophies and prizes were awarded. The Texas Worlds provided a fun element to the overall fish decoy competition and will be included in next year's schedule of events.

The atmosphere throughout the weekend was upbeat and fun, yet highly competitive. Some of the best times were had in the evenings at the Super 8 Motel in Perham. Dozens of carvers, vendors dealers and collectors gathered at what has become an annual event at the hotel. Wisconsin fish carver, Doug Davis, put on his yearly fish fry and beer fest; and the sweet bluegill fillets were fantastic. Add a sampling of assorted side



Harley Ragan with his "Best of Show" arctic Char.

dishes, some smoked or pickled fish, and a generous helping of fishing stories; and this event ranks as a perennial favorite. There is something about the chemistry in Perham. It is like nothing else in the sporting collectibles world. Each participant

brings a unique offering to the event. The carvers' talents are unquestioned and the atmosphere fantastic.

Driving home from the Perham Nationals was a bittersweet experience. As I passed vehicles on the highway, I saw many old friends as well as several new ones. It was a little sad to think that I would probably not see many of these fantastic folks for another year, but the memories will be with me always. Perham, Minnesota occupies a warm spot in many memories as a magical place where we, a bunch of middle-aged decoy carvers, can take the national spotlight for a short weekend in April. We compete, tell stories, fry fish, have a beer-or-five, and act like we did back in those long-ago days when we didn't have a care in the world. The only regret for most is that it only happens once a year. □

(Editor's note: Tim Spreck is a well known, award-winning fish decoy carver and a dealer in vintage spearing decoys. He can be reached at 651-439-1110, or visit his website at—www.fishdecoy.net)

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