



Brian Shallbetter carving fish decoys at his workbench.

Brian SHALLBETTER

Carving decoys for Minnesota's long, cold months

BY ROD TAYLOR

BRIAN SHALLBETTER may have the perfect job for a guy who lives to carve spearfishing decoys: he's an estimator for the largest roofing company in the state of Minnesota. For those unfamiliar with Minnesota weather, from December to March, when the mercury can easily dip below zero, it will absolutely take your breath away!

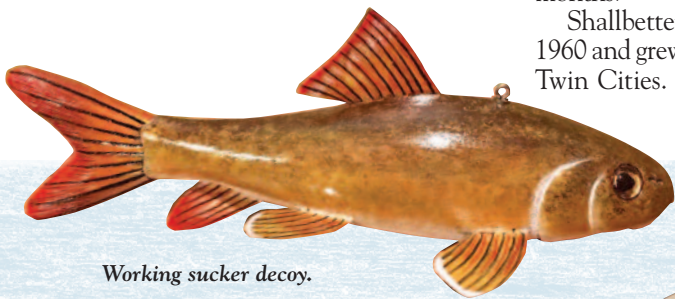
When it snows it sticks around, and with an average of 45 inches annually, roofers during the winter make the Maytag Repairman a whirling dervish by comparison. This downtime enables Shallbetter to concentrate on carving fish decoys and employing them in darkhouses through those long, cold months.

Shallbetter was born in Minneapolis in 1960 and grew up in Crystal, a suburb of the Twin Cities. When he was 17, his family

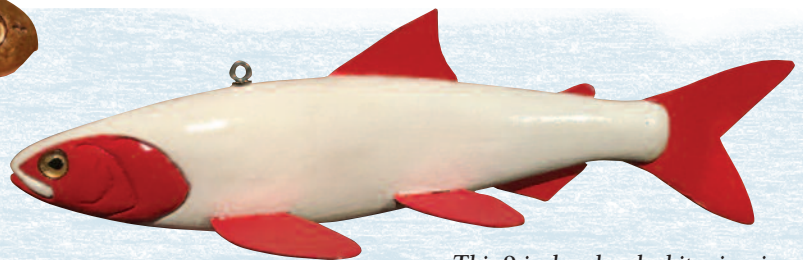
moved to a lake house in Mora. "My dad introduced me to the outdoors when I was four," he recalls. "Since then I've enjoyed hunting and fishing as much for the memories of my childhood as for the fun I have now." His father Vince owned a retail meat market, "so I learned early on how to clean and process anything I harvested."

School, downhill skiing and working in his dad's meat market took up most of his spare time while growing up. He eventually made time to court his wife Jean, whom he met in high school and married in 1981. They have been blessed with two wonderful daughters and three grandchildren. When the topic of his carvings arises, Brian will often look to his wife for her seal of approval, as she is very supportive of his artistry.

In 2008, Shallbetter's good friend Jerome talked him into going spearfishing with him



Working sucker decoy.



This 9-inch red and white cisco is one of Brian's signature decoys



Extremely lifelike cisco spearing decoy, Brian's signature piece of work.

Simple decoys like this red and white sucker form the backbone of any working spearfishing tackle box.





Very lifelike cutthroat fish decoy.

A 13-inch Alaskan rainbow, quite possibly nature's most beautiful fish.



This 13-inch lake trout would earn "Best of Class" at a lot of shows!

on a local lake. "I thought the sport was as boring as watching paint dry," he muses, "that is, until I speared a ten-pound northern pike," he laughs. His early success helped build a passion for the hobby.

The first spearfishing decoy Shallbetter used was made by Jay McEvers, a respected carver from Minnesota. "As I got into the sport I wanted to try and make my own fish decoys," he explains. "McEvers was a big early influence on my carving style and he convinced me to start competing in carving contests with my decoys."

Just like wildfowl carving, there are two kinds of fish decoys: working and decorative. Typical working decoys are seven to nine

inches long, made out of white cedar and tend to be simple in design. "One of the most successful decoys I use is just a generic red and white fish," he says. His decorative or show decoys are made from basswood and measure between nine and 14 inches. Decorative fish decoys do get used in the darkhouse, you just have to remember that you're dangling a few hundred dollars worth of decoy through a hole in the ice.

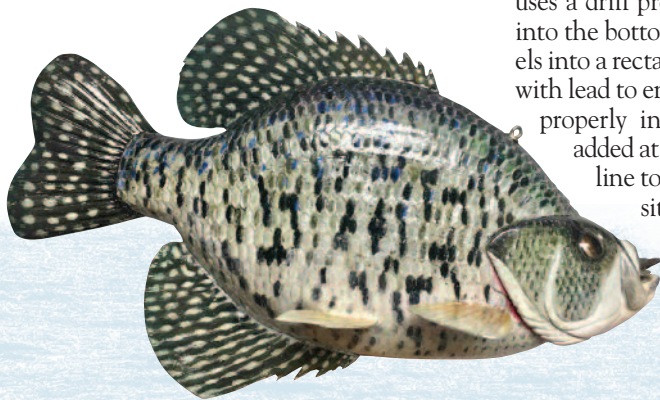
"If there is anyone who still carves in the traditional way, it would be Brian," notes award-winning carver Jacob Sazama. "He has his own style that makes his decoys stand out."

Shallbetter hand-carves his fish decoys using knives, gouges and sanding sticks. He uses a drill press to insert a series of holes into the bottoms of his decoys that he chisels into a rectangular shape, which are filled with lead to ensure that the decoys will sink properly in the water. A screw eye is added at the top of the decoy to tie the line to, which is placed so the decoy sits level under water.

Each of Shallbetter's fish generally has six to seven fins that he cuts out of sheet aluminum. Working decoys typically have their rays painted on the fins. "Competition decoys get all the bells and whistles," he notes. "I use a thicker grade of aluminum on them. This allows me to cut the individual rays onto each fin and to feather the fin edges to look as they do in a real fish." Each scale on a competition decoy is individually applied using a wood burning tip.

Shallbetter then adds two fins per side, one for the pectoral and one for the pelvic, and the anal and dorsal fins are inserted on the bottom and top of the decoy. Painting commences once the fins have been cut to include their rays. He prefers using acrylic paint because it "just gives me so many more options with my fish that I just keep coming back to it," he says. Painted decoys are sealed using several coats of clear urethane to preserve the integrity of the paint.

Once the decoys are finished, it's time to go fishing. Shallbetter uses a four by seven foot darkhouse that has a door but no win-



A black crappie showcases Brian's painting skills.



A lovely 8-inch perch decoy.



Exceptional largemouth bass with deeply incised scales and ground sheet metal fins.



Wonderful colors on a Pumpkinseed sunfish.



A good day on the lake: 37 1/2-inch northern pike with the cisco decoy that lured him in and the spear that nabbed him. Notice how thick the slab of ice is!

dows. The only light source is the 24 by 40-inch hole that he makes using an 8-inch auger to cut a series of interlocking holes through the ice. "The toughest part of getting ready to spearfish is moving the cut slab of ice out of the hole," he explains. "I use a large pair of tongs to firmly grasp the side of the slab. Once I have the tongs on it, it takes all my weight to roll the chunk out of the hole and onto the ice. Once that's done, it's like watching the Mother Nature Channel on TV. The images you see through the ice are that clear."

When you see ice shanties on a lake – and they're quite common on lakes in Michigan and Minnesota – if the shack is in the middle of the lake, where the water is deepest, that's an ice fisherman. Those folks are using live bait and hooks to bring in their catch. If the shack is closer to the bank, that's a darkhouse spear fisherman; they prefer water that is eight to ten feet deep.

Shallbetter uses a two-by-four in the back of his shack to attach two bait-cast reels. He runs the lines from across the ceil-

ing and into the hole that he cut into the ice. After attaching two fish decoys, he lowers the lines into the water. He generally uses a working red and white at a three-foot depth and a more decorative decoy, often a cisco, at a seven-foot depth.

"Northern pike approach fish decoys in almost a casual manner," Shallbetter explains.

"They see the red and white decoy from a distance first and that lures them in. When they get closer, they see the decoy that looks more like a fish, and that's what they strike at. My job is to get the spear off before they hit the decoy. I like duck hunting," he says, "but ducks don't try and run off with your decoy in their teeth."

The spears themselves are almost fearsomely impressive examples of the blacksmith's art.

Shallbetter uses a 5-foot long Kraemer spear that features seven tines with razor-sharp inward-facing barbs plus a double-sided center barb. The top of each spear has a hole through it so that you can tie it off. He typically anchors his spear with nylon line that he attaches to an eyebolt that gets



Magnificent 14-inch northern pike decoy.



screwed into the shack's wooden floor. The spearman's mantra at that point becomes: "Ride your decoys high and stay off the rope." The last rule is important since Brian fishes alone the great majority of the time.

Darkhouse spear fishermen work hard for their catch. Shallbetter generally spends several hours fishing each trip onto the ice. If you spear a fish, that's a good day. On a great day, he spears two. Most folks would call that a pretty meager success rate, but in spite of that there's a palpable level of mistrust between ice fishermen and those using a spear.

The ice fishing faction thinks the spear fishermen are taking all the big fish away. The spearkers claim the ice fishermen harvest many more fish than they do and, truth be told, they do. Most folks wouldn't think it was worth a fight; however, the political lobbying by both groups is surprisingly spirited. There's a reason you don't see many fish decoys from Wisconsin; the state forbids spearing on all inland waterways, although ice fishing is welcome. You can, however, spear on Lake Michigan's ice in the Badger State, although you will want to keep your will updated if you do.

Among Minnesota fish carvers, John Pususta is first among equals. Or as former Houston Oiler's coach Bum Phillips once said of running back Earl Campbell: "He may not be in a class by himself, but it don't take long to call the roll." Reflecting on Shallbetter's progress, Pususta notes that "he has come a long way in a few short years. Brian makes wonderful decoys that are functional as well as beautiful."

Every April, Perham, a small town near the center of Minnesota, hosts an event billed modestly as "The World's Largest Fish Decoy Show and Competition," or as it's more simply referred to: "The Gathering." This weekend show is conducted by The National Fish Decoy Association, an organization that helps promote darkhouse spearfishing and fish decoy carving. Brian attends each year, displaying decoys for sale and competing in the carving competitions. "I have met so many kind and supportive fellow carvers and collectors through this community," he says.

Minnesota is a state with 10,842 lakes and almost as many regulations. The Department of Natural Resources lists 257 different outdoor licenses required for activities that range from "youth bear license" to "decorative bough buyer permit." If you'd like to try your hand at darkhouse spearfishing, you'll need some gear – you betcha – but you'd better also obtain a license for your darkhouse, a fishing license and a fish spearing license, because they're all required. Other than that, welcome to the tundra, and please shut the door! 