

A Previously Undescribed Great Basin Goose Decoy

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Preface

Gratefully, Phil Wilke introduced me to fly fishing and stone tool technology when we were both anthropology graduate students at the Riverside campus of the University of California. When running into each other at fishing locations in the Eastern Sierra, we enjoyed some time together discussing, for instance, fly tying, casting, and current issues in archaeological science. On one occasion, Frank Fenenga and I were joined by Phil on a fishing-camping trip to Deep Creek in the San Bernardino National Forest where Phil and I enjoyed the campfire experience of Frank sharing his knowledge of archaeology and fish. These memories of camaraderie will always remain special.

Abstract

The morphology and size of a tule decoy displayed in the Eastern California Museum in Independence, California, suggests that it may represent a goose. Manufacturing comparisons are made between this specimen and other prehistoric and historic waterfowl decoys. The prehistoric presence of goose decoys and the presence of goose remains in archaeological faunal collections support the likelihood that the museum specimen represents a goose. The Northern Paiute dependence on waterfowl is reflected in the prehistoric distribution of decoy manufacture, but Washoe proximity to environs such as the Carson Sink probably also involved decoy manufacture. The broad usage of waterfowl decoys in California and the Great Basin allows no inference as to the geographic origin of this specimen.

Introduction

Great Basin anthropologists are familiar with the skillfully fashioned, prehistoric waterfowl decoys

from Lovelock Cave, Nevada (Loud and Harrington 1929:Plates 7, 32, 33 and 34) (Figure 1). The tradition of manufacturing waterfowl decoys from tule (*Scirpus validus*) or similar materials continues among the Northern Paiute (Numa) near Fallon, Nevada (Wheat 1967:47–54; Taylor 1985:17).

Here we call attention to a previously undescribed waterfowl decoy (Figure 2) in the collections of the Eastern California Museum (ECM) in Independence, California, and place this specimen within the broad context of related phenomena reported in the ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological literature for California and the Great Basin. Reports of decoys extend from the Coastanoans, Pomo, and Patwin of California eastward to the Great Basin to include the contemporary Northern Paiute. The decoy seen in Figure 2 is catalogued by the ECM as specimen number A:335/571.55. It is identified in the catalog as “One Indian Duck Decoy, A:335, made of tule. Made by Washoe Indians of Carson Valley. Purchased Fall 1935.” This so-called “duck” specimen is somewhat similar in manufacture to the prehistoric specimens described below and particularly to the ethnographic duck decoy specimens of the Northern Paiute (see Figure 3). Its dimensions (approximately 56 cm long, 24 cm wide, and 39 cm high) and morphology strongly suggest that the specimen actually represents a goose.¹

The duck decoy pictured in Figure 3 is 22 cm long, 10 cm wide, and 16 cm high. A similar specimen, but headless, found at Humboldt Cave measures 23 cm

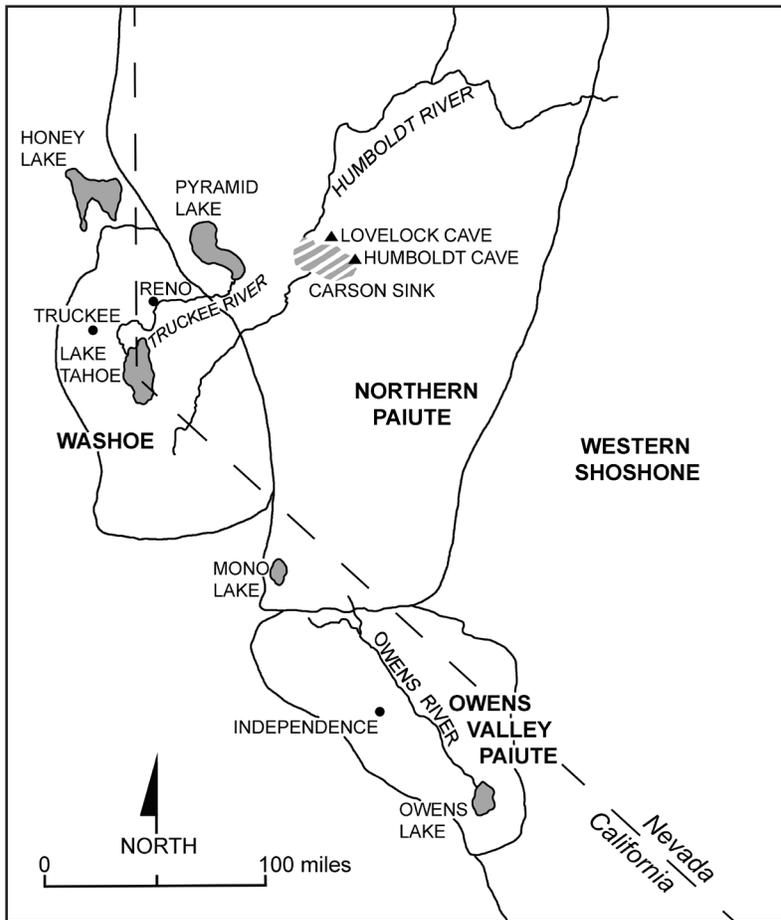


Figure 1. General map of the western Great Basin.

long, 11 cm wide, and 7.5 cm high (Heizer and Krieger 1956:13). The agreement in dimensions of these two duck specimens and the size contrast between them and the ECM specimen with its proportionally long neck further convinced us that the Washoe artifact represents a goose.

Decoy Manufacture

Manufacture began by first bending and binding a bundle of approximately 10 to 15 large tules. The bundle was then bent into a U-shape and the tules were subsequently constricted several inches from their ends to form the tail. The formation of the interior of the body was accomplished by bending single tules into a U-shape lengthwise over the front of the

original bundle and by tying them in a splayed fashion inside the original U-shaped bundle.

Finally, the neck was formed by pushing five or six U-shaped tules up through the central body and binding them together, bending and progressively binding the tules more tightly into a head and a representation of a bill. The contemporary wrapping cords on duck decoys are either string or what appears to be wool yarn. Note that the duck decoy's cordage in Figure 3 is twined tule. The manufacture of the ESM specimen (Figure 2) closely resembles that of the modern Northern Paiute duck decoy, *pihiiti'aa* (see Liljeblad et al. 2012:31), shown in Figure 3, which was crafted by Ivan George of Stillwater, Nevada (and now in the possession of the lead author).

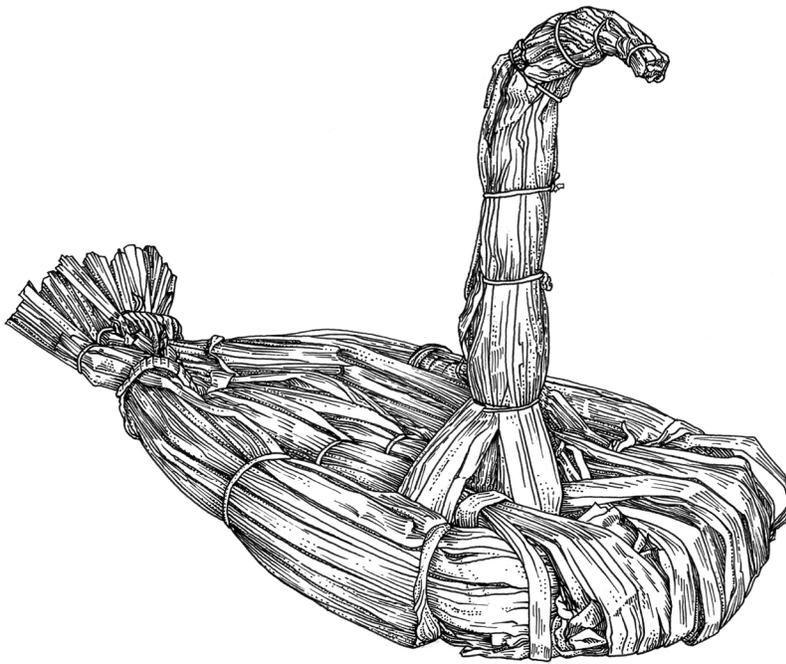


Figure 2. Waterfowl decoy made from tule in the collections of the Eastern California Museum (Cat. No. A:335/571.55), interpreted herein as a goose decoy. Specimen is 56 cm long and 35 cm high.

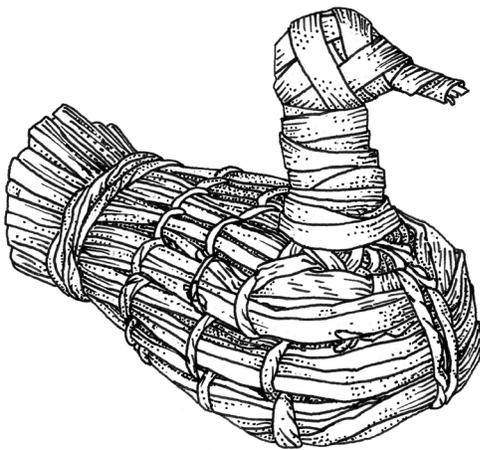


Figure 3. An ethnographic Northern Paiute tule duck decoy purchased by the lead author with a tag that reads "Ivan George of Stillwater, Nevada." Specimen is 22 cm long and 16 cm high.

Archaeological Background

Migratory waterfowl have long been a source of food and materials in the Great Basin and California, and their remains have been found in early Archaic sites near lacustrine habitats, such as Lovelock Cave, Nevada (Loud and Harrington 1929:35), Humboldt Cave, Nevada (Heizer and Krieger 1956:107), Danger Cave, Utah (Jennings 1957:Appendix C), Hogup

Cave, Utah (Aikens 1970:Appendix V) and the Irvine site in coastal Orange County, California (Drover et al. 1983:48–49). It is noteworthy that remains of geese (*Branta* spp., *Chen* spp., and *Anser* spp.) are represented in the Lahontan Basin at Lovelock Cave (Loud and Harrington 1929:35) and Humboldt Cave (Heizer and Krieger 1956:107), but they are not documented in the eastern Great Basin at either Danger Cave (Jennings 1957:Appendix C) or Hogup Cave (Aikens

1970:Appendix V). It is unclear whether this absence reflects different migratory routes and/or procurement strategies, and it is doubtful that the difference is due solely to differential preservation. Given the nature and location of the above mentioned cave sites and the nesting habits of ducks and geese, it could be that the presence of the faunal specimens is cultural; however, the habits of carnivores could result in the introduction of some noncultural avifaunal remains into sites.

To date, prehistoric waterfowl decoys have been recovered in Lovelock Cave (NV-Ch-18), Humboldt Cave (NV-Ch-35), and Ocala Cave (NV-Ch-24), but they are unrecorded from other dry cave sites in similar habitats. Loud and Harrington (1929) described two varieties of decoys recovered from Lovelock Cave, painted (Type I) and stuffed (Type II). The Type I body was formed by bending a bundle of 25 or 30 large bulrush stems (*Scirpus validus*) and binding them together. The ends were then sewn to the body to affect a realistic pose. Next, the bend of the rushes was smoothly bound over with split rush to form the breast; the bird was then painted with black and reddish-brown pigments. Finally, white feathers were applied, the quills of which were stuck under the breast wrappings and held in place with fine cords of Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum* L.). The completed painted decoy illustrated and described in Loud and Harrington (1929:114, Plate 345), which is only 27.5 cm long, is the commonly represented canvas-back drake (*Nyroca* cf. *valisineria*), or *tohatsakwaadi* in Northern Paiute (Liljeblad et al. 2012:743).² Only ducks seem to have been represented by the painted decoys.

Ducks, geese, and other waterfowl were imitated by the Type II decoys and were manufactured by the Northern Paiute. Loud and Harrington (1929:114) described the bodies as being made in approximately the same way as the painted type, but the breast was not bound. Instead of a complete rush head, there was a rush stub, or nipple, that projected from the body to

which a complete stuffed bird head (with skin, feathers, and beak) was attached. Some of these ancient decoys still had a loop of cord on the breast and one under the tail, both of which likely served for the attachment of an anchor cord.

In the upper Lovelock Cave deposits even smaller birds (Type II) were mounted on sticks (see Loud and Harrington 1929:114 Plate 34a). One such specimen is 11.4 cm long, and it was nearly destroyed by insects (as were the other examples). Species represented by Type II decoys included Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*), white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*), American merganser (*Mergus merganser*), and pintail (*Anas acuta*).^{3, 4}

Loud and Harrington (1929:181) also described three fragmentary specimens of Type II decoys from the nearby Ocala Cave. These included the neck of an American coot, or “mud hen” (*Fulica americana*),⁵ stuffed with saltgrass, the head and neck of a mud hen stuffed with saltgrass, and the head of a California gull (*Larus californicus*) stuffed with grass. The gull and other non-waterbird decoy specimens may represent “confidence” decoys, or mimics of birds that occupy the same niche and around which game birds feel safe.

The Lovelock Cave (and possibly Humboldt Cave and Ocala Cave) specimens are associated with the Transitional to Late Lovelock culture phases which date between 1000 BC and AD 500 (Grosscup 1960:Figure 10). Two of the 11 Lovelock Cave duck decoys were dated by accelerator mass spectrometry at 2080 ± 330 BP and 2250 ± 230 BP (Tuohy and Napton 1986). The Lovelock Cave specimens were designated as the official *State of Nevada Artifact* in 1995 (Nevada Legislature 2013).

Heizer and Krieger (1956:13) described several decoys and four twisted tule fragments of probable decoys from Humboldt Cave that were constructed quite like the modern Paiute duck decoys shown by

Loud and Harrington (1929: Plates. 33, 59). They were made of unusually large tule culms bound into bundles of two and three and bent to simulate the body of a waterfowl, with the tail ends clipped short. The tule foundation of their modern specimen, rather than covered with a skin or painted, has blue-black feathers stuck into the clipped ends that form an upright tail. A sharp peg protrudes from the body toward the front, presumably to support a head. A mooring line was observed wound once around a large tule at the front, brought up and wound twice to the peg, then led out again. The decoy body described by Heizer and Krieger (1956:13), recovered just below ground surface at the front of Humboldt Cave, is 23 cm long, 11 cm wide at the neck peg, 5 cm wide at the tail, and 7.5 cm high to the peg, which is 3.5 cm tall.

Heizer and Krieger (1956:13) noted that all four Humboldt Cave fragmentary decoys were found near the deposit surface. Two of these are only heads, while the other two from the same place are probably tail parts. In view of the similar morphologies of waterfowl decoys crafted by the historic Paiute, a relatively late manufacture of these specimens is indicated. Since the decoys and stuffed bird heads from both Lovelock Cave and Ocala Cave were found at or near the surface, there is probably a cultural-historical connection between the last cave occupations and contemporary Paiute manufacture (Heizer and Krieger 1956:13).

Of the aforementioned archaeological specimens, the only goose decoys are Type II specimens derived from Lovelock Cave. They represent a Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) and a white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*).

Waterfowl As Ethnographical Subsistence Resources

There is an absence of decoys from eastern Great Basin archaeological sites, yet there is ethnographic documentation of waterfowl hunting throughout

the Great Basin (Fowler 1986:82). Waterfowl could have been taken using the same netting employed for rabbit drives and terrestrial bird drives, but they were also shot from blinds after being attracted to decoys. They may have been hand captured at water's edge when molting impaired their flight (Kelly 1932:90). When on water, the birds could have been captured from beneath by disguised swimmers (Fowler 1986:82, 87) who might have employed the use of decoys such as those collected at Carson Lake, Nevada, in 1859, which had "crutch-top" handles appended to the underside to facilitate manipulation (see Fowler and Liljeblad 1986:Figure 4). The focus of ethnographic Northern Paiute decoy use appears among the *Doidikaadi* (cattail-eaters) of the Carson Sink area in Stillwater, Nevada. The tule decoy of the Northern Paiute is known as *pihidi'aa*, and the dry cattail bag for carrying decoys is *mago'o* (Kelly 1932:90; Liljeblad et al. 2012:38).

In the recent past, traditional manufacturing of waterfowl decoys continued among the Northern Paiute and Washoe (Stewart 1941:424, Elements 180 and 181a). D'Azevedo (1986:479) had more to say about the Washoe, identifying duck and goose decoys of twisted and bound tules and stating specifically that mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Canada geese, and whistling swans (*Olor columbianus*) were the largest and most favored species represented. The manufacture of tule duck decoys similar to those described above also continues among the Northern Paiute (Wheat 1967:47–54) (see Figure 3). It is noteworthy that while Steward (1938:Figure 7) reported the availability of ducks in the southern Owens Valley, and Liljeblad and Fowler offered the following observation:

The heavy dependence of the Northern Paiutes on waterfowl had no counterpart in Owens Valley. Decoys, nets (other than the rabbit net also used for catching fish), and communal duck hunting were generally unknown in the Sierra Piedmont [1986:418].

Ethnographic examples of decoy manufacture, however, are not restricted to the western Great Basin. Specimens identified as “grass-stuffed geese” were described by Palou for Costanoans at San Pablo Creek on San Francisco Bay in 1776 (Bolton 1926:2, 341; cf., Heizer and Krieger 1956:76; see also Margolin 1978:38–40). Kroeber (1932:390) described stuffed geese and duck decoys manufactured by the River Patwin as well as by the Wintun (Kroeber 1925:359). He also noted that the Maidu used live goose decoys (Kroeber 1925:410). An illustration in Heizer and Elsasser (1980:68, Figure 39) suggests Pomo use of decoys.

Pigeons were mimicked by skin- or feather-covered decoys among the Yokuts (Holmes 1902:61; Latta 1977:492, 495). A review of the culture element distribution (CED) lists for the Pomo and southern California peoples omits reference to decoys, apparently because the question was not posed. However, seven of the 25 lists do carry affirmative statements of decoy use. Entries in these lists are often nonspecific and refer to the fact that “stuffed bird skins were used as decoys.” References in the CEDs to decoy use include the Southern Sierra Nevada (Yokuts, Tübatulabal, Kawaiisu, Owens Valley Paiute) (Driver 1937:62), Northern and Gosiute Shoshoni (Bannock, Promontory Point) (Steward 1943:295), Nevada Shoshoni (Battle Mountain Shoshoni) (Steward 1941:224), Northern Paiute (Tasiget, Kuiu dokado, Kupu, Toe dokado, Tovusi dokado, Pakwi dokado, Pakwi, Washoe, Tago Toka, Kidu dokado) (Steward 1941:Element 180; 424), Northeastern California (Tule Lake Modoc, Valley Maidu) (Voegelin 1942:53), Plateau (Umatilla, Lower Carrier, Kutenai) (Ray 1942:122), and the Central Sierra (North Fork Mono, San Joaquin Yokuts, Plains Miwok, Northern Miwok) (Aginsky 1943:397). For the southern Sierra Nevada region, Driver (1937:62) reported the presence of “stuffed bird skins, floating,” for four valley Yokuts bands (Nutunutu, Tachi, Chunut, and Yaulmani), as well as for the Tübatulabal, the Kawaiisu, and, interestingly, for the Owens Valley Paiute.

Heizer and Krieger (1956:76) speculated that since Steward’s CED studies of the Nevada Shoshoni (1941) and the Northern and Gosiute Shoshoni (1943) show decoys as unknown or doubtfully present in the eastern Great Basin, then the trait is a special western Great Basin element “...with closest parallels to central California.”⁶ The widely spread distribution of waterfowl decoys indicated above does not allow identification of a point of origin.

Summary

Drawing on ethnological data and observing the general condition and construction of the ECM specimen, we infer that it is probably meant to represent a goose, is of relatively recent manufacture, and may be of Washoe origin, directly or indirectly influenced by Northern Paiute technology. The ethnohistoric literature does not document waterfowl hunting utilizing goose decoys, although such decoys are known from the archaeological record and may have derived from the Type II style noted above for Lovelock Cave (see Loud and Harrington 1929).

End Notes

1. This article stemmed from a visit by both authors to the Eastern California Museum during a fly fishing trip in the eastern Sierra ca. 1987. Frank Fenenga passed away in 1994.
2. It is not clear what techniques of avifaunal analyses were performed at Lovelock Cave, and in the absence of uniform application of screening techniques, results may be somewhat indiscriminate. The avifaunal list from Danger Cave reflects only feathers recovered from the deposit (Jennings 1957:Appendix C).
3. Canvasback duck faunal remains are not known from Lovelock Cave (Loud and Harrington 1929:37), but they are represented at Humboldt Cave (Heizer and Krieger 1956:107).

4. Of these specimens, Canada goose, pintail, and American merganser are represented in the larger faunal collection of Lovelock Cave.

5. While American coot (mud hen) remains are not present in the Lovelock Cave faunal assemblage, they are represented at Humboldt Cave (Heizer and Krieger 1956:107). Description of the larger faunal assemblage from Ocala Cave is absent (Loud and Harrington 1929).

6. It is unclear how Heizer and Krieger interpreted these entries as an absence of waterfowl decoy technology. Steward (1941:224) noted that among the Nevada Shoshone, “ducks were rare in most parts of Shoshoni territory. Stuffed decoys were used occasionally. The ‘birdskins over-head’ is a complete duckskin mask worn by the hunter who swims among ducks, seizes their legs and pulls them underwater.” Also see Steward (1943:295) for the Nevada Shoshoni and for the Northern and Gosiute Shoshoni.

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