

Open Water Ducks

The "layout" boat may be the best way to hunt deep, open water, but building it is no easy task.

by John Crew



Lawrence S. Earley

Every waterfowl hunter has had the frustrating experience. You're sitting in a blind at the edge of a marsh. In front of you are 75 decoys bobbing enticingly on the water. Everything looks perfect, but not a single duck has passed within 100 yards all morning. Instead, they're all rafted up in open water. Once in awhile, a bunch will get up and fly, but do they head your way? Of course not. They plop down in another expanse of open water.

Many years ago, before floating sink boxes were outlawed, you could effectively hunt these open-water areas, but the requirement that blinds be permanent and protrude above the water surface reduced the effectiveness of open-water blinds, and modifications simply didn't produce well enough to be worth the trouble. Some open water stake blinds are still in use, and permanent blinds styled somewhat like the old sink boxes still produce a few birds in Pamlico, but the lack of mobility doesn't help.

Still, there is a good way to hunt those frustrating open-water ducks if you're willing to go to a bit of trouble. What you need is a "layout" boat which can be moved from place to place and anchored for hunting. Such a rig isn't legal in some places where blind sites must be permanent and registered — like Currituck Sound, for example — but there are plenty of other spots in Coastal North Carolina where a layout boat can still be used legally if you're careful to comply with regulations.

Layout boats — so named because the hunter lies on his back in them, and sits up to shoot — are hardly new. First developed in the Northeast and Great Lakes, these low-profile one- and two-man boats are similar to the old Barnegat sneakboxes and Long Island punties, except that the layout boat is not designed to move under any type of power — paddle, motor or anything else. It's basically an anchored, floating blind, and although it protrudes above the water, the curved deck and low profile do not alarm ducks.

The mobile layout boat offers the unique opportunity to go where the fowl are while the more traditional hunters are waiting for the ducks to come to them. Most diving-duck hunters know that as the season progresses and hunting pressures increase, the fowl shy away from blinds and shorelines. A layout rig allows a hunter to watch the fowls' flight and follow them. A rather simple concept, but some of the logistics and techniques are more complicated than appear on the surface. Because layout hunting requires large numbers of decoys, 100 and more, you want to locate large enough concentrations of fowl to justify the effort. Rigging large numbers of decoys in deep water far from land in heavy seas can require some

massive support and manpower. You can, of course, rig a layout as a conventional stake blind close to land and wade the decoys out, but the boat is really at its best in deep water. However, rigging in shallow water dramatically reduces the effort.

One welcome surprise is that layout hunts don't begin until mid-morning or even afternoon, which means no more frigid dawn sentinels.

Whether you choose a rig in the shallow or deep water, a tender boat is required to transport the layout, decoys, hunter and crew to where the fowl are. My personal rig to support a one-man layout boat is a 17-foot deep vee boat with 115 hp motor, 150 decoys rigged on "long lines" as illustrated, and a skilled crewman. The necessity of the crew can't be over-emphasized. Two experienced hands can anchor the layout, rig the decoys and transfer the hunter to the layout in a fraction of the time otherwise required. A third boat large enough to serve as a base headquarters allowing the hunter to stretch his legs and get out of the weather is helpful, but not necessary. Exposure to wind and wave is very tiring and necessitates drying out frequently.

The layout is anchored fore and aft by a bridle attached to four

Anchored in deep water, a layout boat's curved deck and low profile hide the hunter. Its mobility lets him get out where the ducks are. There's an obvious advantage to this kind of anchored, floating blind especially in late season when the waterfowl shy away from the shoreline. The layout boat can be slung across the gunnels of a power boat for transport.



Lawrence S. Earley

Decoy Set

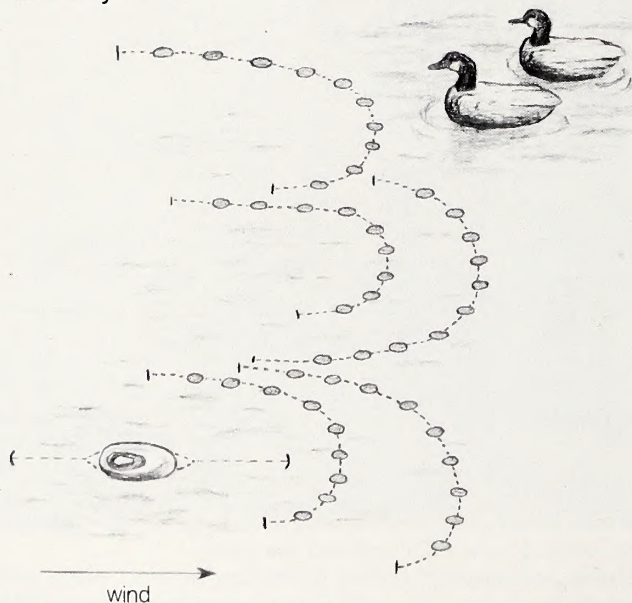


Diagram (above) shows strategy for setting layout boat's decoys. Place decoys 20 - 25 yards downwind of layout boat. Boat should be slightly to the left of center for right-handed shooters, and centered for left-handed shooters.

charts by Peggy Callaway

eye bolts screwed into the box. If all shooters are right-handed the decoys are set 20-25 yards downwind slightly to the left. If there are left-handers the layout should be centered upwind.

The classic layout operation includes the tender and/or base craft, alternate hunters and crew, and a vast decoy spread. The tender boat lies at anchor some distance upwind from the layout, watching the incoming fowl and the shots. This spectator vantage is often as exciting as the actual shooting since you have a panoramic view and can see the whole plot unfold.

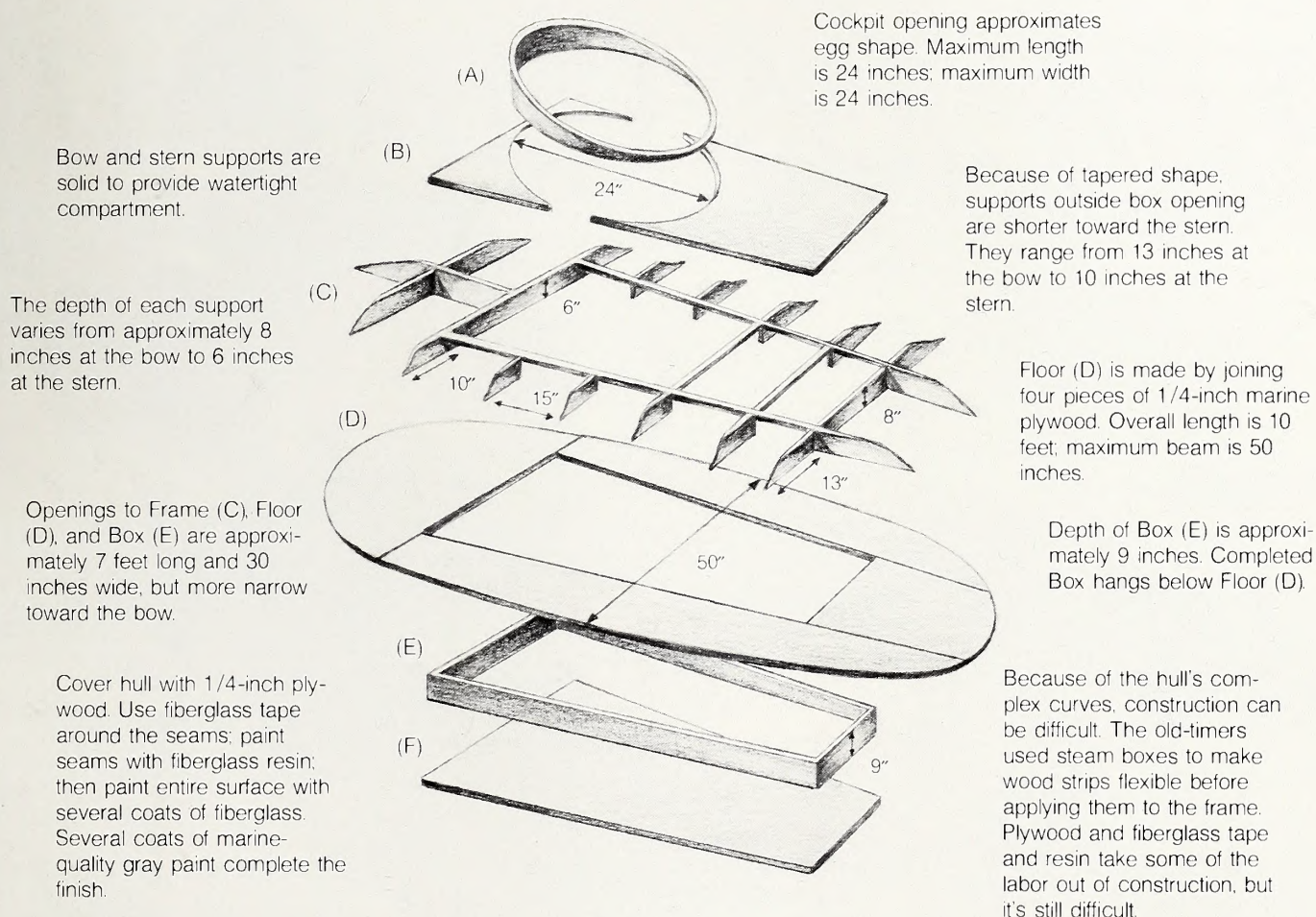
The hunter uses a flag or prearranged signal to notify the tender boat to pick up a downed fowl, as the layout itself is left in place and not involved in retrieving fowl. The layout is strictly an anchored shooting platform. Hunters alternate shooting based on the frequency of shots or the ability of the shooter to tolerate the cold and immobility, depending on which comes first. All shots are taken sitting up, rotating on that part of the anatomy designed for sitting, no easy feat from a bobbing, rolling layout. Waders and rain gear, standard in layout shooting, also restrict your movement somewhat and make tracking the fowl difficult.

If the shooter can resist the urge to sit up until the fowl are 20-25 yards away, shooting will be better. This brings up the other advantage of layout gunning: camouflage. The layout is designed to present no outline, hence no silhouette or shadow. Think about it. A rolling sea presents little profile, only changing wave angles. A low lying craft with a rounded deck must appear as just another wave, if it's visible at all to a duck cruising by at 40 mph. At any rate if the hunter makes himself small with only his eyes exposed he's practically invisible. If the waves pick up he can simply raise the canvas spray shield to keep the chop out of the cockpit.

When you're part of the decoy spread it opens a whole new dimension to the sport. You'll learn that divers can turn on the afterburners almost instantaneously and be out of range before you can begin to track them, rotate for the shot and follow through. If you sit up too soon or too late the fowl simply will be out of range so timing becomes a critical part of the shooting process. A light, fast-tracking automatic or pump with a modified choke and heavy duck shot seem to work best.

If you're up to the challenge and want to experience what our waterfowling forefathers must have felt while lying at anchor, maybe layout hunting is for you.

Layout-Boat Diagram



Unfortunately, you can't simply go out and buy a layout boat. Such boats are virtually unknown in the South, and even in the Northeast and Great Lakes, they are so specialized that they are not available commercially.

That means if you want to try layout hunting, you'll probably have to build your own boat — no easy task. The accompanying exploded diagram with approximate dimensions and photos of the layout may help. Since this one-man boat was built by simply reducing the dimensions of a two-man boat, these dimensions should serve only as a guide at best. If you choose to build a layout you may want to change the dimensions to fit your physique or hunting situation. Profile and strength are more important than dimensions.

The one-man layout boat is 10 feet in length and 50 inches in beam. The box where the hunter lies is 7 feet long to accommodate a 6-footer bundled up for the winter. Be sure to leave adequate foot space for oversized insulated footgear and enough room for some foot movement since lying immobile isn't conducive to good circulation. Use 1/4-inch marine plywood for the hull and deck and 1/2-inch pine for the box. The frame is also made of 1/2-inch pine. The frame itself is sort of like an old-time balsa-wood airplane wing. Each support is slightly smaller than its neighbor and thus the overall effect is a gentle slope. The canvas spray curtain has a frame made of bent aluminum tubing joined with a dowel. A back board and removable flooring keep the gunner comfort-

able and out of the inevitable slop that accumulates in the box. A drain plug is a real asset and prevents the necessity of sponging the layout dry. I also installed two "runners" made from a split 3-inch rod covered with a split rubber garden hose to protect both the layout and tender boat while under way to the hunting area. The one-man layout is generally carried across the tender boat's gunnels while under way. The two-man boat is generally towed. Plenty of fiberglass will extend the life of layout boats since they are subjected to lots of wear. Copper boatbuilders' nails and brass hardware will last longer in salt water and several coats of flat gray marine paint will protect those hours of labor. The color will also blend with the general drab tone of most winter coastal waters. ◇