



Sculling Gets Hunters Close

By Chuck Lichon
Photos by the Author

During the market hunting era when waterfowl limits were non-existent, numerous types of boats were used to outwit ducks and geese. Maximum performance in those days meant anywhere from dozens to hundreds of birds downed on any given day. Not only were the waterfowling rigs unique, but deadly punt guns added tremendously to the market hunter's arsenal.

In his book, *Duck Shooting*, author Eugene Connett in the early 1900s discussed the various types of boats and shooting techniques once used to hunt ducks. One method was sculling, and it was used by market hunters to slaughter waterfowl by the hundreds and thousands.

"The boat used for sculling was a low, flat-decked type with a coaming around the cockpit and a sculling hole out through or over the stern," Connett wrote. "Ice and snow were piled on the deck and around the coaming to give the appearance of a large cake of ice

Both forward motion and steering of the sculling boat are accomplished with the use of a long rudder that sticks out the stern of the boat.

drifting with the tide. The hunter, dressed in a white coat and hat, lay on his back or side, with his feet forward under the deck. He operated a curved sculling oar over his shoulder and out through or over the stern. This method of approach had to be done very carefully, lest the ducks be frightened by seeing a cake of ice rocking badly in quiet water or drifting unnaturally against the tide or wind. When properly done the birds were entirely unafraid."

Times have certainly changed with respect to waterfowl numbers, limits, and hunting techniques. Wood boats have been replaced with fiberglass, four-gauge bores with 12-gauge guns, and lead shot with steel or some other non-toxic metal. Limits on birds have gone

from all you could shoot to today's very conservative bags. Sculling, however, is still used to hunt both ducks and geese.

Today's sculling techniques are not much different from those of days gone by. The boats still employ a poler in the back and gunner in the bow. And although bluebills were heavily hunted back in the early 1900s with this method, sculling is used for almost all species of waterfowl, including mallards, red-heads, coots, and geese. Sculling on flat water or down a river or stream can pay big dividends for those who enjoy this method of hunting.

Sculling can be likened to jump shooting with the advantage of keeping low in the water, and therefore hidden from the keen eyes of the waterfowl. It allows you to gain valuable distance before jumping the birds, and it is also an excellent method for photographing.

The person at the helm propels the boat by twisting the sculling oar blade in a figure-eight pattern, providing just enough motion to propel the water

On flat water or down a river, old-time waterfowling method can pay big dividends.

backward and hence the boat forward. Sculling is quiet, exciting, and effective in all types of water, including marsh, open water, and stream. Birds seem to be confused by this large floating mass of material, or at the very least they are usually not overly concerned by its presence. They continue to mill around until you decide to pop up from your low profile.

Scullers often will scout an area before setting out, glassing for rafts of birds, then moving in from an upwind position. As you move within range, the hunter at the helm pivots the boat to get both hunters into shooting position. Some hunters even work a scull boat with a layout rig. The scullers work area rafts of birds, keeping them in flight in hopes they will work toward the position of the layout.

One of the foremost scullers in Michigan is Lou Tisch, owner of Lock, Stock & Barrel. Lou likes sculling so much he commercially builds the boats in his shop in St. Clair Shores.

November 1998

His *Brant I* is a one-man sculling boat that is used for hunting marshes, either sneak shooting or lying in wait along rivers and lakes. Tisch's *Brant II* is a two-man rig and is excellent for river shooting, as well as lakes or marshes. The *Brant II* is a 160-pound 16-footer with a 45-inch beam and 18-inch depth. It comes either pre-assembled or in kit form.

Lou often tells about the time he was piloting the lead boat with a couple of friends on a river in Indiana. A woodie came whistling right down on Lou and his partner, and after the third shot the bird splashed down on the river. They continued moving down the river, and within seconds shots were fired from behind them.

Lou turned around to see the hunters in the second sculling boat drop one of three flushed wood ducks. Lou and his partner sculled right past those three woodies tucked up against the bank. As soon as the hunters passed the ducks, the oar movement behind the boat spooked the birds and they flushed over the trailing boat.

My first effort at sculling came with Lou along the west end of the Saginaw Bay, near Linwood. The day was one we often refer to as a "bluebird" day: no wind, mild temps, and partly sunny. Lou got out his binoculars to scan the flat water for birds. This particular day we were looking for rafts of coots.

Waterfowlers for various reasons often overlook coots. The flavor of the meat is often likened to crow or sea gull. Actually though, like a lot of wild game, if properly prepared, the breast meat on a coot is quite good. Another reason they are not hunted much is their erratic flight pattern. Usually only a few feet off the surface of the water, coots will fly only far enough to get out of harm's way. This may be only a few hundred feet. They rarely fly anywhere near a decoy layout, and therefore must be hunted with a more non-traditional method, which usually involves sneaking up on them.

Lou spotted several rafts only a few hundred yards off shore. We loaded the boat and headed toward one of the

flocks. As Lou worked the oar back and forth, the sound was mesmerizing, relaxing me on this unusually mild November day.

As we neared the first raft of birds, Lou told me to get ready. I was too low in the bow to see the birds and didn't want to spook them. At this point I could feel the boat go from moving straight ahead to turning slightly, or into shooting position. A few more seconds and Lou quietly told me we were in position. I sat up and watched the surprised look as the birds started to scoot in all directions. I took aim on a small group and ended up three for three.

We ended up sneaking up on a few more flocks, enough to give me an idea of the basic "what's this all about?" of sculling techniques. I was satisfied and ready to work the more traditional puddle and diver ducks.

No question that sculling is very different from other methods most waterfowlers are accustomed to. It's a tradition that I am sure many modern duck and goose hunters would pursue if given the opportunity. It's a "hands-on" technique, so to speak. Rather than waiting for the birds to come to you, you go after them. No calling, no decoy rigs; just you, the boat, and your gun.

For more information about sculling and sculling boats, contact Lou Tisch at Lock, Stock & Barrel, P.O. Box 267, St. Clair Shores, MI 48080, 810/790-2678, fax 810/790-2653. □

From the back of his sculling boat, Lou Tisch glasses the Saginaw Bay shore for sitting flocks of waterfowl.

