

**CANADA GOOSE AND STYLIZED SWAN** (left) are part of the flock created by Dan Sullivan (right). Assorted boonducks (below) carry the rustic look that characterizes his work.

# Down in the Boonducks

*Hatched in Wisconsin, these rare birds have astonished many who've seen them.*

*By Dan "Sully" Sullivan  
Oneida County Field Editor*

AS A BABY BOOMER growing up in Dodgeville during the 1960s, I had TV heroes that ranged from Mighty Mouse to the Lone Ranger.

Mr. Magoo was not one of them.

But my inability to read the blackboard at age 9 made it inevitable I'd be compared to this nearsighted bumbler. A condition called "Stargardt's" got me tagged with the label of being legally blind, and it would take years of Mr. Magoo-style perseverance to overcome the stigma.

It wasn't until I moved to the boondocks that this became so.

One day in 2012, near my home in northern Wisconsin, I was staring at a salvaged barn beam, pondering how to turn

this archaic timber into something of use. Like that wooden piece, I also had flaws that called into question my usefulness.

### Carved a New Niche

Focusing with perspective instead of acuity, I impulsively began rasping away on this chunk of pine. After a while, it almost looked like a duck. Then, with a little more hand work, I had it shaped into

something I've come to call a "Boonduck".

I named the figure this because it sprung from wood recovered in the boondocks. Since then, I've made dozens of pieces of this avian art that's far from finely feathered. On a whim, I entered a few of these quirky creations in a Madison art show and was mind boggled to learn they'd won top honors.

### View Toward His Future

Once known in my hometown as "the kid with bad eyes", I was now validated as an accomplished visual artist.

Oftentimes, pieces of wood are perceived as weathered, warped or cracked. What's beneath the surface is overlooked and defined by outward characteristics. I can relate. Through 50-plus years of vision loss, I've largely been "creatively out of sight".

My impairment affects the central visual acuity needed for detail work and reading. I see the world from a more peripheral viewpoint, and sense of touch is important.

My Boonducks take wing from out of barn beams, cabin timbers and vintage wood of other humble origins. Starting out as elder trees, then serving for decades as structural supports, a Boonduck can take centuries to hatch.

Glass eyes, textured hammering and beeswax tinting impart a unique tactile quality to them.

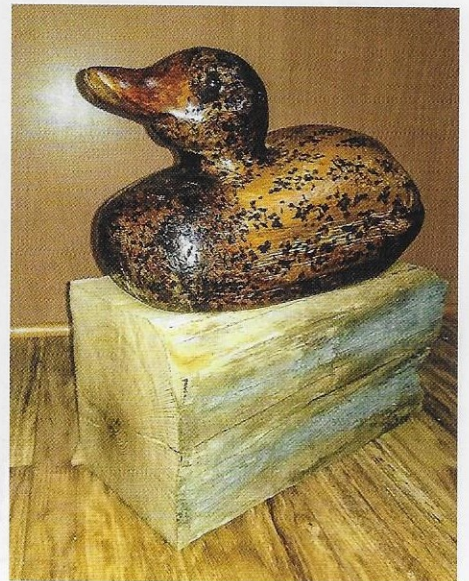
Many woodcarvers strive to make their decoys as lifelike as possible, while







**ROUGH-HEWN LOON** (above), like all of Dan's Boonducks, took wing from Wisconsin's backroads, beginning life as barn beams, cabin timbers, pier pilings and other vintage woods.



my Grandma Moses approach emphasizes contour and character over details. The wood's patina, patterns and imperfections are blended in as character marks.

Creating these rustic pieces means I get to tangle with anything from rock-hard oak to nasty knotty pine, which traditional carvers avoid.

### Species Native to Wisconsin

I don't use power tools because if I tried that, I'd decapitate a few digits!

Instead, I use rasps and chisels, slowly sculpting the pieces rather than carving them. A favorite tool is an antique farrier's rasp, similar to what my great-grandfather once used to trim horse hooves.

Over the past 7 years, my Boonducks have been showcased at galleries and museums nationally from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, were featured on PBS and received honors from the National Endowment for the Arts. I'm humbled at all of this.

But the thing I relish most is preserving parts of Wisconsin's heritage in small locales. Loons, swans and Canada geese are among figures that have winged their way to new homes in communities statewide.

For example, for the Wedl family of Jefferson, I recently carved a Boonduck from a keepsake beam out of their barn.

The Coots Unlimited Lodge near Chetek now has a nesting pair of *Booncoots*. A

*"A Boonduck can take centuries to hatch..."*

series of birds hatched from Door County barn beams is exhibited at Woodwalk in Egg Harbor. Another series that I call *Horsefeathers* came from timbers off the former Circle M Corral in Minocqua.

A flock at Moondeer and Friends Gal-

lery in Boulder Junction came from wood scrounged out of hunting lodges, log cabins and boathouses. You might call them *woodsducks*.

The *Duck Dynasty* TV series gave Louisianans wacky beards with their waterfowl. Wisconsin has a dynasty of its own—in a state known for lumberjacks, here come the *lumberquacks*, grown from local wood.

While I still don't care to be likened to Mr. Magoo, I've learned something from this unsinkable animated character: It's not how well you see what lies before you, but how well you see what's farther beyond.

Some old chunks of Wisconsin wood helped me to finally see this...and realize the visual creativity within me really could take flight.

For more information on Boonducks, call Sully at 715/439-4250.

Sideline: Wood from sugar maples, the state tree, is heavy and strong—used to make furniture, floors and bowling pins.