

# A Happening



## The renaissance of duckboat racing on Barnegat Bay

by Joshua F. Moore  
Photographs by Stan Switlik

In plenty of locations around the world, particular wind, wave, and depth conditions have given rise to boats uniquely suited to their environments. The sandbagger, for example, is ideal for the sheltered, shoal waters of New York Harbor. The stout channel cutter is perfect for the blustery conditions between England and France. In northern New Jersey more than a century and a half ago, the sheltered waters of Barnegat Bay brought about the birth of the 12' wooden sailing duckboat. Today, a renaissance in duckboat racing is under way here, and for one day every summer the duckboat still rules.

But that's not how it looked when I walked into the Mantoloking Yacht Club the evening before the 2008 World Ducks—the common name for the World Duckboat Championship, a late-August regatta drawing nearly six dozen duckboats to compete in a half-dozen

races. Instead, a portion of the fleet appeared largely sunk, their planked cedar decks awash as they sat tethered alongside the bulkhead. Those not seeming to settle into a watery grave rested on trailers, water dripping from seams as their deliberately filled cockpits slowly drained. When you sail a boat but once a year, it appears, the process of allowing the planks to swell so the seams will tighten needs to be accelerated a bit.

Looking a bit closer, though, I discovered that this was anything but a fleet of abandoned castoffs. Instead, fathers and daughters were carefully adjusting turnbuckles to tune shrouds while sons and mothers lashed hand pumps to daggerboard trunks or reeved Dacron mainsheets through sets of modern blocks. Nearby, a 12-year-old girl finished some spot painting, the final touches of a restoration that had taken her most of the summer. A

**Above**—In recent years, as many as 70 boats have competed in the resurgent World Duckboat Championship regatta at Mantoloking Yacht Club on Barnegat Bay, New Jersey.



Duckboat racing is a family tradition.

The duckboat's precise historical origins are murky at best. There is no doubt that the design evolved from the Barnegat Bay sneakbox, a duck-hunting boat first created by Hazelton Seaman in West Creek, New Jersey, in 1836. Early models, including those built by M.M. Crammer and Samuel Perrine, were fitted with decoy racks and oarlocks, as well as metal runners that allowed the boats to be hauled up on the ice during the winter. These one-man craft included a sprit- or gaff-rigged sail that allowed hunters to easily cross the handful of miles between Bay Head, at the northern end of Barnegat Bay, and hunting grounds farther south, places like Toms River and Silver Bay.

60-something gentleman noticed the pride she was taking in her work and remarked, to no one in particular, "When I was a kid sailing around here we wouldn't be caught dead in one of these. Now everyone wants one."

He's right. Although World Ducks has been held here for the past 40 years, in recent times the interest has skyrocketed. What began as a way for young local racers to challenge themselves on a boat as indigenous to Barnegat Bay as the spike grass is to its marshes has turned into a community celebration, an opportunity for families to slow down, come together, and have fun on the water. It also doesn't hurt that they're raising tens of thousands of dollars for charity while they're at it.

By the end of the 19th century, however, as vacationers from New York and Philadelphia started turning the Jersey Shore into their summer playground, the duckboat began to evolve into a one-design racing class for the yacht clubs these vacationers founded. Black-and-white photographs hanging on yacht club walls here show dozens of duckboats tied to the piers, their crews dressed nattily in neckties, skirts, and dress whites. The extreme to which a duckboat could be pushed was dramatically demonstrated in 1925 when Barnegat Bay sailor Slade Dale cruised a duckboat from New York to Miami, chronicling his adventures for *Yachting* magazine.

Following the Great Depression and World War II,

While boats line up on trailers at the Mantoloking Yacht Club, crews fine-tune rigging and wet down the hulls so they'll "take up."



Many old hulls brought out of storage have been given a new lease on life by owners who had a long history with duckboat racing. Others, like QUICK QUACK, left, have been built new by amateurs to join in the racing tradition.

duckboats returned to popularity as yacht clubs sought them out as training boats for their junior sailing programs. Many turned to Phil Clarke, a Bay Head builder who had worked at the Nevins yard on City Island, New York, during the 1930s before moving to the Jersey Shore. After building about 14 duckboats, though, Clarke decided he couldn't keep up with demand and sold his jig and plans to David Beaton, who had set up a boatshop directly across the bay from the Mantoloking Yacht Club.

Beaton soon became the largest builder of duckboats in the area, finishing some 200 before he died in 1977. His son, Lachlan, continued to maintain these boats for various clubs, but interest was already beginning to decline as young sailors, not to mention their increasingly busy parents, gravitated toward fiberglass Lasers and Optis.

"The whole thing with the Opti was that it was easy," says Stan Switlik, who grew up sailing in nearby Seaside. "The duckboats you had to take care of—which meant the parents had to take care of them." But even as Switlik and other Barnegat Bay sailors moved into other dinghy classes, they couldn't bring themselves to completely abandon the duckboats they'd grown up with. "We went into Penguins, into Lasers, and the duckboats went into sheds. Nobody would get rid of them. They wouldn't sail them, but they wouldn't get rid of them." Though World Ducks continued to be held every summer, by the late 1980s the fleet had dwindled to barely more than a dozen.

Little more than a decade later, though, Switlik and his peers found themselves again hauling their duckboats out of the sheds. "For those of us who grew up sailing in the boats, our kids were out of the house and we kind of got nostalgic. We had some time over the winter, and we liked the therapy of working on an old wooden boat," he says. Within a few years, the number of duckboats attending World Ducks had rebounded to about three dozen.

One Mantoloking summer resident who noticed the resurgence was Peter Kellogg, a stockbroker who had earned a fortune on Wall Street and who had always taken a fancy to wooden boats, including the 28' A-cat class that had been raced locally for nearly a century. Kellogg told local yacht clubs that if they'd restore a duckboat and enter it in World Ducks, he'd make a donation to their junior sailing program. "I've always cared about boats, and I've always thought that wooden boats

**Intended to be inexpensive to build, duckboats have structural pieces called harpins along the sheer. The planking runs past these at the bow, to be trimmed off before the deck is installed.**



were a kick," explains Kellogg, relaxing at his home at the head of Barnegat Bay. He had purchased his first A-cat, LOTUS, with a friend when he was just 18. In recent years, he has commissioned the twin sandbaggers BULL and BEAR (see WB No. 135), shares ownership of the 68' Sparkman & Stephens yawl BLACK WATCH, and has commissioned a 33' catboat.

Kellogg recognized that restoring and caring for a duckboat would teach young people more than just how to sail. "Once we got this going, and got the kids into this, we had kids discovering sandpaper and paint," he says. Willie DeCamp, head of the environmental group Save Barnegat Bay and a longtime duckboat racer, says Kellogg's support did more than restore a one-design class. "It saves a cultural heritage," DeCamp says.

Within two years, Kellogg had succeeded in bringing all 13 yacht clubs around Barnegat Bay together for the event. Then, he modified his proposal: anyone entering a new or restored duckboat in World Ducks for the first time (and after a judge's not-so-critical determination that it was in Bristol condition) could designate a charity to which Kellogg would donate \$5,000. Thereafter, those same duckboats would receive \$1,000 for their owners' charity each time they entered the regatta. This offer—"bribe people into doing good things," Kellogg calls it—increased interest even more.





A new duckboat comes together at the David Beaton & Son Boat Yard in Mantoloking, where hundreds of the boats have been built.

“As it built and grew, the stories came in,” Kellogg says. “One duckboat was in a dump, one was in a garden filled with flowers.” The number of entries has continued to increase steadily year after year: DeCamp notes that 70 boats entered last year’s event, six more than competed in the inaugural event back in 1969.

Despite Kellogg’s support for duckboats and A-cats, he says it’s unlikely that his philanthropy will extend to other one-design classes. He believes charitable support for wooden boats ought to be done in a way that can be sustained beyond a single donor. “You should help, but you shouldn’t help too much.”

**W**ith local clubs snatching up the few remaining boats ripe for restoration, Tom Beaton, whose grandfather had first purchased duckboat plans from Phil Clarke, soon found himself setting up a duckboat jig once again.

Save for a rise that David Beaton had introduced into the sheer to prevent the plowing that had become a notorious hallmark of the duckboat, the design had changed very little over nearly a century and a half. With an overall length of 12’3”, a beam of 4’6”, and freeboard of about 1’, the duckboat makes good use of the “skimming dish” concept that has evolved locally into the modern E-scow, which has little or no rocker and a rounded scow-type bow. Such a design is well suited to the shallows of Barnegat Bay, though it makes a duckboat tender when the breeze pipes up. “These boats can sail in very shallow water,” Tom Beaton observes. “And there’s a lot of water here—but there’s a lot of thin water.”

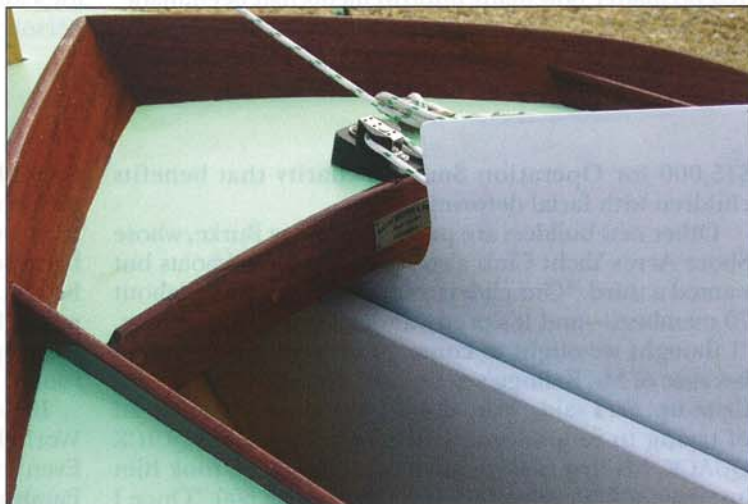
A duckboat’s most striking construction feature is the lack of a keel timber or stem, with the bottom plank and topside planks instead providing longitudinal support. During construction, the planks run past the sheer at the bow, where they are fastened into beveled harpins—structural pieces along the gunwales—and later trimmed back. This method greatly

simplifies construction and keeps costs down, explains John Brady, boatshop manager at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, which has restored several duckboats in recent years. “They were a boat you could build for a reasonable amount of money, so when yacht clubs were looking for fleets either to race or to train kids in, they were the logical boat to go to.”

During the past 50 years, the Beaton yard has built about 200 duckboats. Longtime shipwrights like Paul Smith say that during the boom days of the 1950s and 1960s there were usually about 50 of them at Beaton’s each winter for maintenance. During that time workers could finish about one new duckboat a month, from jig to varnish. At World Ducks, you’re more likely to see a Beaton builder’s plate than any other, though the yard these days focuses mostly on maintenance of these boats and A-cats, which have staged an equally dramatic comeback (see WB No. 171).

“This is one of those places...not much changes,” says boatbuilder Pete Schell of Beaton’s as he leads a tour of the yard’s rambling, green, wood-sided shops. “As you can see, the buildings are still the same as they’ve always been.” Beaton still uses white cedar for hull planks and red cedar for decks, just as the first builders did. For frames and trim, he has turned to mahogany, which is more readily available than the white oak used in earlier times.

Not everyone looking to enter World Ducks commissions Beaton’s to build a boat, of course. Several schools and backyard builders have tackled duckboat construction on their own after borrowing plans from Tom Beaton. The boats reflect the diversity of their builders—some have perfectly fair hulls and immaculate brightwork; others make generous use of seam compound and have a more rudimentary paint job. Among the new builders is a woodshop class at The Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, which has built and raced two, raising



**DUCK TALE** is the latest of the duckboats to carry the David Beaton & Son builder’s plate.

## Tactics—and a Good Pump

I like to believe that I let Betsy Alison win. Sure, her domination over me and 67 other World Ducks skippers last year might have had something to do with her nearly four decades of yacht racing and more than 30 national and international titles, compared to my pathetic and scanty racing record. But when I tacked up to the starting line in a borrowed duckboat, I thought surely there'd be some magical way for me to snake past her on my way to the front of the fleet. Many of the other boats were sailed by kids barely older than my own, and I figured a few well-timed tacks would have me and Alison battling for the windward mark in no time.

What I would soon learn, of course, is that duckboats are full of surprises. Three restarts should have told me that the race committee, at least, was taking these races more seriously than I was. Within seconds of the starting horn I had already witnessed more top-notch tactical maneuvers than I kept in my own racing arsenal, many of the most impressive performed by a blond 14-year-old who simultaneously managed to flirt with his fellow sailors while roll-tacking his duckboat. I also noticed that my rivals had mastered one of the most critical aspects of sailing a duckboat: bailing. As I tried to remove as much of Barnegat Bay as possible from my boat by precariously balancing a hand pump between my legs, I noticed that several of the fastest sailors had wisely attached their pumps to the daggerboard trunk to allow one-handed operation; some even had installed a foot-operated bellows. Other improvements were more subtle: telescoping carbon-fiber tiller extensions instead of my wooden one, jam cleats for the mainsheet instead of the bronze cleat on which I kept a turn. Within minutes of the start, Alison was already practically out of sight. Perhaps I needed more than magic, I began to think.

As the fleet stretched out along the course and I settled in among my pals at the rear of the pack, I noticed that no matter how many improvements had been made to a boat's rig or equipment, we were all experiencing the same things: the sound of water splashing against a

duckboat's cedar planks; the surprising surge of speed as the mainsail fills in a freshening afternoon breeze; the dread as the round bow plunges into the wake of one of the many powerboats hovering nearby to offer tips, cold drinks, and even relief crews—these are thrills that everyone who steps into a duckboat feels. "It's a boat that is perfectly evolved to do this job in a specific body of water," says John Brady, of the Independence Seaport Museum. "It's New Jersey's Beetle Cat—or maybe the Beetle Cat is Massachusetts' duckboat." Most important, though, all the sailors seemed to enjoy the experience of sailing with people twice their age and with people a quarter their age, with some who knew the racing rules by heart and others who didn't yet fully understand the port-tack burden. Many of us shared the same



pains caused by squeezing our adult frames into a junior's boat. "It's a kid's boat, because it's small inside, and you've got to be agile. Frankly, there's just not enough room for my legs," remarks 6'-tall Dave Burke, who lets a 14-year-old club member sail his new duckboat, QUICK QUACK. Another racer puts it even more succinctly as he crosses tacks with me: "My butt is killing me!" he shouts.

"The top talent on the bay sails in World Ducks and gets frustrated by these boats," says Stan Switlik, who refers to himself as the "non-chairman of the non-committee" for the regatta. "The grown-ups have restored the class, but the kids like it. And as they get older, they like it even more."

Alison, who was recruited by race benefactor Peter Kellogg, says she enjoys competing against such a diverse group. "Part of the attraction is that you're racing against kids who are 10- and 12-year-olds, and you're sailing against people who sailed these boats when they were basically new. There's such a legacy for these boats. They were developed for a utility purpose, but if they're maintained right, they can be very competitive."

Indeed, proper maintenance and equipment count for a lot at World Ducks—but apparently having the right person in your duckboat doesn't hurt, either.

—JFM

\$15,000 for Operation Smile, a charity that benefits children with facial deformities.

Other new builders are people like Dave Burke, whose Shore Acres Yacht Club already had two duckboats but wanted a third. "Our club is a small club—we have about 70 members—and it's pretty underfunded," Burke says. "I thought we ought to come up with a third boat, but because of Mr. Kellogg's generosity everybody's snapped them up. So I said, 'Why don't I just make one, instead of trying to rebuild one?'" Burke's duckboat, QUICK QUACK, his first major construction project, took him just over 400 hours to build, at a cost of \$2,600. "Once I

figured out how to read a table of offsets and cut all the different stations and set them up, the project kind of took on a life of its own, and it really became simple because each step that I did showed me the next step," he says. "Once I had the stations set up, I knew I had to make the frames. Once I had the frames, I had to put all the strips on. It just kind of fell together, like walking one foot in front of the other."

In addition to builder's plates, many of the entries at World Ducks now have coveted brass "restoration" plates. Even five-time Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year and U.S. Paralympic Team coach Betsy Alison, who grew up sailing

The distinctive use of a keel plank that runs right up to the sheer forward gives the 12'3" LOA duckboat a scow-like bow.

at nearby Metedeconk Yacht Club and raced in last year's World Ducks regatta, admits to having several people out sleuthing for one of the now-rare original boats. "If I could find an old duckboat, I would love to have it as a garage project," she says. "I think if you're going to be a well-rounded sailor, being able to sail different boats is the best legacy you can have."

**K**ellogg is especially proud of the diverse group that comes together for World Ducks every year. Many of the boats are sailed by kids from local clubs—the 2007 champion was 14-year-old Joe Paggi of Ocean Gate, New Jersey. But many seasoned sailors join in, too. Among these are Tom Beaton, who races with his son, Thomas; Peter Chance, who won the first World Ducks in 1969; and even 82-year-old Connie Pilling, who also has been competing in World Ducks since it began.

While competition is intense—with shouts of "starboard!" ringing out and a couple of collisions during each regatta—the camaraderie is obvious. Last year, for instance, Betsy Alison offered rig-tuning tips to her teen-aged competitors, and coaches in a fleet of chase boats zipped around to help bail or just to bring skippers a drink of water. Many adult skippers swapped boats with each other.

Adults usually singlehand duckboats, but traditionally most junior crews consist of two people. "The duckboats were always sailed by two kids, and while you kind of aged out at about 14, you could crew at 8 or 10 years old," Stan Switlik says. "It kind of eased you into it, and it gave you someone to BS with."

**T**he action taking place on the water is only part of what has made World Ducks a spirited event. Kellogg's philanthropy has drawn participants from



throughout the Jersey Shore and neighboring states, and last year the 57 charities benefiting from the racing ranged from the Annisquam Neighbors and Friends of Belmar Harbor to the Sierra Club and American Heart Association. Although no one will reveal exactly how much has been raised over the years, all point out that the 70 boats entered last year had each earned \$5,000 for their chosen charity at some point and continue to earn \$1,000 each year just for entering. Roughly, that's well over \$500,000 in the past eight years.

At the 2008 awards ceremony, the spirit behind World Ducks was apparent when the organizers discovered that some names of individual winners had been jumbled through a registration glitch. The charity listings were unaffected, and eventually the winners were sorted out. (Not surprisingly, Betsy Alison took home overall honors, though she beat 15-year-old Joe Paggi by just a few points.) It was clear, however, that the wooden decoys serving as trophies were far less important than the fleet's sense of community.

Switlik says the way World Ducks has evolved into a community event is a testament to the duckboats' ability to unite people whose lives revolve around Barnegat Bay. "It involves us all—grown-ups, kids, all the clubs—and it keeps us reminded of the bay, keeps us in the heritage of the wooden boat. And it gets people involved in all these charities. In the old days it was just a big sailboat race, but now it's a happening."

*A regular contributor to WoodenBoat, Joshua F. Moore is a journalist from Camden, Maine. He serves as the deputy editor of Down East magazine and recently published the book What's In a Picture? Uncovering the Hidden Stories in Vintage Maine Photographs.*



**Camaraderie—and a sense of humor—make DUCK TAPE and the rest of the duckboats a congenial racing fleet.**