

# A Timeline Tale of Factory Blue-Winged Teal Decoys

## By John Ockerbloom

All photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted. Click on any image to enlarge it.

This article offers an analysis of the different types and styles of factory blue-winged teal decoys over time. In writing it, I have assumed that the reader has a basic working knowledge of decoys, the species, and the makers. I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the different blue-winged teal decoy makers as a number of excellent books and articles already exist (see References at end). Instead, my goal is to examine how the style of blue-winged teal decoys has changed over time.



A trio of standard Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal Drakes shows a slight pattern of change and evolution in style.

I have chosen to focus on six makers -- Peterson, Dodge, Mason, Pratt, Hays and Evans -- whose decoys overlap closely in style and time period. An examination of these makers' decoys enables us to study the development of decoys over the "golden years" of factory production from roughly 1880 to 1930. Although referred to as "factory" products, some of these early decoys are essentially handmade.

Factory Maker	Location	Timeframe
Peterson Decoy Ducks	Detroit, MI	1873-1884 sometimes G. Peterson
Dodge Decoy Co.	Detroit, MI	1883-1894 bought Peterson
Mason Decoy Co.	Detroit, MI	1896-1924
Wm. E. Pratt Mfg.	Chicago, IL	1924-1936 bought Mason
J.M. Hays Wood Pr.	Jefferson City, MO	1921-1925
W. Evans Decoy Co.	Ladysmith, WI	1928-1934



The Peterson Blue-Winged Teal Hen (front) shows some of the contrast in carving that helps to differentiate it from the early Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal Hen in the rear.



Evans "Swift" Rig Pair of Blue-Winged Teals, c. 1928-1934. Formerly in the collection of Gary Lyon. With maker's marks.

Because the blue-winged teal was a regionally hunted bird, the number of blue-winged teal decoys produced is not as great as for some of the other decoy species. Nevertheless, the analytic process undertaken in this review of blue-winged teal decoys can be duplicated for other duck species.

## Mason Company Decoys

Any review of the early (pre-1930) factory decoy must include a sampling of the various styles and grades produced at the Mason Company. This series of illustrations shows the transitional variations of the Mason Premier blue-winged teal drake.



Mason Hollow Premier Drake, c. 1898-1902. This style decoy is considered by many to be among the earliest produced by Mason with a larger flat bottom, higher neck shelf, and more developed head carving and throat crop area. All of Mason's pre-1903 decoys were hand carved, and most featured a sloping chest with heavy body spotting. Photo courtesy Russ Goldberger, RJG Antiques.

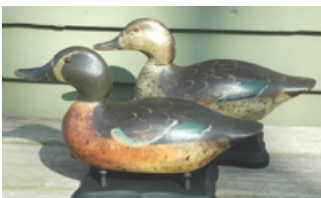


Mason Premier, c. 1903-1910. Another early version of the Mason Premier. Selected features such as the upturned tail, heavy bill carving, exaggerated head, and significant chest and body paint spotting indicate it may have been a special-order bird. This example is very similar to the Mason catalog illustration of this decoy. Over the years a number of decoys from the same rig have been uncovered (Cheever, p. 31).

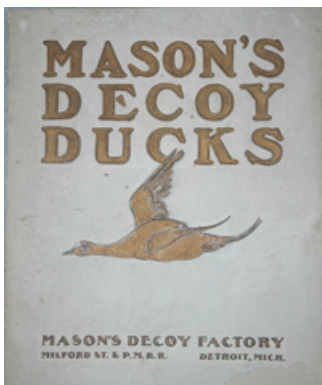


Mason Premier, c. 1908-1915. This Mason Premier exhibits the "snakey" head type. There are significant variations within this style. The body is beginning to now take a standard form, but the bill style and body paint still reflect its early manufacture.

The "double-blue" back paint highlights were somewhat common in the earlier decoys. Near the end of the factory's production era, they all but disappeared. Formerly in the collection of Gary Lyon.



Mason Premier Blue-Winged Teal Drake and Hen, c. 1915-25. These are believed to be the last of the Mason production runs. Characteristics include the more standard head, slightly shorter bill, slightly larger body size, less artistic flair to the painting, larger and fewer loops in rear feathering, and chest spotting now significantly reduced in number. Drake formerly in the collection of John Hillman. Hen formerly in the collection of Gary Lyon.



Mason catalog image, photo used 1903-1920.



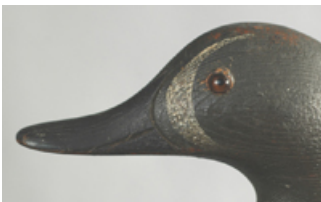
Peterson Drake, c. 1875-1882. An example of one of the earliest factory-made decoys, this decoy exhibits some of the characteristics in style that other makers would mimic for years to come. Formerly in the collection of Shirley & John Delph.



Mason Premier Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1903-1910. Notice the atypical heavier bill carving on what might be a special-order bird. This view clearly shows the common carving characteristics for the Premier bill: carved lines and tip notched above the rear bill, with nostril lines.



Mason Premier Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1905-1915. This is a more commonly seen early snakey-head, with slightly extended bill. Though not visible from this angle, the tip of the bill carving is present. Note the quality of the dark glass eye. Formerly in the collection of Gary Lyon.



Mason Challenge Blue-Winged Teal Drake. The majority of decoys had their glass eyes added as a last phase, after the head had already been painted. In some, the eye seating glaze can still be seen. Many collectors evaluate the eye seating area first when considering repainting. Formerly in the collection of Joe French.



Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c.1910. This example is carved in its simplest form. The glazed eye filler can be seen. The bill has been shortened and is stouter. The blue-winged teal decoy normally has a slightly darkened yellow glass eye. The earlier and higher-grade decoys appear to use a higher-grade eye. A common trait to the later standard grade glass eye Mason decoy is a washing out/fading of the eye's rear coloring.



Early Mason Tack-eye Blue-Winged Teal Hen, c. 1910-1915. In the early years, tack-eyes were added to standard glass eye bodies.



Late Mason Tack-eye Blue-Winged Teal Hen, c. 1915-1924. Starting in this period, separate body forms and heads were produced for Tack-eye and Painted Eye series.



Mason Painted Eye Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1915-1924. Painted Eye heads can either have a recessed eye filled with glaze or it is smooth and not pre-drilled.



Peterson Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1873-1884. Note the wing paint style, bill carving, pointed chest and body spotting. Formerly in the collection of Shirley & John Delph.



Dodge Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1884-1894. Dodge bought Peterson in 1884. Dodge decoys tended to have sloping/boat sides and flat bottoms, verses the rounded sides of the Peterson. Photo courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt Inc.



Late Mason Blue-Winged Teal Tack-eyes, c.1915-1924. Hen formerly the collection of Joe French. Drake formerly in the collection of Harvey Pitt.



Late Mason Painted Eye Rig Pair, c 1915-1924. New body forms were later introduced for both the tack-eye and the painted eye. Pair formerly in the collection of Clarine & Bud Menzel



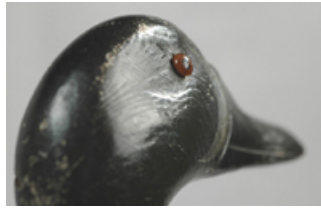
Pratt Blue-Winged Teal Pair, c. 1928-1932. Inexpensively manufactured production-line decoys. The back paint appears to be spray painted, with the body spotting now rare and random at best.



Pratt "Premier" Blue-Winged Teal, c. 1930-35. Pratt bought Mason's rights in 1924 and produced similar, but cheaper, mock-ups of the various grades.



Standard Pratt Blue-Winged Teal Hen, c. 1928-1932. See prior photo as well. Pratt decoy eyes were not normally set in glazing like the Mason factory eyes.



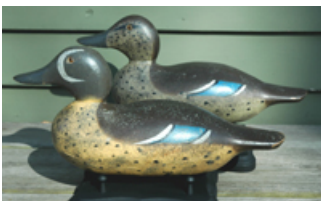
Pratt "Premier" Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1928-1932. See prior photo as well. The majority of Pratt decoy eyes tended to protrude slightly from the head, not always being recessed.

## The Hays Decoy Company Glass-eye Blue-Winged Teal

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties a new collector faces is learning to differentiate between the glass eye standard grade decoys made by Mason and those made by Hays. Subtle differences between the two makers can confuse new and old collectors alike. The fact that some early reference books show Hays decoys as Mason products further contributes to the confusion. "If it's in the book, it must be right" is not always correct.

J. M. Hays Wood Products Company, Jefferson City, Missouri, marketed both Grand Prix (premier) decoys with both hollow and solid bodies and solid-body Superior grade decoys. I have observed two styles of Hays body carvings in use with the blue-winged teal, and both have been referenced in various sources as being of the Superior grade.

Early reference books make no mention of the Hays factory or its decoys (see Cheever, *Mason Decoys*, and Delph, *Factory Decoys*) despite illustrating what I believe are Hays standard grade glass eye blue-wing teal decoys labeled as Mason products (see Cheever, pp. 34-35; Delph, pp. 94, lower left photos; p. 99, lower photo). In fact, the Hays blue-winged teal drake illustrated here as part of a rig pair is the exact same bird illustrated in the group assortment photo in Delph's factory book (p. 99). Delph himself included the Hays bird together with the Masons. Only with the publication in 1981 of Haid's *Decoys of the Mississippi Flyway* and Fleckenstein's *American Factory Decoys* was the Hays decoy factory formally recognized.



This nearly mint rig pair of Hays Blue-Winged Teals, c. 1921-1925, shows the typical lengthened tails, high and clean brown feather coloring, narrower neck and the sparser body spotting. Formerly in the collection of Roger Ludwig.





Two styles of Hays Blue-Winged Teals (c. 1921-1925) are common. The main differences are in the tail styles and the level of back feather sponging. The rear decoy is nearly the same size as the one in front.



Mason Standard Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal (rear) and Hays glass eye Blue-Winged Teal (front). Due to their brief production run Hays decoys are actually rarer than their counterparts in the Mason line.

## How to Tell the Difference

In general, the Mason Standard Glass eye is more refined and the paint is of higher quality than the Hays decoy. However, in the last years of Mason decoy production, the stylistic similarities between the two narrow.

1. Overall, the Hays decoys have simpler paint lines. It almost appears that the back brown feather color is sprayed onto the body utilizing a stencil. This brown body paint also rides higher on the body and is recessed slightly back from the neck on the Hays. Over time, the brown body painting on Mason glass eye decoys develops similar characteristics. The paint moves higher and back further on the bird toward the end of the Mason production run. See the photo at the beginning of the article of the trio of Mason glass eyes.
2. The Hays lower body spotting is much more sparsely applied. Once again, this stylistic trend appears in later Mason decoys. The earliest Mason birds have very prolific body spotting, but in the final production years, the spotting is less detailed.
3. The Mason decoy shows back feather loop painting, whereas the Hays is sponge painted.
4. The narrower head, the longer tail, and the longer, skinnier neck are also characteristics of the Hays decoy. Overall the Hays is a slightly longer decoy.





Evans Pair of Blue-Winged Teals, c. 1928-1934. With owner's brand and maker's marks. Other than some Masons being marked with model names (e.g., Challenge), only Evans's decoys were marked with the maker's full name when sold direct. Pratt decoys sometimes had labels attached.



The bottom of this Premier Pratt Blue-Winged Teal Drake (c. 1928-1936) shows the original label and weight/tie strap.

This tendency for Mason decoys to take on the characteristics of Hays decoys as time goes by is probably due to the fact that the Mason factory was turning out its final decoys (the factory closed in 1924) just as Hays was beginning production (started 1921 and closed 1925), and that Hays was attempting to mimic the construction and style of the current Mason standard grade glass eye.



Early Mason Premier Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1904-1910. Back-feather loops.



Later Mason Premier Blue-Winged Teal Hen, c. 1919-1924. Back feathering.



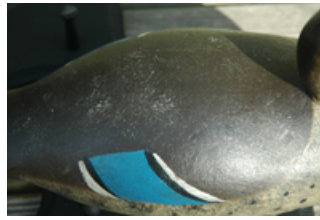
Evans Blue-Winged Teal Drake, c. 1928-1934. Back feather scratch paint.



Early Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal, c. 1903-1910. Back feather loops.



Later Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal, c. 1915-1924. Back feathering.



Hays Blue-Winged Teal, c. 1921-1925. Back feather sponge paint.

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An original set of three rig mates, early Mason Glass eye Blue-Winged Teal, branded "EH," c. 1905-1910. This style Mason is most often confused with decoys by Peterson. Although the back feather painting on both the Mason and Peterson is nearly the same, other factors highlight the differences. Peterson decoys have a more refined bill and sharper, protruding chest; are wider in the shoulders; and exhibit less extensive body spotting. Sometimes a side-by-side comparison is required. Decoys formerly in the collection of Clarine & Bud Menzel.

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