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ARTICLE

# The landscape is a trap: Duck decoys as multispecies atmospheres of deception and betrayal

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**Abstract**

Duck decoys are trapping devices designed to catch ducks. From the fourteenth century onwards, duck decoys emerged in riverine lowlands in northwestern Europe. Their operation is based on a rigorously maintained physical structure with a woodland that encloses a water body with protruding extensions called pipes, which end in nets and are surrounded by reed screens. Catching ducks in these places requires a complex interplay between different groups of ducks, a dog, and a human decoyman who together are enmeshed in what becomes a deeply deceptive landscape. This paper explores duck decoys in the Netherlands as relational, situated and co-designed multispecies atmospheres. Through ethnographic descriptions of field visits, interviews and by drawing on historical accounts, we trace how inter- and intraspecies relations and behaviours are interpreted in terms of deception, betrayal, trust and curiosity. The varying interpretations of behaviours and the more-than-human knowledges at play reflect the essentially elusive character of the duck decoy. Especially when facing the environmental challenges of the Anthropocene, duck decoys and the ambiguous relations that were until recently maintained in them, encourage us to consider the historical trapping and hunting landscapes as places made by multispecies atmospheres. Even though these atmospheres and the intimate collectives of human and more-than-human lives have become increasingly fragile, their afterlives resonate through the changing character of the riverine landscape and its various waterfowl, as well as practices of knowing and conserving biodiversity.

**KEYWORDS**

atmospheres, duck decoy, hunting, landscape, multispecies methodologies, trapping

Here lies the Decoyman who lived like an otter,
Dividing his time betwixt land and water;
His hide he oft soaked in the waters of Perry,
Whilst Aston old beer his spirits kept cherry.

Amphibious his life. Death was puzzled to say.
How to dust to reduce such well-moistened clay;
So Death turned Decoyman, and 'coyed him to land,
Where he fixed his abode till quite dried to the hand;
He then found him fitting for crumbling to dust,
And here he lies mouldering as you and I must.[1]

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: DUCK DECOYS AS MULTISPECIES LANDSCAPES

I (the first author) drive down the dike next to the river and enter a courtyard with several buildings. An old man with green clothing and a grey sideburn beard opens the door. A small white dog with chestnut brown spots slips through the door to see who is there. The (slightly overweight) dog seems happy to see a visitor and enthusiastically circles around me. Then suddenly, we hear a loud bang. Soon after, I notice a big group of ducks (it must have been more than 50) flying over. 'Oh no, the decoy goes empty', says Dirk.[2] He swiftly hints me to follow him, and at a quick pace we walk over a winding path. He opens the door of the observation hut and we enter a dark cabin with peepholes. He looks through one of these holes and breathes a sigh of relief: 'they are not gone'. I look around to see a large body of water surrounded by reed screens. The quacks of wild ducks and the whistling noise of Eurasian wigeons are intensified by the water. They appear to be a gregarious bunch of ducks; their splashing and quacking resembling the splashing of children in an outdoor swimming pool. Nothing indicates the deadly nature of the duck decoy that these ducks so joyously inhabit.

(Field notes, 17 October 2017)

The word 'decoy' was introduced into the English language in the seventeenth century, when Dutch decoymen, called 'kooikers', started to build 'endekooyen' in England on behalf of the British aristocracy during the reign of Charles II (Bateman, 1988; Southwell, 1904). In English etymology, the Dutch word 'endekoy' became 'decoy', meaning 'a person or thing used to mislead or lure someone into a trap'. Nowadays, the word decoy is mostly used in relation to 'decoy ducks', deceptive objects meant to imitate real ducks. However, as this paper seeks to bring to life, duck decoys comprise an entire landscape involving complicated processes of deception and betrayal.

It is not known who constructed the first duck decoy and when. The oldest known document referring to a duck decoy is dated 1318 and speaks about numbers of ducks caught in Bornem, Flanders (Verstraeten et al., 2011). Likely duck decoys existed from the late Middle Ages onwards, originating in the Low Countries[3] and subsequently spreading to similar lowland river areas. Before they attained their current form, duck decoys probably started as a singular catching pipe built alongside rivers or ditches. Later, the water bodies were dammed in or dug, creating a distinct duck decoy with a decoy pond and with several pipes surrounded by a small woodland. Even though they have recurring features, duck decoys are not moveable objects and they are not exactly the same everywhere (Karelse, 2008). The trapping mechanism and its material components are enmeshed with the wider landscape. Moreover, duck decoys define the area around them. By law, any disturbing activities within a certain radius of the duck decoy is banned. To migrating ducks flying over this landscape, duck decoys appear as calm, attractive and safe places. At night, the decoy's resident ducks foraging in neighbouring areas would lure 'new' ducks to the decoys. Yet, as we will document in this article, these landscapes turn out to be highly deceptive.

Whereas in most traps, animals are caught in the absence of humans, duck decoys traditionally capture ducks by means of a dog, a decoyman, and various ducks working together to lure in and trap wild ducks in a closely choreographed collaborative effort that has been learned over decades or even (human) generations: 'Some of the largest traps ever to have been used, decoys are live traps but they seldom capture automatically' (Bateman, 1988, p. 149). As we will discuss, a very particular multispecies relationship is crucial to the working of the duck decoy. It involves a complex attunement between various types of animals; especially other ducks play a crucial role by luring in their conspecifics. This relationship is not easy to define; it has historically been described in terms of deception and betrayal (Ryckelsma, 1622), but as we will see, decoymen themselves tend to avoid this characterisation.

Especially in a time when working duck decoys and their multispecies relations have become rare, retracing the vivid operation of duck decoys is key to making sense of contemporary landscapes as the outcome of more-than-human histories and not just the result of human interventions imposed on a site. It also helps understanding how the knowledge practices that inform contemporary waterfowl/biodiversity conservation are inscribed in and emerge from landscapes and the intricate relational practices these landscapes afford. If landscapes are relations, it is crucial to find ways to study

these. Therefore, next to illustrating how multi- and intraspecies relationships constituted in duck decoys complicate common characterisations of human–animal relationships, this paper also shows how knowing landscapes requires a combination of contemporary and historical multispecies methodologies. Thereby, this paper contributes to a growing body of work that pays attention to the embodied experiences of spaces that are intimately shared among human and non-human subjects and collectives (Keul, 2013; Lorimer & Whatmore, 2009). Understanding these 'animal' (Matless et al., 2005) or 'multispecies' (Tsing, 2012) landscapes, offers a way to engage with contemporary and historical nature-cultures that foregrounds the entwinement of the cultural and material, of individual experiences and collective projections, and of animal and human agencies and subjectivities.

Many of the landscapes we now think of, and have come to conserve as nature, historically emerged from hunting practices. These practices are associated with diverse practical experiences and knowledges (Marvin, 2005; Matless et al., 2005), and with ambiguous human–animal relations that involve dynamics of domination as well as trust (Ingold, 2000). Obviously, hunter–hunted relationships are not symmetrical. Yet, understanding these relationships only in terms of domination arguably renders animals as mere passive subjects of control. Or, as Keul (2013, p. 935) points out, 'When we investigate human–animal relationships from a perspective where people have all of the power to shape animals' worlds, we deepen the constructed divide between us'. Rather, we can understand the relationally specific ways of living in duck decoys in terms of always-hybrid communities (Lestel, 2014) in which duck decoys articulate particular 'atmospheres' (Lorimer et al., 2017) that consist of ambivalent connections of co-belonging and that are profoundly political (Lobo et al., 2022). Relations, then, actively constitute landscapes and their human and non-human subjects.

Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we establish a conceptual and methodological framework to study more-than-human landscapes and engage with both past and ongoing formations. We then introduce the complex workings of duck decoys and the intricate inter- and intraspecies relationships occurring there. Subsequently, we highlight the ambiguity of duck decoys as lively and deadly compositions. We do this by exploring the diverse understandings and motivations of behaviours in duck decoys using characterisations such as deception, trust, betrayal and curiosity. We conclude by arguing for the need to take the bodies, materialities and multispecies relations in hunting landscapes such as duck decoys seriously to grasp how more than human atmospheres can be central in knowing and conserving biodiversity.

## 2 | STUDYING MULTISPECIES LANDSCAPES

Whether understood as primarily projection or reality out there, as symbolic or physical, as meaning or matter, the concept of landscape has been intensely discussed and debated around these dualities by scholars of cultural geography over the past decades (Wylie, 2007). Landscape eventually has been argued to be an inextricable combination of (and thereby unsettling) all of these oppositions. Landscape is an elusive concept without a single definition (Minca, 2013). Rather, as Wylie describes, we see value in 'the precise manner in which it demands that we produce accounts which dapple between interiority and exteriority, perception and materiality' (Merriman et al., 2008, p. 202). Landscape encompasses materialities, but not as mere physical environments that function as static background to (human) dramas. After the (new) 'material' turn, landscape becomes a place where animals, but also other 'stuff', appear as agential; as actively partaking in the production of events, subjectivities and relations among humans and materials (Whatmore, 2006).

In animal geography and cognate fields, human–animal relations are increasingly understood in terms of embodiment, affect and attunement (Keul, 2013) and as known through combinations of engagement and detachment (Candea, 2010). Much of this work has focused on the centrality of embodied and affective modes of relating and knowing animals, for example, in knowledge production through scientific practices in which bodies are in continuous relational flux as they 'learn to be affected' (Despret, 2004). For scientists, being attentive to others in co-producing knowledge, instead of merely gathering 'data', means creating knowledge 'with' instead of 'on' animals (Boonman-Berson et al., 2018; Haraway, 2016). Here, affect becomes a central mode of knowing, as a prerequisite for scientific as well as professional knowledge (Boonman-Berson et al., 2016; Latimer & Miele, 2013). Practices involving animals, such as angling (Bear & Eden, 2011), are shaped through dynamic multispecies encounters. Understanding these means being attentive to 'the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations that include, but always also exceed, dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, researcher and researched' (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 3). Inspired by new materialism (Bennett, 2010), and building on accounts of indigenous ways of knowing (Country et al., 2015; Todd, 2016), liveliness is proposed as not an exclusively biotic feature (van Dooren et al., 2016). To understand behaviours and meanings in multispecies landscapes, we should not start with assuming clear boundaries between organisms, species, humans and their shared environments.

Getting to know the intertwining lives of humans and animals, while transcending the dualisms commonly structuring their representation, requires going deeper into the embedded and situated nature of these relations. Since the seminal book *Animal spaces, beastly places* (Philo & Wilbert, 2000), animal geographers have revealed a large variety of ways in which human–animal relations are entangled with and emerge from particular spatial settings and orderings. The ambiguous relations that make up the duck decoy may, however, complicate the central distinction between spaces ordered by humans and places made by animals on their own terms. Humans, animals and their shared environments require an understanding that is spatially situated in ways that are meaningful both to humans and non-humans. As Hayden Lorimer's (2006) historical reconstruction of a reindeer herd in the Cairngorn mountains made clear, to understand a herd means understanding a landscape, and vice versa. Human–animal relations are the outcomes of historical processes and their analysis requires being attentive to the shared pasts and presents of more-than-human situated relations and knowledges (O'Gorman & Gaynor, 2020). This is needed to recognise how the behaviours and knowledges of groups and generations of animals can be seen as living archives in the landscape (Lorimer, 2006). These lively archives are currently dissolving in many places. Not just populations dwindle, we are also losing shared vocabularies, behaviours, sensory knowledges and future possibilities and opportunities (Smith, 2013). But how to study a landscape such as that of the duck decoy, which is based on relations that are meant to be deceptive in multiple ways? The decoyman, whose death was mourned (and whose life was celebrated) in the epitaph quoted at the start of this article, seems a key but elusive figure to explore this further. As his body, after a life in the decoy, blended with the landscape and transformed to become with and part of the decoy he operated, both his character and his biology were impossible to disentangle from this treacherous device and the animals caught up, or participating, in its workings.

According to von Uexküll (1909), minding the 'sensory bubble' or *Umwelt* and what matters to animals within these Umwelts provides insight into their world. However, as we will show, these Umwelts are not only based on a species' or a subject's perceptual lifeworld. Umwelts or lifeworlds turn out to be more complex and impossible to understand in isolation when they are overlapping with and even shared among different humans and animals. This becomes particularly apparent in duck decoys. Careful multispecies collaboration is a necessity for these to function as a duck catching device. Humans and non-humans act as collectives as well as individuals. Biosemiotic relations are actively interwoven, as the outcomes of prolonged processes of attunement.

## 2.1 | Methodology

Fitting with seeing landscapes as emerging 'crystallisations of activity within a relational field' (Ingold, 2011, p. 345), and as interweaving Umwelts, this paper will document the embodied practice of catching ducks. The analysis is based on half-day to full-day visits to four duck decoys in different regions in the Netherlands by the first author. Each of these visits comprised an unstructured interview conducted in an informal setting at the decoyman's[4] house. Before and/or after the interview, the daily practice of the decoyman was observed, mostly by walking along with a decoyman while he attempts to catch or feed the ducks. Similar mobile methodologies have been adopted by geographers studying practices that involve more-than-human interactions (Lorimer, 2006; Lulka, 2004). Next to the idea that walking stimulates the respondent to talk more freely in comparison to formal interview settings, it is also a way of being aware of the more-than-discursive. Vision, sound and smell become observable to the researcher via shared experiences with the research subjects. This is especially interesting when animals are involved, allowing for a fuller sense of the forms of interaction that occur. However, it also creates challenges since the interplay between duck, human and dog is so delicate that a minor disruption threatens to distort the whole functioning of the duck decoy. This is the reason why access to a duck decoy, particularly in the catching season, is usually restricted to anyone besides the decoyman.

The decoymen the first author has met were, however, interested to explain and show their increasingly rare profession/hobby for several reasons. Nowadays decoymen are not financially dependent anymore on catching ducks, so distortion is no longer a direct threat to their livelihood. The 'kooikersvereniging' (the organisation representing the owners and operators of duck decoys) provided contact details for a variety of duck decoys to visit. This association has made efforts over the years to make duck decoys more known as valuable heritage. Also, the assumption by decoymen that the research might contribute to this goal, together with the rapport built by the first author in this community, made it possible for the first author to gain access. The practices performed by decoymen are not publicly contested in current Dutch society, and as such they are not considered a vulnerable group. The decoyman have been anonymised through pseudonyms and no personal records have been collected.[5]

The observations were collected in fieldnotes, of which segments will be presented below. As first person accounts, these notes reflect the research practice as an affective and situated encounter, giving room to 'speculative modes of writing' (Ogden et al., 2013, p. 17).[6] Encountering the decoy in operation, with the decoyman and the range of organisms and motives involved in this operation, allows for a renewed understanding of how historically, human–animal–landscape relations have emerged that now figure centrally in the conservation of both cultural landscapes and biodiversity. Next to fieldwork, the decoys and their operation were studied through archival material, cartography, duck decoy literature and expert interviews. This combination of multispecies ethnographies and historical animal geographies allows for an entry point into the shared lively histories of duck, dog and man, and offers a glimpse into the 'lively energies that announce themselves as landscape' (Lorimer, 2006, p. 517).

## 3 | ENTERING A LIVELY LANDSCAPE MADE OF COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIPS

Being granted access to a duck decoy in operation is rare. This is one reason why decoymen have always been known as somewhat elusive figures. Traditionally, operating a duck decoy is a solitary occupation. The decoyman's first and foremost job is to ensure and maintain peace in the decoy. To create an attractive environment for the ducks, the fewer people the better, which means that a decoyman spends his days in the decoy without fellow humans. His companionship consists of the ducks, his dog(s) and the decoy. To villagers and to decoymen operating other decoys, the decoyman would not speak about his techniques of catching. Also, he would never give out the amount of ducks caught. 'Decoymen always lie' is the saying (van der Heide & Lebret, 1944, p. 95).

'Why is the profession of a decoyman surrounded by so much mystery?' I ask Jaap, one of the few remaining decoymen ('kooiker' in Dutch) who sells the ducks he catches at the *eendenkooi* next to his house.

> You know what it is, we work behind the screens ... We never flaunt what we catch. When people ask, 'how are things going?' it always goes well. Also when you don't catch any ducks because of weather conditions, and they ask, does it go well? It goes perfectly well!
>
> (7 December 2017)

He continues by explaining that decoymen generally keep up these positive appearances because they worry that once it would become known that they are not catching much, people in the area will think they can make noise around the decoy, thereby disturbing the animals.

Traditionally, decoymen work together with one or several 'Kooikerhondjes' (literally decoyman's dogs). According to the official breed prescriptions, kooikerhondjes are small spaniel-like dogs characterised by a bushy white tail and orange patches that are purpose-bred to function as a decoy dog. However, the dogs I see here are not of the 'kooiker' breed. They are hunting dogs, bred for their sense of smell and agility. Dirk, the decoyman introduced earlier, told me that any type of dog breed is able to work in the duck decoy, as long as they show suitable behaviour: not barking in the decoy or chasing ducks. Also, they will have to stand out since the ducks have to notice the dog for the trapping mechanism to work. A bushy tail helps, but sometimes a bunch of straw is attached to the dog's tail. Accompanied by the two dogs, we enter a forest enclosed by a small water-filled ditch. After picking up a bucket of grains at a small outbuilding, we walk further into the forest and pass along tall and broad opaque reed screens. A couple of metres further, one reed screen slightly deflects, demarcating the larger unwooded area behind it. There are two very small peek holes, and when I look through them, I can overlook a large pond with about 100 Mallard ducks in sight.

Depending on the geographical location and a range of features of the duck decoy, different duck species can land on the pond. Some of the decoys are popular among, for example, Eurasian wigeons; others are favoured by Mallards. In general, Mallards are called 'wild ducks' and the other duck species are in Dutch called *blauwgoed* ('blue good') among decoymen. They are also referred to as 'whole ducks' (Mallards) and 'half ducks' (other species) (Karelse & Mandigers, 2013). These taxonomies of ducks are related to their utility or traditional economic value. All these are considered ducks that can be caught, collectively referred to as 'strange ducks' (*vreemde eenden*). These strange ducks that select the duck decoy as a resting place are the ones the decoyman intends to catch. However, the decoyman needs the help of other so-called 'stale ducks' (*stal eenden*). Stale ducks can be divided into two categories. The 'flying-stale' (*vliegstal*) consists of ducks who, at night, will start foraging outside the duck decoy and in the morning bring along new ducks they encountered during the night. The 'tame-stale' (*makke stal*) or 'feeding ducks' (*voereenden*) are fed by the

decoyman in the catching pipe (*vangpijp*). Stale ducks contribute to maintaining the duck population in the decoy since they breed new ducklings, of which a few are caught and killed. For stale ducks, the duck decoy seems an attractive place to live. As decoyman Dirk told me: 'So actually if you come to the world as a Mallard, the smartest thing you can do, is to become a stale duck on a duck decoy'.

The decoymen are able to identify individual stale ducks since they have specific predictable behaviours (just like the decoyman himself, one might say):

> It is the same every day. The same duck sits on the same side ... and with feeding, the same ducks come out of the water at the same spot, the same ducks walk around your feet. The same 'woerd' (male duck) comes and flies a few metres back. He does that every day.
>
> (Dirk, 17 October 2017)

Some decoymen make use of characteristic appearances. Decoyman Arjan, who catches ducks in a decoy that has been refurbished approximately 15 years ago and now is completely maintained and operated by volunteers, receives mallard ducks from the animal shelter. He explains that these animals often do not know how to swim, so he keeps them in a separate kennel with a pond. When feeding, he chases them into the water, gradually teaching the ducks to swim. Most of these ducks are particoloured, which makes them identifiable as stale ducks once they are set loose in the duck decoy: 'They might not look nice, but it is nice to be able to recognise them as individuals. They are a bit on the border between kept animals (*gehouden dieren*) and wild animals. Actually, they are half-tame.' (Arjan, 13 October 2017). Once introduced to the decoy, they will have to get used to the device, therefore they will be placed in one pipe for 2 weeks where they will be fed every day. After 2 weeks they are released into the decoy pond (*kooiplas*). But this is not how every decoyman will obtain stale ducks. Some will buy tamed or domesticated ducks, while others, such as Jaap, only make use of a 'wilde stal' ('wild stale'): 'I do not have tame ducks, I catch on a completely wild stale ... I do not own the ducks'. When the catching season starts, Jaap will go to the decoy every hour to feed the newly arrived ducks. So, in some duck decoys, the population of stale ducks does not consist of the same individuals every year. Some die, some leave or migrate, and every year newly hatched ducks also enter the decoy (see Figure 1).

Because of the construction of the reed screens, the ducks cannot see the humans and dogs, but they can hear or smell them.[7] I know from previous visits to duck decoys that I have to be absolutely quiet, refrain from speaking or from making other loud noises, and avoid stepping on twigs. The wind, as in other hunting practices, affects the sensory experiences and attunements between man and duck: 'With little wind the human smell lingers, first between the reed screens ... trees, and that can last for ten minutes. So, it can happen that you have left the spot for five minutes already, but then suddenly the bubble of human scent floats on the pond and all the ducks will be like, huh?' (Dirk, 17 October 2017). Sometimes decoymen use a burning turf to mask their smell to the ducks. If the strange ducks distrust the situation, they will fly away and the whole mechanism of the duck decoy fails: no duck will be caught. Some decoymen, however, do make sounds that blend with the other sounds of the decoy: 'I am completely quiet in the decoy. Well, I whistle with them' (Dirk, 17 October 2017). He whistles to let the stale ducks know that he is there.

'Shall we have a look in the pipe?' Jaap asks, and he instructs me to stay close to him. This is the first time I am allowed to walk together with a decoyman and his dog during the feeding of the ducks. Even though he is one of the few remaining professional decoymen who catches and sells ducks, he seems the least concerned about disturbance by my presence. Starting at the broader base of the pipe, Jaap throws food into the pipe and slowly walks towards the outer end of the pipe. His pace is steady and relaxed, aligned to the rhythmic throwing of food. The screens are interrupted, which allows for the dog to walk around the screens. On instruction, the dog walks around the screens moving further into the pipe. Although, as we will discuss below, the experiences and motivations of the ducks are open to multiple interpretations, it is the assumption that the rounds the dog makes lure the strange ducks further and further into the pipe, while the stale ducks are thought to associate the dog with food. According to Jaap, the resident ducks know him by the routine movement of both dog and decoyman, which is repeated every day. During our walk towards the outer end of the pipe, Jaap softly says: 'I will show you'. The ducks walk around his feet looking for food. When he sets one step in the direction of the ducks, about 50 ducks noisily flap their wings, fly up and leave the pipe very quickly.

When we are at the end of the pipe, Jaap whispers 'maybe there is one', which means he spotted a strange duck. When I ask him how he knows this is a different duck, he mutters unintelligibly and gestures me to follow him. When we walk to the second pipe, he tells me to stay behind a bit because he spotted the strange duck again. He walks towards an interrupted screen of the starting point of the pipe and walks in between the screens, which makes him suddenly visible to the ducks. The other ducks start quacking, but the one duck he spotted beforehand seems

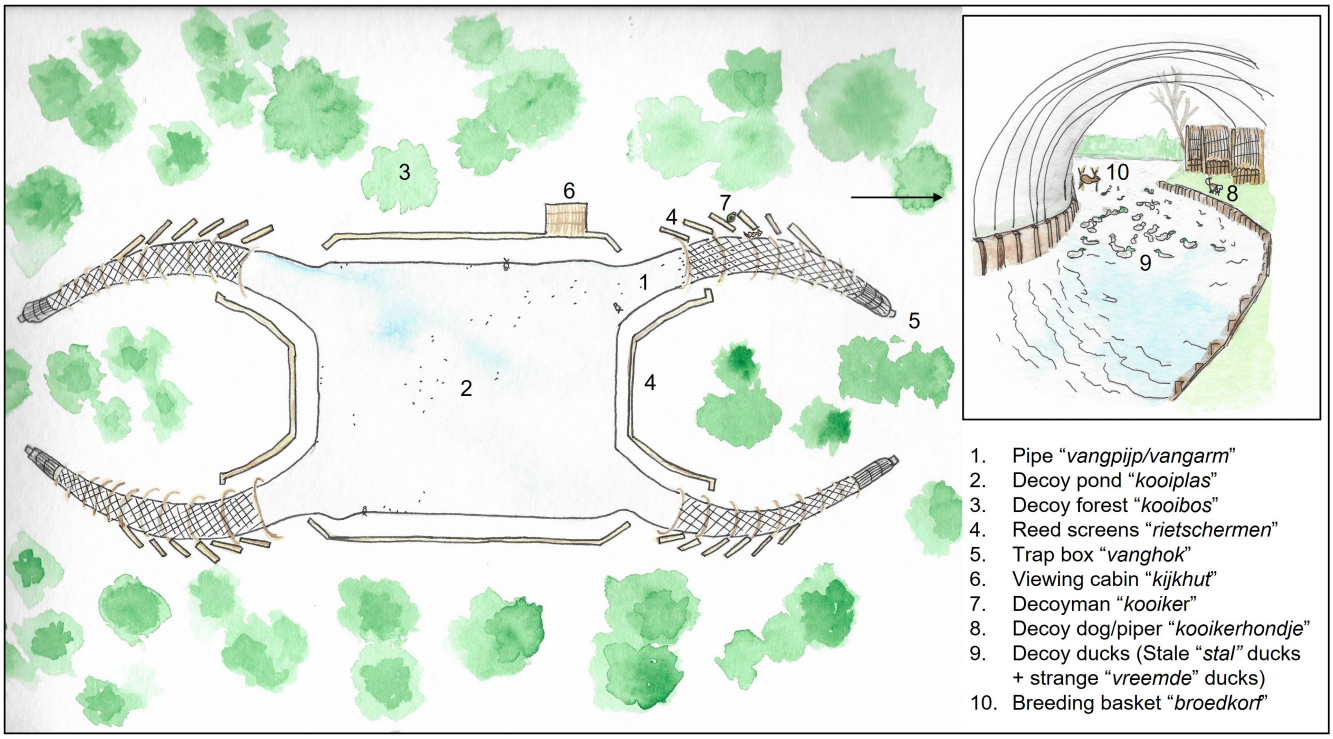


**FIGURE 1** Simplified sketch of a duck decoy, based on a model of the duck decoy belonging to the former landed estate of Batenburg.

to be startled and starts flying towards the outer end of the pipe. 'Well, we have got one, come along', he says, while he quietly, and at the same steady pace I saw before, continues feeding the other ducks. The duck flies against a net, drops on the ground, and then walks towards the smaller and smaller end of the pipe, eventually ending up in a box called *vanghok* ('trap box'). By pulling a small cord at the end of the pipe, the decoyman closes the box. When we walk towards the outer end, the young dog energetically jumps around the box, looking at the duck and then at the decoyman, actively wiggling his tail and jumping up and down. Jaap walks at the same steady pace he has been walking all the time towards the box, where the male mallard duck is flapping his wings, trying to get out. On top there is a hatch. Jaap opens it, puts his whole arm through it and reaches for the duck. The duck does not peck at him when the decoyman grabs the duck. He lifts the duck out of the box, with one hand lifting the duck, and with the other hand he crosses the wings of the duck. In this way the duck cannot flap his wings anymore. Then, the one hand still holds the wings, while with the other hand the decoyman grabs the upper part of the duck's neck and without much force twists it with an audible snap. Then, the neck of the duck drops, bouncing to his chest. The duck immediately seems dead, also the remaining twitches of his wings appear lifeless because of the dead posture of the duck. The grabbing of the duck to the twisting of the neck took no more than ten seconds. During the rest of our visit to the other pipes, he holds the dead dangling duck by the neck in his left hand. The stale ducks could actually see the dead duck they just arguably betrayed, but they did not seem to care or mind.

## 4 | CURIOSITY, TRUST, DECEPTION AND BETRAYAL, OR …?

> The word 'Coy' seems to have little to recommend it to English ears, save its brevity, and it would doubtless soon be replaced by a more familiar native word already existing, which not only embodied the Dutch noun, but so accurately conveyed the insiduous [sic] and highly deceptive character both of the device employed and of the allurements by which its dupes were inveigled to their destruction.
>
> (Southwell, 1904, p. 609)

From this quote by Southwell (1904), we might understand both the duck decoy and the trapping process to be of a deceptive nature. In historical sources and contemporary literature, duck decoys as trapping devices are celebrated

for their cleverly situated designs and described through their technological and material characteristics: 'A Decoy is a cunning and clever combination of water, nets, and screens, by means of which wildfowl … are caught alive' (Payne-Gallwey, 1886, p. 17). In line with the Western epistemological tradition of understanding traps as (humanised) techniques or designs to deceive or trick nature, as Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel (2019) point out, the mechanics of the duck decoy are intrinsically associated with tactics of deceit: they are 'mechanical' in the original meaning of *mechos* in Greek; devices designed to deceive (Flusser, 1999). The word 'decoy' has become integrated in the English language not just as a noun, but also as a verb: to lure or deceive a person or animal. The duck decoy as a trap is, by design, invented for the purpose of enticing ducks to live, breed and/or meet their demise. The deceptive nature of the duck decoy is therefore ambiguous. The landscape is constructed to trick animals into decoying themselves (*kooien* which literally translates from Dutch as putting themselves in a cage), but it is at the same time also designed to habituate ducks who are not 'fooled' by its deadly composition and are able to have a pretty good life there. The deaths the landscape produces easily covers up the agency of those deceptive ducks who learned to inhabit it and who contribute to its workings.

Figure 2 originates from a didactic poem ('leerdicht') by Victor Ryckelsma dating from 1622. The engraving shows wild ducks flying in and stale ducks awaiting food tossed by the decoyman in the foreground. He is holding a dead duck and is looking through the peephole while two dogs circle around the reed screens. The scenic and somewhat dramatic moralising of the decoying ducks in both text and engraving could easily be dismissed as anthropomorphic projection. However, such simple dismissals are increasingly challenged (Keul, 2013; Laurier et al., 2006). In fact, it is not so straightforward to arbitrate between the multiple interpretations and understandings of the more-than-human relationships occurring in the duck decoy in historic literature, by decoymen, or ethologists. Hunters' conceptions of human–animal relations can embody both actual and metaphorical truths (Nadasdy, 2007), and different interpretations might be based on different ontological assumptions. Depending on these assumptions, duck decoys may appear deceptive in more ways than one. What happens if we take seriously Ryckelsma's projections of understandings, motivations and obligations of behaviours in the duck decoy; if we define stale ducks as betrayers, decoyman and stale ducks as cunning, or both the decoy itself and their participants as deceptive?


**FIGURE 2** 'What do you quack and raise your crest? See, in this way the one duck lures the other into a trap with gabble, And cunningly precedes her with his example and with deceptive chatter, Until the dogs have brought them under their spell' (in: Ryckelsma, 1622; translation based on van der Heide & Lebret, 1944).

## 4.1 | Decoyman

In the poem by Ryckelsma (1622, p. 9), decoymen are referred to as 'schalcks' ('mischievous' or 'roguish' hunter), and 'list'ge Boer' ('cunning farmer'). To wild ducks, the decoyman makes himself unnoticeable; he stays out of sight behind reed screens, masks his scent with turf, and makes no alarming sounds. But in the trapping process the decoyman changes character. When the ducks are far into the pipe, he shows himself. This scares the wild ducks so they will fly away from him further into the pipe and become trapped. Through the interplay between invisibility and visibility, absence and presence, the decoyman communicates both safety and unsafety to the wild ducks and he changes roles from caretaker of stale ducks to hunter of wild ducks. This ambiguous role of the decoyman becomes visible in the relationship he has with the stale ducks. The behaviour of both the flying stale and the feeding stale ducks is based on a particular affective relationship between decoyman, dog and ducks that is characterised by trust. The feeding stale ducks are very much attuned to the behaviour of the decoyman and the dog, and the decoyman puts a lot of effort into maintaining this relationship. Dirk explains: 'keeping the ducks accustomed to me is a continuous process'. He tries to keep the ducks in a calm state, and at the same time the feeding ducks need to get used to him. The ducks know the predictable routine of the decoyman and his dog. For example, Jaap explains that when the feeding ducks are fed in one pipe, they know that in 23 minutes the decoyman will appear in another pipe: 'The stale, your feeding ducks have to be tried and tested. You have to trust them and they have to trust you so much you can eventually step behind them'. Sometimes something happens that makes the ducks get scared again, which means that he has to start over. This does not agitate Jaap: 'They are jumpy animals, that's the way it is'. This subtle and delicate process of gaining trust seems to be governed by a set of social rules in which all involved have to behave accordingly and shape the conditions under which the catching takes place. Ingold (2000) describes these relations of trust in hunting practices as a combination of autonomy and dependency. The decoyman depends on the stale ducks and the wild ducks to behave in specific ways in order for the decoy to work. At the same time, a response is not forced upon the ducks: both wild ducks and stale ducks can choose not to partake in the catching process. For example, the stale ducks might decide to forage elsewhere, or wild ducks can fly back to the pond instead of the pipe. According to Ingold (2000), any attempt to impose a response in this type of relation would represent a betrayal of the trust established and at the same time renegotiate the relationship. That this renegotiation takes place is perhaps most evident by the presence of flying stale ducks. Some of these ducks have been in the pipe, flew to the end, but turned around, back to the decoy pond. Like Dirk mentioned:

> (these ducks) … thought, yes, something isn't right, back … You will never catch them again. But they do stay the rest of their lives on the pond, because they know it is safe here … in this way a duck decoy maintains a population of ducks … of which you only catch a part of the offspring.
>
> (17 October 2017)

In many human–non-human relationships such as in agriculture and laboratory settings, trusting relationships that are fostered involve a subsequent act of betrayal when the animal is exploited or killed (Cooke, 2019). Additionally, hunter–prey relationships are based on a 'willingness to give' (Ingold, 2000, p. 71) and a form of 'reciprocal exchange' (Nadasdy, 2007, p. 26) based on mutual trust. It is these kinds of reciprocal relationships of trust and deception that characterise the workings of the duck decoy and the inter- and intraspecies relations it is made up of.

## 4.2 | Stale ducks

Animals killing animals, and the sociability behind it, becomes especially complicated when killing is an indirect effect of a certain behaviour, rather than a direct bodily affair. The role of stale ducks in catching wild ducks is historically characterised as an act of betrayal. For example, Ryckelsma defines stale ducks as betrayers of their species: 'Spies to a word, traitors to a sign' (Ryckelsma, 1622, p. 14). 'Seemingly their friend, they lie to their folk' (ibid., p. 26). Here, betrayal refers particularly to the luring behaviour towards conspecific birds: The flying stale attracts wild ducks to the decoy by foraging outside the decoy at night and bringing along new ducks in the morning. The feeding stale then lures the wild ducks into the trapping pipe where the new ducks might be caught. If we describe this process through an understanding of duck decoys as mechanical designs—whereby mechanical is understood, with Flusser (1999), as inherently elusive, the functional operation of its working is predicated on its deceptive character—each stale duck performs the task of luring

in other ducks. Many other trapping devices are based on the principle of luring birds with other birds. As the Dutch proverb goes: 'with birds one catches birds'. Sometimes a wooden figure mimicking a real bird (one that has come to be known as a decoy in English) provides sufficient attraction, and in other cases tame birds are used. What these hunting and trapping practices have in common is that they make use of an animal's curiosity towards the presence and behaviour of another animal, functioning as 'abstract bait' (Bateman, 1988, p. 240).

In the case of the duck decoy, the luring seems to be based on the characteristic behaviour of waterfowl to flock together. During migration and in wintering areas, ducks are known to flock in large numbers, seeking each other's company by foraging and roosting together. This behaviour is understood by ethologists as beneficial for individual birds, because predators and other threats are noticed sooner and large numbers of ducks might confuse predators (Caraco et al., 1980). From this perspective, the presence of stale ducks communicates something important to the wild ducks: we are a collective and we provide safety. By acting as a 'normal' sociable flock, both the stale ducks, as well as the environment they are in, seem trustworthy. As we have described, one of the supposed purposes of (joining) a flock is to notice predators. When stale ducks and wild ducks move into the pipe and the decoyman shows himself, the stale ducks do not recognise him as a threat. They are used to seeing the decoyman and this often means food. So rather than alarming the other ducks, the flock communicates something else. However, in the course of the trapping process, the wild ducks are frightened by the decoyman. Their individual fear eventually supersedes their willingness to be part of the flock and this ultimately results in their getting caught.

Can we understand this behaviour of stale ducks as an act of betrayal? It may be too simple to consider them as mindless participants of a trapping game they do not understand, as if they would be nothing more than living versions of wooden decoy ducks. Yet, to consider this behaviour of stale ducks as betrayal for the sole reason that they are part of the same species, as if they have some sort of intraspecies obligation towards each other, would also be a one-sided interpretation. Alternatively, we could say that the congregation of individual stale ducks acting as a flock, misguides their conspecifics into believing the duck decoy is safe. Accordingly, the insidious, deceptive and cunning characterisations as described by Ryckelsma (1622) could be understood as a betrayal of the social obligations of the flock. However, the extent to which this is a conscious act of betrayal—as if they are in on the game with the trapper—remains ambiguous. Stale ducks do not let themselves get caught, and when they are surprised by the decoyman, they will fly back into the pond. Does this behaviour signify some sort of understanding about the working of the duck decoy, or at least that the outer end of the pipe is unsafe? Almost all stale ducks avoid the end of the pipe, and consequently they avoid getting caught while their wild counterparts fly to the end of the pipe. This might suggest that stale ducks do have an understanding of the deadly consequence of going there. At the same time, it is impossible to tell because on the rare occasion that a stale duck is caught, the decoyman might decide to end its life, or to release it. In both scenarios the duck will not come near the pipe again.

## 4.3 | Dog

So far, we have unpacked the relationships between decoyman, stale ducks, wild ducks and their environment in terms of deceit, trust and betrayal. According to decoymen, for the trapping process to work, wild ducks have to show a certain kind of behaviour, particularly, they need to exhibit fear and curiosity. Decoymen tap into this fear by showing themselves, after which the wild ducks fly into the end of the pipe. Decoy dogs draw on the curiosity of ducks by luring them into the pipe. Ryckelsma (1622) describes the dogs as 'silly animals' (*onnozele beestgens*, p. 21), that mesmerise the wild ducks. They 'caress her [the wild duck] eye, blind her thoughts, consider her as a friend, take her for no robber, and cradle her to sleep, until she surrenders entirely' (Ryckelsma, 1622, p. 21). By repetitively appearing and disappearing behind the reed screens, the dog supposedly draws the wild ducks further and further into the pipe. 'It is as if curiosity and suspicion are fighting for precedence' (van der Heide & Lebret, 1944, p. 34). As Arjan explains, the curiosity of the ducks is clear from the way they 'stick out their necks to follow this moving thing' (Arjan, 13 October 2017). Nowadays, the importance of this curiosity becomes visible by its absence. As decoyman Dirk explains:

> (the ducks) all know dogs. It used to be much, much less. And then the ducks in the decoy pond saw a dog for the first time in their lives. Saw a beastie they didn't know ... and they saw that the beastie was not dangerous ... that just walked in between the ducks. And then they came to see it ... That works much less nowadays ... they will come and have a look, but they are no longer so fascinated that they swim after the dog into the pipe.

But there are other interpretations as to what makes the wild ducks collectively approach the dog when it appears at the pipe. As we previously described in the process of luring wild ducks by the stale ducks, there is safety in numbers. Ethologists have described the collective movement, harassing and sometimes attacking a potential predator by prey as 'mobbing' (Carlson & Griesser, 2022; Slattery et al., 1998), which is observed across many animal species. The understanding of duck behaviour in duck decoys as mobbing, as proposed by Kear (1990), diverges from the decoymen's understanding which considers it as an act of curiosity. Instead of merely 'uninterested' individual curiosity, acting as a social conspecific group, as a flock or a herd, is often understood in view of anti-predation strategies (Cresswell, 1994). From this perspective, we could understand decoy dogs and wild ducks in terms of a predator–prey relationship. To interpret the 'curiosity' of the ducks as investigative behaviour towards a predator, as inspection of the predator, as predator harassment, or as mobbing is however difficult to distinguish since the outcome for the predator is often the same (Caro, 2005). The collective act of curiosity towards a potential predator might be an accurate description of what is happening here since the stale ducks do not exhibit this curious behaviour and seem indifferent to the dog; 'they (the stale ducks) don't look at him (dog)' (van der Heide & Lebret, 1944, p. 33). They take little notice of the dogs or associate the dog with feeding time, which suggests that they seem to know that the dog is not a predator. That wild ducks do treat the dog as a predator might explain why 'it is always the new-comers who are easiest taken in by a dog and his tricks' (Payne-Gallwey, 1886, p. 49).

As we have discussed so far, we can use multiple terms to describe what is going on in the duck decoys: trust, deceit, betrayal, mobbing, curiosity, protection. These multiple accounts underscore the ambiguity of the inter- and intraspecies relationships in the duck decoys. Historical sources emphasise trust and deceit and add a moral dimension, ethological accounts are based on predator–prey ontologies, and the accounts of decoymen emphasise the intimately choreographed relations enabled through this landscape. As we will discuss in more detail in the next section, this points to an inherent ambiguity of duck decoys which continues to this day.

## 5 | MULTISPECIES ATMOSPHERES

> The first half or first quarter is easy to catch ... If I tell you how to catch ducks, you can catch ducks. But after 15 minutes all the ducks will be wild. They notice that one should not come near the pipe, that something is not right. And then they will nicely stay on the pond and do not come near the pipe anymore. Look, you must avoid that. So it is a constant game, you need to sense it, how the wild [wild ducks] behave and what the mood is.
>
> (Dirk, 17 October 2017)

What the decoyman describes as sensing the 'mood' reflects how his skill and knowledge involves atmospheric and affective attunement to not just individual bodies, but to multispecies relations. This mood is often described in relation to sensory experiences and the weather. The sounds of the ducks, their behaviour, but also high-pressure areas associated with a stable weather type, are said to have a calming effect on the ducks. If that is the case, then, 'they nicely sit on the side. When they start doing that, it is a sign of ... rest on the pond' (Dirk, 17 October 2017). Weather conditions play a crucial role also when catching ducks. Wind direction is essential. If it blows slightly the other way, according to decoymen, it is impossible to catch a duck. Through these weather conditions, the materiality of space becomes embedded in the behaviour of the ducks, which exemplifies the working of atmospheric geographies as affective relation (Adams-Hutcheson, 2019). Being a decoyman means tending a multispecies landscape, by carefully maintaining 'the peace' in the decoy under ever-varying conditions: not just by keeping people and noise at bay, but also by caring for the various non-human residents and attending to their ongoing relations. And by not seeking to catch all ducks, the decoyman maintains a particular affective atmosphere. As Lorimer et al. (2017) show, these affective atmospheres are constituted through and by animal subjects in relation to elements such as weather and material circumstances. The sensing of the mood described by the decoyman refers to how all involved carefully attend and attune to the spatial and temporal dimensions of affective experiences. The different categories of ducks form different attachments to the duck decoy. When all these are in place, duck decoys are enacted through 'learned skill' (Lorimer, 2006) as communally inherited landscapes.

However, we should be careful to assume given characteristics and capacities of the animals involved (Lorimer et al., 2017). Even though the decoyman predefines the roles of the ducks, these are also a product of the 'mood' and atmosphere in the pond and the particular character of individual ducks (cf. Garlick, 2019). The active production or orchestration of this atmosphere is inherently a temporally and spatially specific affair, revealing the complexity of this multispecies landscape that interweaves Umwelts in ways that incorporates human and non-human subjectivities.

We can then consider the behaviours in the decoy as collective acts in which different animals and humans somehow emerge in relation to each other and agree to work together across species boundaries (Barreto, 2010). We might start to see the duck decoy as a co-designed perceptual lifeworld, a mutually attuned mix of Umwelts, a place where ducks feel safe, comfortable and sociable while some of them are also being trapped. This all happens in an atmosphere that requires lifelong dedication to produce and maintain—making it a human trap of sorts as well. We can appreciate the decoymen's 'patient subjection of their bodies, minds and sociality to their traps', suggesting more generally 'the perils of entrapment, which cannot rest on mastery alone, but must imply subjection and vulnerability' (Nahum-Claudel, 2019, p. 473).

As Gell has argued, traps embody and evoke 'the idea of a nexus of intentionalities between hunters and prey animals via material forms and mechanisms' (Gell, 1996, p. 228). But even more than the traps he describes, the duck decoy is a device made up of relations between various active participants. It appears as a loop of layered deceptions, operating through the purposefully choreographed ambiguity of experiences and intentions. Traps, for Gell, make use of and thereby subvert the animal's natural behaviour. However, in the duck decoy, it is not just the behaviour of individual animals that is subverted, but the very relations between them, including how ducks make sense of the experiences and intentions of other ducks. The decoying practice subverts the relations that constitute the collective of a flock of birds. Our analysis, therefore, shows that duck decoys are not just 'lethal parodies of the animal's Umwelt' (Gell, 1996, p. 227), but that they can shape multiple overlapping/interlocking Umwelts of different species that mutually inform each other. It is the very ambiguity of the relations in the decoy pond that makes it a trap, by actively producing a shared atmosphere with diverging affective intensities to attune to.

The success of a duck decoy depends on many factors, from skills of decoyman and dog, to regional water levels and migration routes, and to the legal authority controlling the behaviour of humans in the surrounding area. Atmospheric and affective attunement is not limited to the local physical boundaries of a single duck decoy, but historically required the functional organisation of the entire landscape to produce an almost industrial form of hunting, or harvesting from the sky, of up to a thousand animals in a single day (Jaap, 7 December 2017). Long before the industrial era, duck decoys had spread across the Netherlands, resulting in hundreds of decoys constructed across the Low Countries and beyond. From a bird's eye view, they contain shared memories of a deceptive landscape, scattered with duck decoys where you could be fed, safely breed or get killed, depending on when you decided to enter the pond and if you were initiated to the workings of the decoy. The landscape became entirely shaped into an appealing space that was at the same time a skilfully operated trap with the sole purpose of catching ducks. Decoymen under these conditions spatially reconfigured their design to coproduce assemblages of animals, reed screens, water and scent, together generating elusive atmospheres and deceptive intentions. Human operators were attuned to their workings, producing a set of complex and fragile relationships maintained through ambiguous signalling.

## 6 | DECOY AFTERLIVES

Of the 1000 decoys that once existed in the Netherlands, currently 113 registered duck decoys remain. But only a few of these still catch ducks. The others have become ruinous over the past century. Some have been restored, but many have dissolved into the landscape or were actively removed. Even though Gell (1996) argues that the hunter's skill and knowledge are located in the trap and 'would survive even the death of the hunter himself' (p. 227), the relations that made up a living duck decoy in operation have largely disappeared. To the decoymen, the soul has vanished from these places.

The duck decoys that remain in operation increasingly fail to catch ducks. Waterfowl populations in these landscapes have dwindled. Since 1990, Mallard breeding populations have gone down by 30% due to a variety of causes, including the increasing drainage of the Dutch landscape, together with the parcelling of agricultural lands, the increasing number of predators, 'neat' borders of waterways and fewer insects (van den Bremer et al. (2015). Moreover, the relational atmosphere that forms the basis for duck decoys to work has changed. Ducks have become less scared of people, and as we discussed, dogs. Most mallards in the Netherlands now 'live between the houses in cities and villages' (Dirk, 17 October 2017). Decoymen express that they or their predecessors remembered the time when Mallards were still scared of them, while nowadays Mallards often fly the 'wrong' way when they see the decoyman. Only migratory ducks from Siberia that have not encountered humans or dogs before are more cautious towards the human, and more curious towards the dog (Dirk, 17 October 2017).

Yet, the ambiguity of duck decoys remains. In some places the physical structure of the decoy is diligently maintained by volunteers for both heritage and nature conservation purposes. In some of these, a few plastic ducks are placed in the pond, presenting the duck decoy as a peaceful resting place while also reminding visitors of its past deadly operations.

Some decoys changed function from trapping ducks for consumption, to trapping for knowledge production.[8] Since duck decoys are the sole sites where the ringing of waterfowl takes place, these places—and those (relations) operating them—have become (or remained) central in knowing these animals. And since only those animals that still visit decoys and get caught in them are being tagged, monitored and investigated, our contemporary knowledge of waterfowl emerges from the remnants of this landscape and the multispecies relations and skills practiced in it. This peaceful repurposing of duck decoys is, however, predicated on hunting practices elsewhere: not just to promote the use of the decoy as a safe haven, but also as the tags mainly get reported back during the hunting season in France. Diverse motives are at play in decoy-based research. Decoys figured centrally during the 2014 episode of avian influenza, when the knowledge produced in them was used to determine whether resident or migrating ducks carry the disease (Verhagen et al., 2014). In pursuing this question, attention is oriented away from the question why avian influenza is problematic in the first place. Consequently, duck decoy knowledge now serves the interests of industrial farming, which, with 60 million chickens housed indoors in the Netherlands, is currently the dominant bird-producing machine in this landscape. Duck decoys therefore seem to continue to produce a more than human landscape in their ambiguous workings as heritage, meat production, nature conservation and knowledge production.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

After centuries of decoying practice and decades of ethological studies, diverging views of what happens in the decoy persist. Who is deceiving whom? Is it curiosity for the dog and/or fear of the decoyman that leads the wild ducks into the trapping pipe? Or is it a betrayed act of solidarity in repelling a predator as a group? It may be the very ambiguity of these relations that is key to the working of the duck decoy. In the decoy, a shared atmosphere is cultivated by the decoyman, the dog, and various types of ducks; a mood which facilitates the making and unmaking of collectives and promotes what could be seen as betrayal. Duck decoys seem to deceive in more ways than one. They establish relationships between people, animals and the landscapes that they share. The varying interpretations and multiple knowledges of how behaviours are characterised and crafted in the practice of decoying ducks reflect the essentially ambiguous character of the duck decoy: the deeply elusive nature of what drives the various subjects in the decoy appears key to its operation.

The contemporary and historical multispecies methodologies we have drawn on to explore duck decoys in terms of concepts such as deception and betrayal allows for an understanding of these sites as more-than-human assemblages, emergent from intricate and dynamic relations of materialities and bodies. Building on the new material turn in geography, we propose an understanding of duck decoys as not just deadly and exclusively human-controlled technologies, but as carefully crafted multispecies atmospheres. The various ducks inhabiting these places are far from defined by their (sub)species, but more by their local relations and atmospheric attunement. Stale ducks can be acknowledged as mindful, intelligent and social animals that reveal a relational agency in their engagement in collective acts of curiosity, betrayal or both. Rather than being a question of who exactly betrays whom, we suggest that it is the landscape and the carefully maintained atmospheres it harbours that induces multispecies relations that can simultaneously be seen as betrayal and solidarity. The entire landscape is shaped to facilitate the ongoing enactment of these ambiguous relations. The landscape, then, is not just a giant trap made up of physical elements in space. Rather, the decoy inscribes, assembles and organises a range of more-than-human relations and generates lives which have been deeply entangled and mutually constitutive for north-western European riverine landscapes since late medieval times.

The diverse afterlives of duck decoys reflect their continued ambiguity. The passing of the decoyman in the beginning of our story illustrates the fate of the duck decoy and its carefully orchestrated relationships. When no longer maintained, wild ducks, stale ducks and the aging decoymen with his dog(s) slowly disappear. The few remaining duck decoys that still are able to catch ducks now primarily do this for the production of knowledge, through bird ringing, that can be mobilised for diverse, even contradictory purposes. Most duck decoys are cosmetically maintained as cultural heritage, as 'landscape elements' of the fluvial landscapes to inform the public of a past land use and to value and preserve as a biodiversity hotspot. But as we show in this paper, conservation might encompass more than preserving materialities and species in a predetermined and fixed landscape. Heritage and biodiversity both appear as possible modes of valuing and understanding of not just objects but deeply ambiguous relations as the inherent features of a more-than-human world. Relations that can be found to be inscribed in landscapes, the interpretation of which requires combining historical accounts with folk interpretations and categorisations of a range of animals, as well as delving into contemporary ethological debates and knowledge practices. Whatever the future of the duck decoy might be, in consideration of the climate and biodiversity

predicaments of the Anthropocene, the duck decoys and their ambiguous relations encourage us to consider historical trapping and hunting landscapes as changing atmospheres of mutually attuned human and more-than-human lives.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, E. van Heijgen, upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Davies' 'History of Whittington Castle' 1800, cited in Payne-Gallwey (1886, p. 151). An epitaph of Andrew Williams, born in 1692 and died April 1776 at the age of 84. He had served the Aston family as a decoyman for 60 years.

[2] We have anonymised the decoymen by changing their names.

[3] The Low Countries roughly encompasses the Benelux which consists of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

[4] Hunting and trapping are often deeply gendered practices. In this paper we do not explore this theme, besides noticing that records of historical or contemporary non-male operators of decoys are rare.

[5] This research project was formally approved by the Wageningen School of Social Sciences.

[6] We are aware of the debate that present tense might create an impression of timelessness and stasis (Hastrup, 1990), but since the focus of this paper is on grasping intertwined more-than-human and human encounters, we seek to bring these to life through present tense accounts.

[7] Decoymen have their own interpretations of duck behaviour that do not always correspond with the knowledge of ethologists and ecologists. For example, many decoymen believed ducks have a sense of smell, long before behavioural ecologists came to the same conclusion (Roper, 1999).

[8] The transition from killing to ringing birds is not a complete shift since some decoys do both. Ringing birds involves a further complex categorisation of ducks, often dependent on the preference of the decoyman.

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